



But can they call it “meat”?

SAN FRANCISCO—There was an antidote here last week to the depressing tale of American agriculture’s conflicts with President Trump over trade, ethanol, and food stamps, and the resulting troubles in rural America.

The Good Food Conference, a meeting of more than 800 plant-based- and cell-based-protein entrepreneurs, scientists, investors, and marketers, was the most upbeat, joyful, and youthful American agriculture gathering in years.

Plant-based foods that mimic meat are on a roll. In the past year, Burger King introduced the Impossible Whopper, Beyond Meat began moving its burgers from the frozen-foods case to the refrigerated-meat case, and several companies competed to offer chicken-less nuggets. Farmers and ranchers contend that those interested in plant-based meat alternatives are coastal elites. But the industry’s biggest success has been in fast-food chains where customers are not vegans but “flexitarians” or “reducetarians” who have become convinced it’s healthier to eat less meat—and that the taste of plant-based “meats” is at least acceptable, especially when served with plenty of condiments.

Entrepreneurs who believe they can produce protein—or “meat,” as they call it—in a laboratory from a few animal cells have told investors they expect to have their products to market soon. Traditional meat companies such as Cargill, Tyson, JBS, and Perdue, who have gotten into meat alternatives and begun referring to themselves as “protein” companies, sent executives to the conference.

To top this off, the Trump administration announced that regulation of the cell-based industry will be divided between the Food and Drug Administration, which will control premarket approvals, and the Agriculture Department’s Food Safety and Inspection Service, which will oversee production. The cell-based industry preferred to be totally under the FDA, which ruled that “heme,” a soybean product crucial to plant-based foods, is safe. But the entrepreneurs are glad the administration has limited the power of the USDA, which is considered sympathetic to conventional-meat industry claims that cell-based protein isn’t real meat.

“We are using markets and food technology to create a better world,” said Bruce Friedrich, the cofounder and executive director of the Washington-based Good Food Institute, which sponsored the meeting. “We are still an extraordinarily nascent sector with a huge pie to grow.”

The future is not, of course, that simple—especially as the companies grow and face government regulation.

While the Good Food Institute brings together the plant-

based and cell-based industries, they are not united. Some of the Plant Based Foods Association’s members hate the idea of meat produced in a lab as much as meat from cattle raised on ranches or pigs and chickens in confined quarters. Last month, five companies—BlueNalu and Finless Foods, who make cell-based/cultured seafood; and Fork & Goode, JUST, and Memphis Meats, who produce cell-based/cultured meat and poultry—formed the Alliance for Meat, Poultry & Seafood Innovation and hired the Glover Park Group to speak for them in Washington.

The alliance has a broad agenda, but its top goal may be to convince the USDA to allow the firms to use the phrase “cultivated meat” to describe their products even as farmers and ranchers say only the product of animals should be called meat.

Some state legislatures have passed laws to forbid using the word “meat” in conjunction with the sale of alternatives. Some attendees said they thought the big meat companies’ entry into the field would mute opposition. But former Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, who advises some of the companies, reminded them that the opposition is “coming from grassroots producers who feel very threatened by these new technologies,” while President Trump’s trade policies “have impacted



Bruce Friedrich, cofounder of the Good Food Institute

their incomes.”

The real Achilles’ heel of the plant-based industry may be nutrition. Advocates stress that reducing meat consumption is healthy. But a study released in August by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health noted that plant-based foods can be high in fat and sodium.

Capitol Hill could see confrontations between plant-based upstarts and traditional agriculture. Lisa Feria of Stray Dog Capital, a venture-capital firm for vegan businesses, said the USDA should have “an alternative-proteins department,” while an Archer Daniels Midland executive said that as the corn-ethanol market declines, it “would make sense to subsidize plant-based proteins.”

New agriculture may not win all its battles, but it’s invading traditional ag’s territory. Thomas Jonas, the CEO of Sustainable Bioproducts, said he plans to ferment microbes into “healthy, delicious foods” on 0.7 acres in Chicago’s old meatpacking district. Cattle, he said, would require 7,000 acres to produce an equivalent amount in burgers. □

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