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Why your new favorite backyard burger may soon be plant-based



Classic burgers on the grill at a tailgate party. Beyond Meat, a company based in El Segundo, is planning to launch plant-based burgers at grocery stores in Los Angeles later this year. (Mark Boster / Los Angeles Times)

Nick Pachelli

For the roster of companies producing plant-based meat alternatives, the burger is the end-all-be-all. And one company thinks they've got the burger that will push the meat-eating industry as we know it to the tipping point.

[Beyond Meat](#), a company based in El Segundo, just unveiled a burger so similar to the classic American burger (and far more healthful) that it's become the first ever plant-based product sold in the meat department at [Whole Foods](#). The company is starting with a Whole Foods in Boulder, Colo., where they [sold out](#) in their first week's launch.

“We have completely disrupted the meat counter,” said Marian Spector, Beyond Meat senior director of R&D project development.

The company’s team of chefs and scientists, led by Stanford's Joseph Puglisi and the Scientific Advisory Board, target the meat eater, or what they call “meat reducers.” At their El Segundo headquarters, the scene is a chemist’s playground, but instead of foaming test tubes and beakers, there’s protein powders, legumes and organic vegetables lining the tables. There’s three rows of aroma, taste and texture simulators—complex oven-looking contraptions—that operate in the shadow of Beyond Meat’s “steer,” an extruder that takes the magic formula of ingredients through a sequence of high and low pressure to create the patty.

The end product, made mostly of pea protein, yeast extract and natural oils, has more protein than the traditional burger with far less saturated fat. And for that essential fatty flavor, the team concocted a mix of canola, coconut and sunflower oil that adds a juiciness to the patty as you bite through the darkish brown exterior. The burger “bleeds” too, thanks to some pulverized beets.

The Beyond Burger, along with the company’s line of other plant-based products, aims to disrupt the global meat industry. [Bill Gates](#), [Biz Stone](#), Seth Goldman and former McDonald’s CEO [Don Thompson](#) are investing early in the seven-year-old business.

Beyond Meat’s first stop in getting the plant-based burger out to the masses is Whole Foods. “Every step of the way they’ve helped us grow the business,” said Beyond Meat founder and CEO Ethan Brown. “And it was a long conversation to get into the refrigerated meat section.”

With the support of Tom Rich, senior vice president of Whole Foods’ Rocky Mountain region, Brown entered the Boulder Whole Foods’ meat counter alongside the poultry, pork and beef, with their sights set on locations in Southern California and across the country later this summer.

Outside of Whole Foods and other grocery store chains, Brown’s long-term goal is to be the uncomplicated, inconspicuous alternative at fast-food chains in the next four years.

“My kids are 10 and 12 now,” said Brown. “By the time my 12-year-old is driving at 16, he should be able go to any major fast-food chain and have a Beyond Meat burger without it being an event.”



The Beyond Meat Beyond Burger patties. (Nick Pachelli / For The Times)

To test the Beyond Burger’s potential of winning over red meat-lovers in the retail and food service space, we conducted a taste test with everyday store-bought burgers as well as a few L.A. favorites. Due to Beyond Meat’s policy, we couldn’t take the burger home for a blind test; but we tasted it at the lab in consecutive order with its competitors in a two-day, burgers-only affair.

First, the classic hamburgers from the fast food joints, in order of consumption: [In-N-Out](#), Five Guys and the Habit. And higher-end burger

mainstays: Shake Shack and Belcampo. While Beyond Meat hopes to target In-N-Out-caliber joints when it comes to the patty, we thought it best to test the Beyond Burger's strength against the best of each league.

If we focus on the meat, the Beyond Burger holds its own with the classic In-N-Out Double Double. Red meat's zing of fat will always be a challenge for the Beyond team, but its mix of oils makes for an intriguing flavor undercurrent. The soft-packed, pink interior bleeds down to the bun, and the thicker patty doesn't get lost under a neon-yellow slice of cheese. Pile on the familiar accoutrements and season generously with salt, and the Beyond Burger makes for a compelling cut of protein.

As expected, the Beyond Burger falls short against the custom blends of chuck, sirloin, brisket and other cuts from Belcampo and Shake Shack. The depth of flavor and caramelization you get from the competitor patties, along with the tight interior texture are too much for the Beyond Burger's first iteration to challenge. But it's certainly what the team of PhDs at the lab have their sights set on as they continue testing.

Against the average grocery store burger, the Beyond Burger has very few differentiating factors. It sizzles on the grill with a surprisingly similar aroma; the texture is moist and not too chewy; and with a simple lettuce, tomato, ketchup, mustard and square of American cheese, you'd be hard-pressed to pick out a clear winner in the backyard. The only thing a burger traditionalist might miss is the depth of flavor and the aftertaste — the sort of powerful finish we've come to expect of dry-aged steak. But overall, a win for Beyond Burger over store-bought.

What's next for the company as the Beyond Burger enters L.A. meat cases later this summer? First, to hopefully cause a paradigm shift in the way we see plant-based meat — not as the vegan, doesn't-taste-as-good option but simply just another meat burger, that's not made from an animal. And second, to produce next generations of the Beyond Burger on a near annual basis.

As for replacing the rib-eye steak, “anything’s possible,” said Brown.

<http://www.latimes.com/food/dailydish/la-dd-beyond-burgers-20160606-snap-story.html>