

Best practices for engaging with foodservice operators

The Good Food Institute partnered with Palate Insights to learn the most effective ways of communicating with chefs to get alternative proteins on their menus. Palate interviewed 15 chefs across a range of food service establishments — including fine dining, schools/universities, fast casual, care facilities, and corporate cafeterias — to uncover what problems alternative proteins can solve for chefs, the most effective ways of reaching out to chefs and holding their attention, what chefs care most about when considering new ingredients, and more.

Find your fit

- Don't try to be everything to everyone.**
 Focus on one type of food service establishment at a time and be perfect for them. Chefs in different food service settings can have vastly different priorities, such as cost sensitivity, sourcing criteria, available talent and equipment, etc. Therefore, effectively engaging with them requires understanding their unique set of needs.
- Convince chefs that alternative proteins are excellent choices for all diners, including those who eat meat.** 11 of the 15 chefs interviewed perceive alternative proteins as being for only vegan or vegetarian customers. In fact, 97 percent of U.S. households purchasing plant-based meat in retail also purchase conventional meat. Incorporating alternative proteins into menus can help chefs provide inclusive, suitable choices for vegans, vegetarians, and omnivores alike.
- Understand which types of alternative protein products are best suited for a given food service channel.** 10 of the 15 chefs interviewed preferred working with minimalist, whole food, identifiable ingredients. While some corporate and university chefs value the consistency and volume of alternative protein products, other chefs need to know why a brand's products are preferable to creating a similar product in-house. Convenient, quick-cook products may suit fast casual restaurants best, while ingredients that lend themselves well to creativity and customization may be a better fit for fine dining.
- Hone in on the role of nutrition to a specific food service channel and the health benefits its diners are seeking.** K–12 schools, for example, tend to have stricter nutritional guidelines related to portion size or macronutrients that other foodservice channels don't. Diners at fast-casual establishments may be looking for convenient, high-protein options, but may be less concerned about portion size. To better understand how nutrition influences consumer choices, check out GFI's [plant-based meat consumer segmentation study](#).

Get on the menu

- Chefs are generally interested in and open to trying new alternative proteins and other plant-based foods, which they view as a major consumer-driven trend for 2025 and beyond.

“If you don’t keep up with the trends you get left behind.”

– Daniel Peralez, Corporate Dining Chef, B&I

- Human connection and direct outreach are key! Send emails to individual chefs to set up demos. Knock on their doors to drop off samples.

“Brands need to take a page from the pharmaceutical industry, talking to chefs, coming into kitchens. ‘What are you working on? What are you excited about? What’s the word on the street?’”

– Shane Graybeal, Executive Chef, Armory Hotel

- Chefs tend to prefer demos where the brand brings their own chefs who are familiar with working with the product. If that’s not possible, include one to three suggested recipes and cooking guidelines with samples to give chefs a starting point to play around with the product on their own. Several chefs had experiences where, when they first tried to use a product, it seemed like it wouldn’t work for them at all. But after learning more specific cooking protocols from the brand, they were able to create delicious meals. Clear, easy-to-follow instructions are essential not only for initial chef meetings but also for ensuring consistency among all chefs preparing dishes with a product(s).
- Do your homework and find out which distributors chefs work with before meeting with them. Many chefs, especially at universities or other institutional settings, are locked into contracts with the major distributors and must purchase most of their goods from that distributor. Getting on these lists gives a

better chance of being an option for these chefs. You can also do this bottom-up—if you sell a chef on your product with a great demo, they may be able to push the demand up the chain and help you get on the list more easily.

- Stock your product in wholesale quantities. Chefs need confidence that if they put your product on the menu they’ll be able to keep it on the menu.
- Look, smell, mouth feel, and texture were the most important attributes to chefs in getting a product on the menu. Price was generally more of a concern in institutional establishments than restaurants.

Launch successfully

- Education, education, education! Educate chefs so they can educate waitstaff who can educate customers. This includes training on how to properly prepare the product, what it’s made of, where to place it on the menu, how to talk about it with diners, what allergens it contains, and why it may be a great option for their diners. For a corporate or school environment, provide marketing materials such as flyers, signage, and menu descriptions to help customers understand and get excited about the new offering. Use enticing photos and language to highlight its craveability. In a paid-meal setting, provide the restaurant with free product so they can offer special promotions or samples to customers. Customers tend to be afraid of committing to purchasing something new in case they don’t like it.

“Everything comes down to how you train and explain to your staff so they can share the emotion with guests and they get curious to try it.”

– Andrea Pancani, formerly Corporate Chef, Sant Ambroeus

Case study: How the Austin Independent School District embraced plant-based protein

Diane Grodek, Executive Chef for the Austin Independent School District (AISD), offered her insights on how alternative protein brands can best connect with chefs, especially in the K-12 school setting. Grodek is involved in all aspects of procurement and menu planning across the 116-school district. Through a mix of whole food ingredients, meat analogs, and blended proteins, AISD meets diverse student needs while navigating nutritional guidelines, allergen restrictions, and tight procurement cycles. The report also details how a plant-based brand earned a place on the menu by adapting to the operational realities of school foodservice. Grodek's insights offer a practical, real-world look at how collaboration, customization, and operational awareness can open doors for alternative protein products across K–12 and other institutional settings.

Plant-based options at AISD

At all 116 schools in the AISD, a vegetarian option is offered with every meal. Grodek explains that this approach supports the district's diverse student population, ensuring that children from religious, vegan, or vegetarian households always have an option. Health and sustainability also play a role in driving these menu choices.

