

The Plant-Based diet — How Eating More Plants Can Save our Planet

In the quaint neighborhood of Westchester in Los Angeles, California, sits an ethically sourced and environmentally friendly oasis — Sustainabowl. Located on the uphill Lincoln Road, the restaurant exists serenely between the ocean breeze of the Marina Bay and the backdrop of the hospitable San Gabriel mountains. From the moment of entry, the calming energy of space resembles a meditation room, packed with long green vines and hammock chairs hanging from its ceilings.

Founded in 2018, the location has been growing in popularity with local college students and professors due to its diverse menu and healthy approach.

Sustainabowl's manager, Umit Kaur, credits the flexibility of their diet options for this heightened interest. The restaurant embraces an 80 percent plant-based menu, including plates like the Thai Jackfruit 2.0 bowl, with papaya, sesame milk and peanuts, and one of its most desired offerings, the Moroccan Goddess, with jackfruit and yellow curry rice.

“Lots of customers prefer to eat vegan, and they don't feel they're missing out [on eating] meat, so that means a lot,” explained Kaur. “For example, a professor who is not vegetarian loves to eat the Moroccan Goddess, which is one of our vegan bowls, because it's just so delicious and flavorful. So, I think in the end, people just want nice and tasty food .”

The plant-based diet has been rising in prevalence in the last couple of years. In the United States alone, there are 13.4 million vegans, representing a 3,000 percent increase over the last 15 years], as reported through a new study by Ipsos Retail Performance. This jump can be attributed to major cities that have transformed vegan eating into a mainstream affair.

And it's no surprise a city like Los Angeles, with a shared culture for social media and all things wellness, has taken the forefront in the plant-based movement.

Space Coast Daily details that in the last couple of years, LA has become a hub for veganism in part thanks to celebrities like Natalie Portman and Joaquin Phoenix who have popularized this lifestyle. Vegan businesses and markets have also been on the rise making plant-based eating an appealing pastime and a complete immersive experience.

But beyond the physical health and social benefits that are often linked to a tofu-filled diet; by eating more plants humans are actually saving the world.

Data from the EAT- Lancet 2019 Commission on Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems, illustrates that when comparing the carbon emissions released in meat versus soybeans and legumes, red meat emitted 98 percent higher carbon dioxide levels than soybeans and legumes.

“If you look at the data for 28 grams of soybeans and legumes you can see that greenhouse gas emissions are super small compared to the same 28 grams of meat,” said Professor of nutrition Heidi Lynch from Point Loma Nazarene University. “So, you really don't have to be choosing one or the other. It's the same thing; foods that are good at reducing environmental impact are the same foods that are good at helping you be physically healthy.”

Just last year, NASA reported that 2023 was considered the hottest year on record, a number that is only expected to rise if carbon emissions aren't lowered.

In addition to lowering carbon emissions, the United Nations's 2021 report on climate change outlines that a vegan diet conserves water and land, decreases energy consumption and even combats world hunger by improving farming systems.

Yet, while it's clear that a plant-based diet plays a role in the preservation of the planet, it's not always easy to encourage meat eaters to implement vegan and vegetarian options into their palettes.

"Change is hard. Food is very emotional, and it's so much more than strictly fuel for the body when we get into the culture and traditions," stated Lynch.

This cultural emphasis on meat is widespread worldwide. In Argentina, their adoration with beef has historically grown since Spanish colonists introduced cattle ranching to this nation. Today, they are well-known for their asados, or barbecues, and consume the highest amount of meat globally, with 39.9 kilograms per person.

Other countries like China and most of the European continent come second in their meat-eating habits with the greatest percentage of pork consumption around the world. All due to the persistent usage of this food to produce traditional plates that are delicious and deeply tied to their heritage.

But change is possible, and establishments like Sustainabowl introduce accessible ways people can support their environment and improve their physical wellness without sacrificing their taste buds. Although their menu contains a small percentage of fish-based poke bowls, more and more customers are opting for the greener options.

"There hasn't been a 100% shift, but there has been a 50/50. People will pick up a smoothie and a vegan bowl, instead of choosing two of the poke bowls," said Kaur. "You can tell when a customer is not vegetarian but they're being half and half, so that's a win-win situation in my eyes."

According to the United Nations's Intergovernmental panel, this is exactly what humanity needs — to lower their meat consumption, so more land can store the carbon emissions stemming from a meat-heavy diet, without having to fully become vegan.

This recommendation is echoed by Lynch, who encourages people to view veganism as an opportunity to learn something new in the kitchen and expand the creativity when crafting their meals.

"I think supporting the person with where they are willing to make some changes would be great, helping them get curious and see different ideas that can be delicious is a great way to help them on their own journeys – wherever they're at," she described. "We would see a much bigger change if everyone did something instead of one or two people going 100% vegan."

Beyond the sustainability of their food menu, plant-based friendly locations can also support the environmental education of their customers. For the past two months, Sustainabowl has organized a Climate Cafe, an event dedicated to allowing attendees to share their thoughts and feelings about climate change in a supportive and welcoming space.

“There's so much going on in the world and a lot of people feel that,” said Kaur. “It’s nice to have a platform to hear other’s feelings and come together while eating healthy food and sharing how we can make smart changes at our homes.”

Their mission extends past what’s consumable on a plate and focuses on smart consumption, ethical production and waste reduction – a trifecta that goes hand in hand with the preservation of the planet. The World Bank recently announced that by the year 2050 humans will be producing 3.88 billion tons of waste, a 73 percent increase from 2020.

“The owner of the restaurant consciously put bowls made from corn starch so they’re biodegradable and compostable; if you put the bowl in hot water, it will shrink to a very small kind of thing. So, the carbon footprint decreases.” explained Kaur. “Our straws are made from coconut husks, and our jars are all mason jars for the smoothie drinks.”

Although the fear characterizing the climate crisis has paralyzed many from acting, it’s clear that small and measurable steps are better than radicality. It’s not about completely changing our ways of lives, but about adapting them in a way that includes our planetary home.

“I hope that more people are open to acknowledging the climate crisis and the contributing role that for better or worse, humanity can play,” said Professor Lynch. “Not having a doomsday outlook on it but feeling empowered to step up to the plate.”

In 2022, the plant-based foods association (PBFA) reported that 95 percent of restaurants and services offering plant-based options expect their sales to increase; overall, vegan menu choices are set to increase by 400 percent.

This variety of locations and flexible alternatives proves that plant-based eating doesn’t have to be restrictive, boring or even joyless, there is something to please everyone as they discover tools that can support their health and save the world.

Since 2018, the number of plant-based restaurants has grown by an average of 3.8 percent, and today the United States is home to 28,865 of them, including the serene Sustainabowl.

“In the time since I was in college I had absolutely no sense of any environmental impacts of food choices. We really have come far in the last 15 years.” added Professor Lynch. “So, I think in the next couple of years there will be dramatic strides, and I'm excited to see what that will be looking like — I feel hopeful,” added Professor Lynch.