



FOOD FOR
CLIMATE
LEAGUE

Trends in Climate- Smart Eating



2024



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About the Report

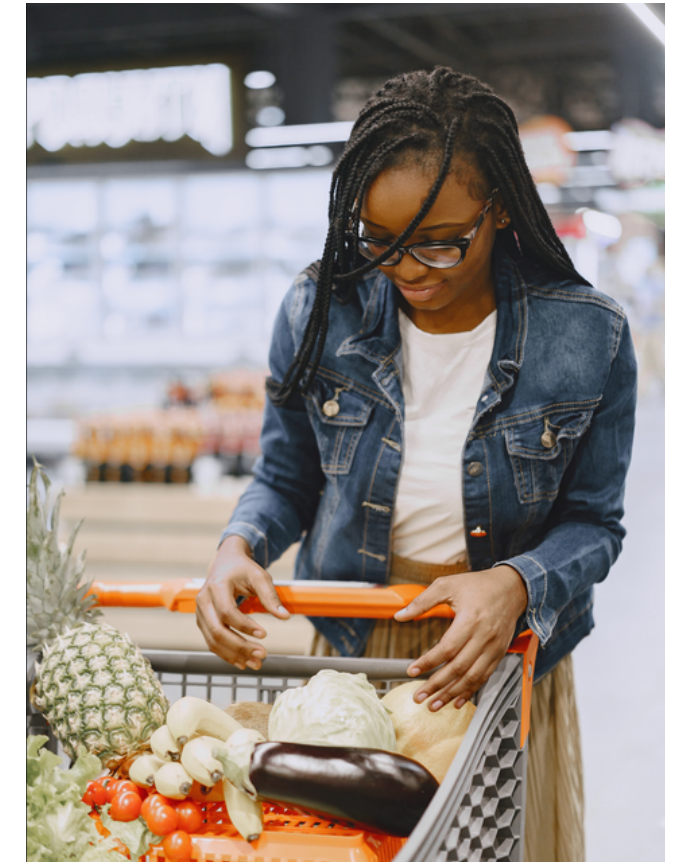


At Food for Climate League (FCL), **our mission is to make climate-smart food choices the norm.** We envision an equitable, nutritious, and sustainable food system that's rooted in people's core needs, values, and diversity of cultures.

All of the trends in this report pull insights from research conducted by FCL, or research by our partners and collaborators, including Datassential and Humantel, for which we provided input or analysis, as well as from observations of food, consumer, and climate trends overall.

Research publications referenced in this trend report include:

- [Serving Up Plants by Default Executive Summary](#) (Food for Climate League)
- [Plant-Forward Opportunity Report](#) (Datassential)
- [How to Talk About Food & Climate](#) (Food for Climate League)



Contact us to learn more about our mission, programs, and projects

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Or visit our website
[**foodforclimateleague.org**](https://foodforclimateleague.org)

Welcome



Tapping into current trends is not only valuable when anticipating what eaters want, but also when motivating people to make a more climate-smart food choice.

Food is one of the most impactful levers for responding to climate change, but it's challenging to get people to change the way they eat. A recent study from Humantel, with input from Food for Climate League, asked people to choose what food-related steps they'd be willing to take to fight climate change, and "change my diet" came in last.

"Food is emotional, and it can be very triggering for people when you talk about diet change," says Food for Climate League Executive Director Eve Turow-Paul.

"For those with goals to improve the health of eaters and the planet, it's much more effective to meet people where they are or where they want to be." Trends are a roadmap.

In FCL's first-ever trend report, we present four trends for institutions, suppliers, city leaders, and others to keep in mind when implementing climate-smart food programs, menu items, and products. We gathered insights from interviews, narrative tests, and analysis we've seen in our own work, as well as observations, conversations, and collaborations with our ecosystem of partners working at the intersection of food and climate.

It's all about understanding how sustainability aligns with

people's current needs, interests, and priorities—and yes, the *trends* that excite them and drive their behavior today, tomorrow, and in the future.

Want to know what "girl dinner" has to do with zero waste? Read on.

