

# Alt-Meat®

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## OCEANS *of opportunity*

New Wave Foods co-founder **Michelle Wolf**  
on shrimp, 'fresh ocean' flavor —  
and leading a team to better the planet.

Gardein Plant-Based F'sh Filets



Photo credit: Conagra Brands

# 'No reason to buy it'

## OUR TASTE TESTERS STRUGGLED TO FIND A REASON TO ENJOY GARDEIN PLANT-BASED F'SH FILETS.

WHILE THE TASTE WASN'T UNPOPULAR, TESTERS COMPLAINED ABOUT THE TEXTURE AND NOTED THAT THE HEALTH BENEFITS DIDN'T STAND UP TO TRADITIONAL FISH.

**M**ost of us are familiar with plant-based meat and chicken by now, but many are less familiar with plant-based fish products. When we saw Gardein Plant-Based F'sh Filets in our grocer's freezer, they looked just like the "real" thing, and we knew we had found the perfect product for a taste test. Touting 9g protein and omega-3s — which we traditionally associate with "real" fish — the product describes itself as "tender, flaky filets in a light golden tempura batter." Let's dive into what our tasters had to say after cooking and tasting them.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Our taste-testers included a pescatarian, a vegetarian and others who are open to new food experiences with plant-based foods.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

"I haven't bought frozen plant-based fish at all. I usually only have a product like this in a fish taco ordered at a restaurant. This is a brand-new product idea for me," shared our pescatarian taster.

A health-oriented taster pointed out, "The bag is a little plain and most people might not realize it's

plant-based. I like that they have the protein, calories and fat per serving on the front of the bag."

"The graphics were crisp and bold," noticed one of our couples. "We wanted to prepare this in the microwave, but we realized that using the microwave requires two steps: You microwave it first, then finish it in a pan. That would make two things dirty and wouldn't save much time over using the oven, so we didn't microwave the filets."

"The packaging makes the fish look appetizing. I was excited to try them as I haven't had this product yet," said an enthusiastic female taster.

### APPEARANCE, FEEL, TASTE, TEXTURE

"I baked it for optimal texture, and the tempura batter was good. I could see the attempt at more flakiness than a plant-based chicken nugget," said our pescatarian taster. "It was not fishy at all, which I liked, and I ate them plain. They stand alone and don't need sauce."

A 47-year mom who has been seeking healthier alternatives told us, "I made them in the oven, and they were nice and crunchy since it's a tempura batter. The only difference is that the plant-based fish isn't as light and fluffy as a



## Taste Test



### PRODUCT:

**Gardein** plant-based fish filets

### PRICE:

**\$5.29**/10.1-oz. package (3 servings)

### NUTRITION PER SERVING:

**Calories 200**, Total Fat 13g, Saturated Fat 1g, Cholesterol 0mg, Sodium 360mg, Total Carbohydrate 12g, Protein 9g.

‘real’ fish stick. It’s also more dense, but it still tasted like a fish stick. I used tartar sauce, which made it taste totally normal.”

Another female taster said, “I don’t mind that it doesn’t taste like fish. Things that taste ‘fishy’ that aren’t fish are probably spoiled, and I wouldn’t know if the amount of fish flavor was intentional or the product was going bad.” Though the taste worked, this taster wasn’t fond of the texture, saying, “The texture is more along the lines of a chicken nugget. I do see a slight attempt at making it flaky, but they didn’t quite get there.”

A mom tester said, “I would never make these in the microwave because I want them crispy, but I didn’t want to heat up my whole house using a regular oven, so I used my countertop oven. It has a great appearance and looks like the real thing, but the inside doesn’t look or taste as flaky as I would like. The tempura batter is bland. I’d like it to have more flavor.”

An adventurous female tester observed, “It cooked up as crispy as any other frozen battered fish in an oven or air fryer, so they are mirroring that. The inside is a little squishy, but so is fish. This product just flakes differently.”

“It doesn’t taste like fish,” remarked another female. “There’s just not enough fish taste. And it looks like a chicken patty inside.”