Since the pandemic, Grodek has observed a notable increase in student uptake of plant-based and plant-forward meals. These range from whole food plant-based dishes made with legumes and grains to analog alternatives like plant-based chicken nuggets, as well as conventional animal meat blended with plant-based ingredients. Each of these plant-based or plant-forward categories presents unique benefits to schools:

Whole food plant-based options

Legumes are affordable, packed with nutrition, and included on the [USDA commodity foods list](#), making them accessible for National School Lunch Program-participating schools at low or no cost. Grodek integrates legumes throughout the AISD menu.

Plant-based meat analogs

AISD has included plant-based chicken nuggets and tenders on menus for several years. In some cases, they are even cheaper than conventional chicken, depending on whether the district is using commodity or commercial chicken. Sometimes, the plant-based nugget is served as the only option — marked with a leaf icon on the signage — and the students respond positively to it.

Grodek follows foodservice industry [best practices](#) for menuing plant-based options by including allergen information and indicating that a dish is plant-based by simply adding a leaf symbol to the menu. This technique allows Grodek to clearly mark important dietary information without overly magnifying the difference between plant-based and conventional menu items. She says this system helps students who may be deterred by new-sounding foods be more open-minded about trying plant-based options.

Blended proteins

For years, AISD has been mixing ground beef with lentils in an 80:20 ratio. This blended protein mix appears in tacos, enchiladas, and other dishes featuring ground beef. The lentils aren't hidden or disguised, and Grodek reports that students enjoy the meals and don't complain about or comment on the lentils. Grodek uses this approach to lower the costs

associated with serving beef while also promoting sustainability and increasing the amount of healthy, plant-based ingredients on students' plates.

These offerings show that there's room for multiple approaches when it comes to increasing plant-based options in schools. Some students respond best to familiar formats like nuggets or tacos, while others are open to whole food plant-based meals. Variety allows districts to meet a wider range of preferences and dietary needs.

Case example: How one plant-based company got on the menu

- Grodek received an email from a plant-based meat company as well as samples of their plant-based protein ribs, bits, and strips. Grodek was initially underwhelmed, and she reached out to the company with feedback. The brand followed up with a presentation and prepared samples. With the brand's chefs demonstrating proper preparation techniques, Grodek was able to better envision how the strips could be incorporated into the menu.

"Brands need to provide recipes formulated to meet school standards and specify whether the item counts as meat or grain, portion sizes, what serving tools are needed, and instructions for how to prepare and serve their product. The easier you make it for schools, the more likely they are to adopt your product."

- Ultimately, Grodek was convinced by the product's ability to take flavor well and its satisfying tear.

"Based on our success rate with plant-based products with the students in Austin, the goal for manufacturers should still be to get as close to emulating conventional meat as possible with their products. An inability to discern the difference between traditional and plant-based products is still ideal"

- In addition to direct individual outreach, Grodek encourages brands to present their products at state, regional, and national K-12 trade shows such as the School Nutrition Association (SNA) Annual National Conference (ANC).

Launching the menu

- Grodek decided to use the brand's strips in a "beef and broccoli"-style meal. Grodek's team had trouble deciding what to call the product and how to market it, but settled on "savory Asian strips" because it communicated what the ingredient was without calling it out as a replacement.

- Stigma against alternative proteins is a barrier:

"[Students] were excited it looked so good, but when they heard it was plant-based food they changed their minds."

But through menu development and recipe testing, they figured out what worked and what didn't work for their students. Running student focus groups and sampling prior to launch could have saved time, had they had the bandwidth for it. Grodek encourages brands to provide free products to allow chefs to conduct sampling directly with diners if they want to.

Key considerations for selling to public schools

- Many schools require products to have a Child Nutrition ("CN") label and/or a Product Formulation Statement. Chefs at these schools must use these documents when designing their menus to ensure they meet federal guidelines. Brands should prepare these documents before contacting chefs.

- Federal guidelines require schools to serve specific portions of meat/meat alternates, vegetables, fruits, and grains. Foods must have a minimum amount of protein to be considered a “meat alternate.”

“We’re not looking for vegetable replacements or fillers. We need to be able to use [alternative proteins] as a meat alternate, which means something very specific in a school setting. Brands need to know the right portion sizes and protein content required to comply with school nutrition guidelines.”

- Schools also have considerations around common allergens such as peanuts, sesame, and coconut. Many alternative protein options use coconut oil as a binder, which is not permitted at the AISD, a nut-free district. Brands should research a district before reaching out to make sure that their ingredients align with the schools’ requirements.
- School food planning and procurement are performed far in advance, as they are tied to the federal government’s commodity purchasing cycle. The bid process is once a year, a year out from when it will be served.
- Since the menu is planned so far in advance, review cycles are also slow. The AISD runs three menu cycles per year. They review take rates and performance at the end of each cycle to gather feedback and inform decisions for the future.

- Schools are price-sensitive, and margins are thin.

“We’re not setting prices higher or lower based on what we make. It’s a flat rate. [Alternative proteins] have to fit in at the same margin as the rest of the entrees.”

- When creating suggested recipes, companies should be aware of common ingredients schools use, especially items they get for zero cost or cheaply from the government. Districts don’t stock items they can’t use in multiple meals.

While these considerations are specific to public schools, they underscore broader factors that are applicable to a variety of food service channels, like nutrition and labeling requirements, allergens, procurement cycles, institutional and corporate decision-making processes, pricing, volume, and government or corporate regulations. Understanding the range of considerations unique to chefs in a particular channel is key to successful partnerships.

For more resources, check out GFI’s [guide to best practices](#) for marketing and promoting plant-based meat on foodservice and restaurant menus.

About GFI

The Good Food Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit working internationally to make alternative proteins like plant-based and cultivated meat delicious, affordable, and accessible. GFI advances open-access research, mobilizes resources and talent, and empowers partners across the food system to create a sustainable, secure, and just protein supply. GFI is funded entirely by private philanthropic support.