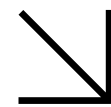


"For those with goals to improve the health of eaters and the planet, it's much more effective to meet people where they are or want to be."

Eve Turow-Paul
Executive Director
Food for Climate League

Line Cooks and Servers as Change Agents

TREND 1



It's clear that chefs, foodservice operators, and menu decision-makers play a crucial role in offering and promoting climate-smart food options to diners.

Now, foodservice operators are recognizing the influence that hourly line cooks and servers have on eaters' food choices as well.

We have seen in our own work that when line cooks understand why plant-forward cooking personally matters to them, and see it as an opportunity to be creative, their natural motivation to plan and prepare plant-forward dishes grows. That empathy, personal connection, and love ultimately translates to the plate.

Front-of-house staff, as well as servers on the line and on the floor, may drive guests toward—or away from—plant-forward food choices, be it with their recommendations or

even their body language. So, it's important that operators not only make it easy and enjoyable for guests to choose plant-forward menu options, but also get foodservice workers excited to serve them.

“Even when they’re directed by the C-suite, sustainable food initiatives need buy-in at every level to be executed successfully and enduringly. This means making sure hourly workers, including line cooks and front-of-house staff, are factored into the implementation plan, and that employers engage these staff members like the influencers they are.”

Chhavi Jatwani,
Director of Research,
Food for Climate League

TREND 1

LINE COOKS AND SERVERS AS CHANGE AGENTS

How to make the most of the trend



- 1 Engage dining staff** when developing climate-smart dishes for the menu. See who already has expertise using these foods, and ask staff to generate ideas for dishes that they'd be excited to make and try themselves. Build on experience they already have by modifying dishes that they're skilled at making and serving that can be easily adjusted to introduce trending climate-smart ingredients.
- 2 Recognize staff contributions**, for example by providing certificates when they've completed a training or publicly acknowledging them for a dish they've developed on the menu.
- 3 Communicate the purpose and benefits** of sustainability initiatives beyond climate to staff at all levels of the organization. Emphasize taste and health, reduction of food allergens, religious diversity, as well as other ways these foods are relatable and connected to people's personal values and cultures.
- 4 Build educational training materials** in accessible formats so that executive chefs and other leaders are equipped to share these menu changes with team members of all roles—during informal huddles, formal training meetings, and on the fly in the kitchen or front of house.
- 5 Include how to talk to and interact with eaters** in a way that does not push or reinforce dominant meat-eating norms when training foodservice staff.
- 6 Consider the full transaction.** For example, does the point-of-sale system make it easy for servers and cashiers to ring up a plant-based swap, such as substituting a black-bean patty for a beef burger?



TREND 1

LINE COOKS AND SERVERS AS CHANGE AGENTS

Trends in action



In a pilot test, FCL worked with chefs at the Good Eating Company to test three sea vegetable dishes (top right). FCL **provided training and education** to chefs and foodservice staff, including cooks and front-of-house staff, about narratives and the health, versatility,

and taste qualities of sea vegetables. After a successful pilot testing the reception of sea vegetables on the menu, staff's intention to offer sea vegetables on future menus **increased from 17% to 71%.**

At Google, the Global Culinary Inspiration Program for Google Chefs and Cooks, co-created by FCL with Food@Google culinarians, is designed to **spark buy-in, build ownership for plant-forward cooking**, and drive enrollment in related skill-based culinary training.



“Unlocking the intrinsic motivation of our chefs has been an absolute game changer for inspiring exceptional food experiences at Google.”

Kitami Lentz,
Culinary Manager
Site Operations,
Compass at Google

Non-Climate Motivations for Climate-Smart Eating

TREND 2



While people generally care about the environment, most often, it does not drive their food choices.

Yes, consumers of all ages are noticing—and are even concerned about—the effects of climate change, according to the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. But research repeatedly shows that most people don't connect the dots to food as a contributing factor to the crisis.

It's no surprise we're seeing a pullback on explicitly plant-forward messaging in branding. In many instances, it's still present, just more subdued. Or the overarching plant-based message is minimized in favor of a focus on ingredients, flavors, or other attributes.

