



## WHERE'S THE *BEEF*?

MARTA COLOMBO meets *Beyond Meat* executive chairman SETH GOLDMAN – and discovers that the times have changed when it comes to the long-ridiculed meatless movement

**U**NTIL RECENTLY, THE idea of a meatless world seemed absurd to many people. By the turn of the millennium, vegetarianism had numerous followers, but wasn't at the centre of mainstream debates, while veganism was a largely unexplored phenomenon. If anything, not eating meat (and criticising the carnivores) was still considered, in many cultures, a form of rebellion for ultra-liberals and progressives.

However, less than 20 years into this century, working towards a green utopia seems more realistic than ever. We're constantly exposed to reports on the harmful effects of excessive meat consumption and it's becoming more common to be surrounded by people who have decided to give up meat. The "green movement" essentially went from being an elitist trend of the coffee shops and salad bars in Venice Beach and the West Village to gaining momentum all over the world. The shift in public opinion has also inevitably affected the food industry, with a surge in the production of plant-based meat alternatives.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, as living standards continue to improve in developing regions, global demand for livestock products is expected to double by 2050; the sector already contributes 14.5 per cent of all greenhouse gas emissions. Beef production, in particular, has a greater impact on the environment than poultry and other animal products.

Above: A Beyond Meat burger at the Butcher's Club  
Next page: The Butcher's Club founder Jonathan Glover, Seth Goldman and Green Common co-founder David Yeung

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SETH GOLDMAN

"It's a fact – our planet cannot support eight billion people eating animal protein," Beyond Meat executive chairman Seth Goldman tells me when we meet in Hong Kong; the Los Angeles-headquartered company is a major producer of plant-based meat. "But by changing the lifestyle, especially in some developing parts of the world, it's possible to change the situation."

Goldman is in town to visit the company's only market outside the United States – and for a culinary showdown at The Butchers Club, where the two Korean-inspired Wu Tang burgers that the crowd comes to taste look exactly the same. But there's a key difference: one is vegan and the other isn't. "When we found out that Seth was coming, we wanted to celebrate with something that was Asian by turning the classic Wu Tang into a Beyond Wu Tang," says Jonathan Glover, founder of The Butchers Club. "It came out so well, that, in fact, I prefer it to the original one – and all the components are vegan."

Beyond Burger made its first appearance in Hong Kong last August, when it started selling at Green Common, one of the city's largest vegetarian and vegan grocery chains. With seven branches, it was the obvious choice for entering the market. But this time around, Goldman decided to partner with an unconventional ally: a traditional burger joint with a menu that's almost exclusively composed of meat-based dishes.

"Until now, most veggie burger companies have had a self-righteous tone – a 'We're saving the world' approach," says Goldman. "But if we were uncomfortable associating ourselves with the meat industry, we

wouldn't be here. We have to recognise that we are a continuum of it and we can't have many conversations if we just keep identifying as a veggie burger company."

In other words, to succeed commercially and to make an impact, Beyond Meat needs to push beyond the approval of the Whole Foodies of the world. The company is doing so by making its patties available at an increasing number of "normal" restaurants across the US, and by targeting both hard-core meat eaters and the so-called "flexitarians" – the occasional vegetarian or vegan that, for a variety of reasons, is cutting back on meat consumption.

Forget seitan and tofu – vegan and vegetarian cuisines have taken on a life of their own; they've conquered the palates of carnivores, too. But rather than being appealing because of the ethical movements from which they originated, their popularity is linked to the fact that when meatless alternatives are as tasty and satisfying as their counterparts, they succeed.

"It's all about the product – it all starts there," says Goldman. "I can't come here and advocate for vegan, plant-based proteins and then the food doesn't taste good. If you have a product that can be a valid – or even superior – substitute, then it can actually work with everyone and slowly change the mindset."

