

# "The Blend," a Meat–Mushroom Amalgam, Hits Restaurants and School Cafeterias

The hybrid is healthier than all-beef dishes—and a more sustainable option, too

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One of the biggest scientific experiments in American schools this year has unfolded not in a petri dish but in a patty. Instead of all-beef burgers, students in more than 300 school districts across the country have been eating “The Blend,” a meat-mushroom amalgam.

This mash-up has its roots in a “healthy flavors” initiative from the Culinary Institute of America, which teamed up with the Mushroom Council in 2011 to explore how the umbrella-shaped fungi could trim the dietary sins of common beef dishes. The groups then partnered with Jean-Xavier Guinard, a sensory scientist at the University of California, Davis, who runs a flavor laboratory specializing in testing and characterizing food tastes. In 2014 The Blend was born.

Why use mushrooms as a stand-in for beef? They contain a chemical cocktail that yields a meaty taste called umami, Japanese for “delicious.” But in contrast to beef, mushrooms boast fewer calories, less sodium and no saturated fat. Those nutritional benefits have persuaded school districts, which must meet national health standards, to try the mixture. For instance, last fall school food provider Sodexo replaced its conventional burgers with versions containing 30 percent mushroom (the percentage counts as a full serving of vegetables). If Sodexo serves the same number of burgers this school year as it typically does, it projects students overall will consume a total of approximately 16 million grams less saturated fat and 300 million milligrams less sodium.

Mushrooms also provide a green alternative to red meat. Their vendors have yet to quantify environmental impacts, but Kirk Broders, an assistant professor of bioagriculture at Colorado State University, sees promise. “It would be much more sustainable than livestock production,” he notes. Mushrooms require

relatively few resources to flourish: commercially grown varieties thrive on manure and carbon-rich agricultural by-products such as corn husks. They also do not require the space and antibiotics that livestock do. Plus they reach maturity much faster.

Despite reports of successful replacements, The Blend does not work in all dishes. In one recent blind taste test, 147 participants sampled carne asada and taco-filling mixes featuring a range of beef and mushroom percentages. Although more than half of them preferred mushroom-mixed taco blends to pure-beef ones, many subjects gave low marks to a mushroom-laden carne asada for texture and appearance. “When you're eating carne asada, you're expecting strips of beef,” Guinard says. “In the taco blend, where the stuff is ground small, you really don't see it.”

If the burgers perform well in schools, however, they may soon debut in office cafeterias, too. National restaurant chains, including Pizza Hut and Seasons 52, have also quietly slipped blended entrées onto their menus in a quest for healthier offerings. All that means The Blend could be the burger of the future. That is, until lab-grown patties come along.

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