Knowing this, operators and suppliers attempting to nudge a more sustainable food choice would do better to appeal to people's existing values,

interests, and needs. For example, that may mean playing up personal health, cost savings, a cultural connection, a trend, or even bold packaging. Promoting the food's sustainability can be secondary.

Car emissions and plastics, rather than meat and dairy, are more likely to be perceived as levers of change, according to "Eating Our Way to Extreme Weather," a co-designed study by Humantel and FCL.

TREND 2

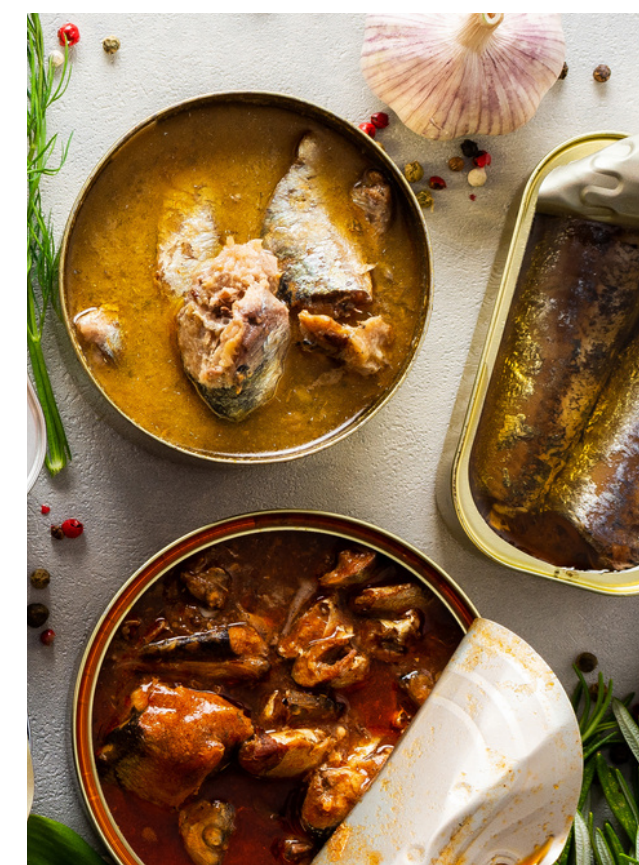
NON-CLIMATE MOTIVATIONS FOR CLIMATE-SMART EATING

How to make the most of the trend



- 1 Collaborate with eaters and culinary stakeholders** to develop culturally relevant, climate-smart dishes that resonate with eaters' palates.
- 2 Craft menu titles for climate-smart dishes** that emphasize enticing flavor profiles, textures, and preparation methods.
- 3 Play with color and contrasting textures**, such as plating on eye-catching serveware, to make plant-based dishes visually appealing.
- 4 Leverage existing food trends** to guide sustainable menus. Pair sustainable aquatic foods with yuzu. Put a spin on the TikTok-famous "girl dinner" by making it zero-waste and plant-forward. Put tinned

mussels and pickled kelp on your next tinned fish board. Make your coffee station plant-based by default to leverage interest in oat milk and other novel milks.



TREND 2

NON-CLIMATE MOTIVATIONS FOR CLIMATE-SMART EATING

Trends in action



In FCL's pilot test with CulinArt of narratives that drive people to use sea vegetable seasonings at a self-serve flavor station, **both Taste & Versatility narratives and Health & Sustainability narratives were effective** at promoting choice, with Taste & Versatility increasing consumption slightly more.

Some of the **hottest trends on menus also happen to be climate-smart**: tinned fish, buckwheat, and tomatoes (to name a few) showed up on multiple industry-watchers "what's in" lists for 2024—and not only because they're good for the planet.



Sea vegetable seasonings at this flavor station (above) include furikake, nori flakes, and wakame and add salty, sweet, and umami flavor as well as crunchy texture to dishes.

Photo courtesy of CulinArt

A Nudge Beats a Push

TREND 3



No one wants to be told what to do—and people especially want to make their own choices when it comes to food. Well-intentioned bans, mandates, and all-or-nothing policies—across the U.S. and abroad—that aim to improve people's health or that of the planet through food are bound to backfire. These measures are upsetting because they take away choices that people love, or in some cases, they merely give the impression that those choices could be taken away.

