

**COVER
STORY**

The future of meat

Emily Ansell Elfer discusses the vegan, vegetarian and flexitarian trends and what they truly mean for the meat sector.



Have you heard the news? Meat is out and vegetables are in – according to the consumer press, that is. Barely a day goes by without a story highlighting the supposed flexitarian, vegetarian and vegan trends. But is this really the case or are these stories more fiction than fact?

An interesting starting point when looking for answers is to consider consumer purchasing data gathered during 2018's 'Veganuary' – an annual January campaign run by vegans encouraging people to give up meat and dairy for a month.

Both fresh primary meat and poultry and fresh processed meat and poultry grew in volume over the 12 weeks to 28th January, with the latter growing faster than the wider grocery market and inflation.

According to Kantar Worldpanel, the majority of households actually bought more meat and poultry over the period, indicating that any suggested rise of vegan and vegetarian diets “does not necessarily mean consumers are moving away from meat overall”.

Fresh primary meat and poultry was up 1.5% in volume during the period, with chicken being up by 4.1% and turkey by 4%, while fresh processed meat and poultry saw volumes rise by 1.7%, with bacon driving volume growth at 2.1%.

However, figures also show that meat-free options gained traction both over the January period and throughout the year.

Nathan Ward, business unit director for Meat, Fish and Poultry, at Kantar Worldpanel, commented: “January is always awash with magazines and bloggers declaring the latest must-follow diet, extolling the ways that consumers can stay healthy as they battle grey days and the post-Christmas bulge. Veganuary, the now four-year-old campaign to encourage a month of veganism at the start of the year, has soared in popularity.

“But this isn't just a January trend – meat-free diets appear to be making more of an impact throughout the year than the usual fads.”



• Nathan Ward from Kantar Worldpanel.

The power of price and convenience

Ward added that in the 52 weeks to 31st December 2017 almost a third of evening meals contained no animal-based protein. However, further scrutiny of the data shows that there is more to the meat-free trend than meets the eye: it's not all about consumers being led by reports suggesting meat-free is healthier.

For a start, meat is becoming more expensive at a time of strong inflation. This means that a move towards some vegetarian dinners – particularly among younger people – could be driven by tighter purse strings. The fact that lamb is in decline, with Kantar data revealing it has been purchased 1.4m fewer times so far this year, does line up with the fact it is becoming more expensive.

The same can be said for beef which shows 400,000 fewer purchases. Ward stresses that “the catalyst for this decline is lower-income households and those most affected by inflation”.

Convenience is also king as consumers opt for ease over effort. Figures show ready meal sales jumping by 26% and Chinese ready meals in particular rising by more than a quarter. The meat industry needs to ensure it is central to this convenience movement.

The big piece of positive news though is that, regardless of all of the above, volumes of fresh meat and poultry sold have continued to grow – Kantar reveals they are up by 5% since 2013.

The young flexitarian

Breaking figures down into types of consumers, it can be seen that the ‘pre-family’ under-28s have reduced the amount of meat, fish and poultry they’re buying, with volumes down by 5% over the past half-decade.

The big piece of positive news is that volumes of fresh meat and poultry sold have continued to grow, and are up by 5% since 2013.

“This could show the start of a cohort effect in the market, wherein these shoppers pass on their buying habits to their children as they age while the older, meat-heavy groups reduce in size,” Ward admits.

However, 99% of shoppers under 28 are still buying meat, fish and poultry in one form or another. It therefore looks like the volume declines are less of a concerted exit from the market and, perhaps instead, signs of the impact of the flexitarian trend where people are selecting meat for some meals and not others.

Ward added: “This younger age group are also becoming more averse to frozen meat products as they try their hand at cooking from scratch and retailers need to consider new products that complement this demand to encourage shoppers to up volumes.”

Chicken is winning

There is one clear winner when assessing data relating to meat sales and consumption: chicken.

It is performing as healthily as ever, with Kantar data for the 12 weeks to 25th February revealing falling prices and rising volumes.