“I made them in the air fryer following the directions on the package. The air fryer gave them a nice crisp on the outside, and they were a nice flaky texture on the inside. They looked like a real typical fish filet meal,” said our vegetarian taste-tester. “Cutting into the filets, they were flaky inside like real fish, and I was impressed

with the appearance and texture. I ate them with a plant-based aioli and was happily surprised at how much I enjoyed them. The flavor was similar to what I remember fish filets tasting like without the overly fishy taste.”

Two couples who tasted the fish together pointed out, “It stuck to the aluminum foil after we baked it. It had a slight, mild fish flavor. We all missed the flaky texture. This was dense and chewy, not flaky. The coating is not crispy, even with extra cook time, and it didn’t seem like a light tempura batter.” The couples had nothing negative to say about the flavor, but they also didn’t have anything positive to add, and they did not like the label information. “It has a very long ingredient listing, and why does a fish product have such a high level of saturated fat?”

A male taster who is open to trying alternative foods wasn’t quite sure what to make of this product. “It looks kind of funky on the inside, almost not real. It looks like chicken. But it tastes better than it looks. It’s buttery with a little hint of fish.”

His wife, who is also typically open to trying alt-meat foods, first commented on the aroma. “I didn’t like the smell after it was baked. It looks good, like ‘real’ fish filets on the outside, but not on the inside. It has a lot of deep fish flavor that I don’t like.”

### CONCLUSION

Our pescatarian concluded, “I would buy this for myself to have every once in a while. I could use them to make fish tacos. Alt-meat options open up meals for me, and I want to keep them in business! I like having options for different things.”

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## Taste Test

A female taster asked, rhetorically, “What is the need to eat faux fish? Fish doesn’t have a lot of calories unless you drench it in grease. I’d eat this, but probably wouldn’t buy it because it doesn’t have a fish flavor.”

Our 47-year-old female explained, “I always buy plant-based breakfast sausage because it tastes just as good but it’s not as greasy and much healthier for me. That’s the same way I feel about this. My family didn’t want to eat them, but I would buy them again for myself.”

Our vegetarian said, “I would definitely buy these to keep in the freezer and use them for when I need a quick meal. I would also try out the fish taco recipe on the back of the package. I’ve been meaning to try these, and now I wish I didn’t wait so long to give them a chance!”

Our couples who ate together explained, “This was one of the better plant-based products we’ve tried because there were no major negatives. But they totally missed the texture. This could be good for kids because it has a mild flavor, but it’s not for an adult looking for a crispy fish product.”

Aside from our vegetarian and a taster who is purposely seeking out “healthier” alternatives, our other taste-testers struggled to find a purchase motivator for a plant-based fish product. Why buy plant-based “fish” when “real fish” is already better for you than other protein alternatives, they wondered.

For example, one taster speculated, “I’m wondering if former fish eaters miss fish so much that they would want a faux version. Do they miss the fish itself or are they missing the whole experience of a meal like ‘fish and chips’ or ‘fish tacos’? The product isn’t objectionable at all; I just don’t have any reason to buy it.”

Similarly, an adventurous taster concluded, “I



don’t understand who plant-based fish appeals to. Why would I buy something with an ingredient list that is long and full of stuff I don’t want to eat? I wouldn’t.”

It was also obvious with this particular taste test that texture can be just as important as flavor, especially when the traditional product is known for having a distinct texture.

Based on our taste test, Gardein F’sh Filets seem to appeal to a limited market. Their challenge, from our perspective, is to better communicate the product’s benefits, to drive broad purchase and reach a larger audience, while also working to improve the flakiness of a product with a distinct texture.

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by Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, U&I Collaboration, LLC.

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Food product development and consumer research veterans, Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, join *Alt-Meat* magazine as contributors to our regular “Taste Test” column. Here’s how the program works: The alternative meat item is distributed to consumers, including the core demographic, for preparation in their own homes. No instructions are provided to the consumer, other than to write their overall impressions of the product, as well as to evaluate the flavor, texture, packaging and ease of use. Cesario and Vahalik look for common threads by using Getting It!®, a system developed to listen to consumers about products. The sample of people is not intended to be a “taste test” in a controlled setting, nor is it intended to simulate a focus group. Others are doing both. Rather, the intent is to interpret the response of the people who might purchase a product like this and use it, simply based on their encounters with the product in their individual, unique home environment. That is how U&I has been developing cutting-edge product and people understanding since 1999.