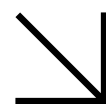
People can be similarly resistant to using meat-eliminating labels to describe their way of eating. Terms like “vegan” and “vegetarian” may trigger feelings of loss. And for many eaters, they're associated with a food culture that's niche, not inclusive.

The answer may be to ease up. We've seen people be more inclined to make the climate-smart food choice when the

pressure's off and they aren't confronted with an all-or-nothing approach.

Defaults are one proven strategy to nudge human behavior. Think: automatic enrollment for 401(k) plans or requiring an extra step to opt out of default privacy settings when visiting a website. Defaults can apply to plant-based menus, too.

How to make the most of the trend



- 1 Adopt a plant-based default serving approach,** as FCL Roundtable Partner Greener by Default promotes, even at one dining station. Just this small change can improve the sustainability of a foodservice operation.
- 2 Try “blended” proteins** that offset some animal ingredients with plant ingredients.
- 3 Play with ratios.** Reduce the portion of animal-based proteins and beef up (pun intended) the portion of plants.
- 4 Use lessons of choice architecture.** Place healthful and sustainable options in areas where eaters have easy access, and place less-sustainable options farther away.
- 5 Talk about what’s in the food,** and why someone should be excited to eat the meal. Be inclusive with menu titles and avoid othering with terms like “vegan” or “vegetarian.”

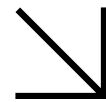


According to Datassential, among the general population, only 2% of people describe the way they eat as vegan and a similarly low 2% describe their diet as vegetarian.

TREND 3

A NUDGE BEATS A PUSH

Trends in action



When plant-based dishes were offered as the default option in all-you-care-to-eat college dining halls in a FCL-run study with Better Food Foundation, Sodexo, and researchers at Boston College, there was a **58.3% increase in people** taking a plant-based option without any other changes to the dining experience.

According to a research study from Datassential, with input from FCL:

- Most eaters are open to flexitarian or plant-forward eating.
- More than one-third say they will be **likely to eat smaller portions of meat** when preparing meals at home this year.



Whole Plants

Over “Plant-Based”

TREND 4



Menu writers and manufacturers can put away the whiteboards full of delicious-sounding pseudonyms for plant-based meat substitutes and just call a bean a “bean.”

People are more interested in ordering plant-forward options this year, but what they’re *really* interested in is plants.

In other words, they’re more drawn to whole foods—such as lentils, beans, and other pulses and legumes—to satisfy their plant-forward cravings than processed plant-based foods that mimic meat.

This is good news: It tells us that we needn’t put all our eggs in the “innovation” basket; many of the food-based solutions to climate change already exist.

A world of options for interested eaters: There are about 300,000 to 400,000 edible plants species, and we eat less than 200 of them, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

TREND 4

WHOLE PLANTS OVER “PLANT-BASED”

How to make the most of the trend



One whole food category ripe for engagement is beans:

- Beans are ubiquitous but underconsumed, even though they're healthy, inexpensive, and a sustainable source of protein.
- Gen Z is open to more bean consumption.
- Data shows that lower income communities and “foodies” are poised to eat more beans with a perception shift.



Trends in action



According to Datassential, nearly one-third of consumers plan to order more plant-forward menu items in the coming year. But **dishes that mimic meat rank lowest compared to all other plant-forward offerings.** (Still, about 24% of people are interested in ordering plant-based dishes that mimic the meat experience.)

“By changing the plant-based narrative to include the plentitude of plants, we can influence what products get investment, what chefs and retailers choose to highlight, and what eaters have access to and enjoy regularly.”

Sophie Egan

Director of Strategy
Food for Climate League



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Food for Climate League (FCL) is a trailblazing, women-led 501(c)3 non-profit **working to make climate-smart food choices the norm.**

We do this by using narrative and behavioral sciences to connect nutritious and sustainable foods to people's diverse needs, values, and cultures.

Make a Donation

Please consider supporting FCL's work and mission with a [donation](#). Your contribution of any size makes a big impact.



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