Goldman's pragmatism, in many ways, echoes the principles of the newly established reductarian movement. "This concept is appealing because not everyone is willing or able to follow an 'all-or-nothing' diet," explains Brian Kateman, co-founder of the Reductarian Foundation.

game changer

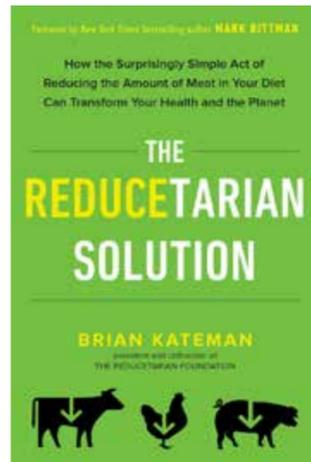
“However, reducetarianism is inclusive of vegans, vegetarians, flexitarians or mostly vegetarian, semi-vegetarians and anyone else who reduces the amount of animal products in their diet.”

In his 2017 book *The Reducetarian Solution: How the Surprisingly Simple Act of Reducing the Amount of Meat in Your Diet Can Transform Your Health and the Planet*, which serves as a manifesto for the foundation, Kateman encourages people around the world to drop dietary labels that imply that the only way to impact the overall reduction of meat consumption is to give it up completely. Rather, he advocates for a more inclusive and positive attitude towards the issue, because, he says, “every plant-based meal is one worth celebrating.”

It took Beyond Meat seven years to perfect the meatless “bloody” patty that debuted to spectacular reviews in 2016. It’s made from beet juice, coconut oil and pea protein, and it contains no hormones, antibiotics or cholesterol. More importantly, it looks and tastes “real” – I personally couldn’t tell the difference between it and beef. However, while many meat substitutes succeed right after their launch and benefit from the green euphoria, not many have proved that they can go commercial and appeal to the masses in the long term.

I ask Goldman how Beyond Meat going to “democratise” its products to keep it relevant. “We are excited to be selling this product in everyday grocery stores where everyone goes and not just on the coasts,” he says. “And, crucially, we are in conversation to bring the product to several national burger chains. We want it to be available and accessible.” So far, the company has distinguished itself from other similar entities because of its strategy, which is essentially focused on bringing down prices and increasing distribution. It’s an operation

Top: Brian Kateman and his book *The Reducetarian Solution*  
Below: The Beyond Burger patties are made from beetroot juice, coconut oil and pea protein



Above: The Beyond Meat Wu Tang Burger at The Butcher’s Club  
Right: Beyond Meat is sold at the meat section at Safeway in the US



that, Goldman admits, “won’t happen in a year or two, but will eventually succeed and bring production to the scale that we want.”

Goldman isn’t new to this sort of thing. In 1998, he co-founded Honest Tea, offering consumers an alternative that was tasty but less sugary than the beverages most American consumed daily and that were affecting their health. His organic bottled tea gained nationwide popularity by being sold at popular fast-food chain Wendy’s and other national chains, as well as in Europe. In 2011, when it was acquired by Coca-Cola, it became the first organic and fair-trade brand in the world’s largest beverage distribution system.

“Even if the products [Honest Tea and Beyond Meat] are quite different, the process is very similar,” he explains. “We have to make it accessible to people from a brand, taste and packaging perspective. The business model is also similar; I led the fundraisings for both.”

So far, Beyond Meat has attracted investors of the likes of Bill Gates and Leonardo DiCaprio, who are both outspoken supporters of environmentally friendly causes and the fight against climate change. Remarkably, being in the spotlight has already proven to work on a practical level. Much like Honest Tea, which effectively popularised an organic beverage, Beyond Meat has started to invade the meat section of ordinary grocery stores in the US.

Goldman’s vision is exemplified in Beyond Meat’s unconventional partnership with The Butchers Club. It is, in the end, a utilitarian one that focuses on the greater good without worrying too much about labels and moral schemes.

“Why can’t our menu be healthier?” asks Glover. “You should be able to change with the times. I’m trying to eat less meat – and I’m the owner of a burger chain!” As I left the event after trying the two Wu Tang burgers, I felt positively energised. Maybe I was unconsciously on my way to becoming a reducetarian. #

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PHOTOS: ANDREI SEVERNY (TOP)