Ward commented: “Chicken is growing in fresh and processed markets, with demand seemingly untouched by the concerns of flexitarianism and veganism. We have seen one million more trips containing chicken this year and 195,000 more shoppers, as this versatile meat continues to take a larger share of sales.”

Cuts of chicken legs and breasts are the drivers for this growth. Chicken breasts are being supported in store with 18% more promotions, as price cuts (up 18%) and Y for £X deals (up 19%) increase over the period. Chicken legs have seen similar support, with promotional volumes up 10%, helping to stimulate 900,000 more trips so far this year.

The future

Considering the figures above as a whole there is no denying that there is consumer interest in meat-free options. However, the fact that volumes of fresh meat sold since 2013 are up 5% speaks for itself.

According to Kantar Worldpanel, ensuring a broad offering is available is going to be key in the coming years. The ‘big four’ have started to increase their meat-free ranges so, in the words of Ward: “it’s worth keeping a close eye on whether these markets can make the move to the mainstream.”



• Research shows that 99% of shoppers under 28 are still buying meat, fish and poultry in one form or another.

◀ What does the industry think?

A selection of industry experts share their views on the future of meat.

“Eating meat remains an important part of the vast majority of people’s diets. Most people recognise it as healthy and nutritious, and above all, an enjoyable and pleasurable part of one’s meal. Vegans are becoming more vocal and aggressive in promoting their own choice of diet, but most consumers prefer to make their own informed decision on what they should eat, and often resist having others’ views thrust on them. This is reflected in the statistics which show meat consumption is almost unchanged.”



David Lishman, chairman of the Q Guild of Butchers.

“All the robust market measures available suggest that overall meat consumption is actually growing in the UK, albeit slowly. Sales of new vegan and meat alternative products are increasing but from a very low base. The publicity being put out by vegan interests or companies currently launching such products in the marketplace is founded on what appears to be very selective consumer research, based on opinions expressed by a narrow group of respondents. It is quite possible that we’ll see some reduction in meat consumption in the Western world in the longer term but, if it does occur, it is likely to be a gradual process linked to an evolution of dietary preferences rather than a knee-jerk reaction to reduce or stop eating meat.”



John Howard, Meat Management columnist.

“What these figures tell us is that people like meat. It is part of their enjoyment of food, and more to the point, not only do they like meat but they recognise that it plays a key part in a healthy balanced diet at all stages of your life.”



Nick Allen, CEO of the British Meat Processors’ Association.

“The facts show that world meat consumption in 2017 was almost 20% (or 50 million tonnes) higher than ten years ago and is confidently expected to continue growing. Although much of this increase is in emerging and developing economies, we should note that US Government figures project that American consumers are expected to eat another record level of over 100kg per head this year (and remember most of the publicity over lab meat/meat substitutes has been generated from North America). In the UK, the total volumes of meat consumed may have fluctuated over the years but are currently significantly higher than 40 years ago. We shouldn’t conclude there won’t be big challenges for the industry in the next few years – but don’t let misleading figures be used to talk down our industry!”



Bob Bansback, meat industry economist.

“Large herbivores have been integral to creating the world’s most fertile soils, the soils which today supply humans with healthy plant foods and meat. In the absence of grazing livestock soils will inevitably decline in quality and their capacity to produce healthy food will diminish, eventually to be lost.”



Professor Ralph Early, Harper Adams University.

“Very often, claims about the growth of vegetarianism or veganism are based on a misinterpretation of supermarket sales. These days more products are labelled as ‘suitable for vegetarians or vegans’ on retail shelves. Consequently, each purchase is interpreted as a preference choice. Increased sales of fruit and vegetables can be interpreted as people preferring to eat less meat. Whereas the reality is that people are making informed choices, eating a much more varied diet, while at the same time enjoying reasonable amounts of meat as part of a natural ‘mixed’ diet.”



Roger Kelsey, CEO of the National Federation of Meat & Food Traders.