

Saving the planet, burger by burger

Beyond Meat founder Ethan Brown wants to change people's mindset about his plant-based meat alternative



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GAME CHANGER
For Mr Brown, his vision is for a day when ordering a plant-based burger becomes as acceptable as ordering fish as opposed to meat.

PHOTOS: BEYOND MEAT

LIVESTOCK agriculture is the planet's single-biggest polluter, with demand for meat soaring in China. In May, Beyond Meat, the Los Angeles plant-based meat alternative backed by Bill Gates and the Twitter founders, arrived in Asia.

If anyone was a poster child for vegan food, you would not expect it to be Ethan Brown. Six-foot-five (about two metres) of tanned California muscle with a jawline that could cut diamonds, Mr Brown would look equally at home felling timber as he would on a basketball pitch.

But the point that Mr Brown, founder of plant-based meat company Beyond Meat, wants to make is that the diets of red-blooded carnivores and hipster vegans are not so different. Minus a few digestive enzymes and amino acids, everything in the food chain originates from the ground.

"We're not making meat substitutes, we're recreating animal protein," he explains. "If you look at what meat is composed of, it's five things: amino acids, lipids, a tiny amount of carbs, trace minerals and water. What the animal is doing is effectively taking materials from plant matter to form new lengths between the proteins and create meat. We're taking those same elements through the same basic process, including heating, cooling and pressure. We're just by-passing the animal."

It was Mr Brown's early experiences as a child on his father's Maryland farm that set the ball rolling. "It wasn't that I saw anything disturbing, but I got to know the animals and I realised they were no different from our pets. That stuck with me," he recalls.

His first foray in business was in alternative energy creating fuel cells – Mr Brown wanted to help the planet. But he couldn't escape the niggles that no matter how efficient energy is, the number-one climate issue is livestock. Ten times more greenhouse gases are emitted for harvesting a kilogramme of meat than for a kilogramme of fruit or vegetables. Raising livestock generates more greenhouse gases, as measured in CO2 equivalent, than driving cars, according to the United Nations.

"In the US we have a tremendous history of efficiency in farming; every year we strive to wring more soya, corn, wheat out of our fields," says Mr Brown. But although we

spend billions on agriculture, people haven't thought to change the "bioreactor system" that our crops run through (that is, the animal body) since time began, he adds.

And so Beyond Meat was born in Los Angeles in 2009, set up with the help of two professors who were experimenting with meatless protein. Mr Brown quit his job, sold his house in Washington DC, and persuaded friends and family to support his fledgling business. But when word got around about the graduate disrupting the meat industry, larger investors began to hover. Venture-capital giant Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers was first in, before Mr Gates, Twitter founders Evan Williams and Biz Stone, food conglomerate Tyson Foods and NGO (non-governmental organisation) The Humane Society, and many more.

"All of our investors are in it for the desire to make a positive impact on global protein markets – it's socially oriented investing rather than a pure play investment, which gives us much more freedom to think longer term," he explains.

Supporting meatless alternatives seems a popular investment among billionaires. Mr Gates, Google Ventures and Li Ka-shing are backers of Mr Brown's meat-free rival, Impossible Foods; PayPal co-founder

Peter Thiel backs Modern Meadow, a startup aiming to produce three-dimensional bio-printed cuts of meat; while Google co-founder Sergey Brin spent a reported US\$330,000 on the development of a lab-grown "Franken-Burger" made from stem cells.

Mr Brown says it is his dream to have the products widespread in Asia, where there is growing status associated with meat consumption. In May, the brand began that journey with its first international foray in Hong Kong. Local meaterie The Butchers Club now serves Beyond Meat burgers in a brioche bun, complete with gherkins, sliced tomato, grilled vegan cheese and crispy "beetroot bacon" for HK\$100 (S\$18).

At vegan restaurant Green Common, launched by Green Mondays founder David Yeung, you can try Beyond Chicken Hainan Chicken and Beyond Meat Spag Bol, or purchase any of the raw ingredients from its supermarket. "I wouldn't compare Beyond Meat with other plant-based alternatives; I would compare it to the iPhone or Tesla, because it is, simply, a game changer," says Mr Yeung.



The real talking point of Beyond Meat is its realism. Vegetarian versions have always been cardboard cousins of the real deal, but Beyond Meat products mimic the exact texture, taste, pre-cooked "blood" (beetroot juice) and even grilling hiss-and-sizzle, as their meaty counterparts.

Beyond Meat's best-selling products are soya-protein chicken strips and pea-protein Beyond Burger patties. Steak and bacon are trickier to make realistic, says Mr Brown, but both, along with chicken breasts, are work in progress. All products have comparable protein to meat but without gluten, cholesterol, or GMOs (genetically modified organisms). Investor Mr Gates wrote on his blog: "I couldn't tell the difference between Beyond Meat and real chicken."

In truth, you can tell the difference, but it's a good difference. The Beyond Burger is delicious, light yet satisfying, retains the smokiness of a traditional burger but with an unmistakable coconutty aftertaste.

One of the main challenges, even in rainbow-coloured Los Angeles, is trying to change the mindset that meat is manly and plants are weedy. Everyone knows a macho meat-eater who would balk at the word vegan. Mr Brown gets this question a lot and, in fact, it's the red-blooded machos who are his ultimate target market.

"We don't fancy ourselves in an ivory tower. We are deeply in touch with the consumer; I care much more about the group of guys having a cookout in Kansas City than I do about Silicon Valley."

But this requires a fundamental change in attitude, which is no mean feat. Mr Brown recently called in the ad man who made milk sexy by putting it on the upper lips of athletes as part of the 1990s "Got Milk?" campaign – to help.

For Mr Brown, his vision is for a day when ordering a plant-based burger becomes as acceptable as ordering fish as opposed to meat. "I want my son and his friends to be able to walk into McDonald's, order a Beyond Burger and it's a non-event. Like so-and-so is getting a Filet-O-Fish, I'm getting a plant-based burger. If we can get people to think of these products not as a substitute or a sacrifice, but just a style of meat, we will have enormous adoption." **W**

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