

Alt-Meat®

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Arik Kaufman
is steering Israel's
MeaTech 3D in many
directions at once, but
with one goal in mind:
feeding the world

The
right path

Tasters agreed on the convenience of Beyond Meats' meatball offering, but on little else about the product.

Convenient, but doesn't satisfy

BEYOND MEAT'S BEYOND MEATBALLS

IMPRESSED OUR NON-MEAT EATERS ... BUT THE MEAT FANS WEREN'T QUITE AS ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THE TASTE, TEXTURE AND VALUE.

Photo courtesy of Beyond Meat

Many people are navigating their way toward healthier food choices and, for some, that means experimenting with more plant-forward eating. According to SPINS research, plant-based burgers lead the alternative meat category, but meatballs, nuggets, tenders, cutlets and deli products are quickly expanding the growth. We spotted Beyond Meat Beyond Meatballs Italian-Style Plant-based Meatballs in several grocers' freezer or refrigerator cases and decided they'd be ideal for a Taste Test. Packed 12 meatballs to a see-through egg carton-like package with a sleeve, we were curious to find out how these ready-made Beyond Meatballs fared with our diverse group of tasters.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Our participants included some who are purposefully eating a more plant-forward diet, a vegetarian, a vegan, several

who were open to and curious to try alternative meat products, and others who are consciously trying to cut back on their consumption of (animal) meat.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

A long-time vegetarian in her mid-thirties explained, "At first it definitely weirded me out when I tried these kinds of (meat-mimicking) products. My brain knew that it was not meat but the taste and texture in my mouth felt like my mind was playing tricks on me. It was hard to get past this after not eating meat for so long. Now, there are so many plant-based items that mimic meat that I'm more used to eating them and it's no longer an issue for me."

Several tasters said, "I liked that the packaging was different from other plant-based meatballs, which are typically in a bag and sometimes stick together. It does seem like a lot of plastic though, and therefore more waste."

Another tester noted: "This was nicer to look at than the bunch of balls in a bag that another brand has. But I feel like the tray could be more eco-friendly." In fact, the recycling symbol on the plastic tray is so small that some of our tasters couldn't find it and were angered that Beyond Meat would not use a recyclable package.

"I have been eating Beyond Meat Ground and Burgers for years, often shaping and seasoning it into my own meatballs, so this seems like it would be much easier," noted a 29-year-old predominantly plant-based eater.

A curious 37-year-old male told us, "My first impression of the meatballs was that they came in cool packaging and looked like 'regular' meatballs. When I opened them though, they seemed very 'sticky' and had an interesting odor to them. I liked the packaging, and how the meatballs were separated. I made all of them at once, but can see how the packaging could make it easy to reseal."

Taste Test



“Beyond Meatballs seems more like the ones you buy raw in the refrigerated case — down to the individual ‘wells’ they are placed in. I never buy those because I’m afraid of what seasonings are used (our family does not like fennel) so I would rather buy the meat and form my own, which I would absolutely do with plant-based meat if I wanted to make alternative-meat meatballs,” explained a mom in her early 50s who enjoys cooking diverse foods for her family.

Our vegan, who has been eating alternative meat products for 16 years, observed, “I was happy that there was no soy in this product. Pea protein is still processed protein, and I prefer non-processed protein. But I understand that I am giving this up for the amazing taste and texture of these meatballs.” She continued, “I really liked that this came frozen as it gives me flexibility as to when and how much I choose to prepare. The preparation instructions said to defrost prior to eating, but I decided to bake them right from the freezer because it suited my time frame for preparation.”

A skeptical male observed, “At least the Nutrition Facts are easier to read (than the cooking instructions and product info which come in tiny fonts), but at 290 calories per serving (five meatballs) and a whopping 500mg of sodium, there is obviously little health benefit in eating this plant-based product.”

APPEARANCE, FEEL, TASTE, TEXTURE

Our female vegetarian said, “I baked the meatballs according to the directions. They were easy to cook and then I added the sauce. I ate them as a side with pasta a couple of nights and then as meatball parm subs another night. They have a similar consistency to traditional meat-

balls and the flavor was similar to what I remember meatballs tasting like. The texture was a little softer on the second night when I just reheated them in the microwave, but the meatballs still held most of their firmness. The seasoning really made the meatballs.”

“Beyond Meatballs has the texture of a regular meatball, with the right amount of bounce and consistency,” indicated an open-minded female. “They taste pretty close to regular meatballs too, until the odd after-taste (reminds me of too much peas and asparagus, maybe?) hits the back of your throat. It is the same aftertaste in the Beyond Burgers I have tried.” She added, “The next two were eaten with BBQ sauce and it sufficiently masked the aftertaste. I then had two more that had been simmering in tomato sauce over pasta. The first few bites were enjoyable and could almost fool my taste buds, but then the aftertaste hit and everything came to a screeching halt.”

Similarly, a frustrated mom remarked, “Why does it always have to have ‘that taste’? It’s less than last time I tried the Beyond Burgers, but I still taste it. Whatever the ‘Beyond’ taste is, it seems to be in all of their red meat replacements.” Our frustrated female mom added, “They’re kind of bland. No distinct stand-out flavor. It has an ‘iron taste.’ I don’t know what kind of flavor it needs. Garlic? Salt?”

A male in his early twenties shared, “The meatballs look like they were hand-rolled. But the first taste is sweet — like licorice. I can smell it too. I don’t want to eat it because of that taste. And, why

do they need to be cooked to 165°? If it’s not meat-based, what are you killing? Do they not want you to eat live plants? If you added a bunch of seasonings maybe it would be OK.”

“The previous time I bought these meatballs I did the brief sauté and simmered in sauce, and while I liked the flavor, I did not like the texture,” explained a pescatarian who is open to plant-based meat alternatives. “I described them as ‘squidgy.’ This time I cooked in the oven and the texture was much improved — good bite and mouthfeel. The flavor was good, not too strong, but flavorful enough to stand up to just eating it alone.”

A 30-year-old male who is open to trying plant-based products shared, “Texturally they ate like a (traditional) meatball, but the flavor was overpoweringly earthy and it didn’t have a traditional meatball taste. It just tasted like a Beyond Meat patty — which I’ve had before. We had it with pasta and a portobello mushroom tomato sauce and the (meatball) spices didn’t come through.”

“These are a little bit on the smaller side for a meatball and they were plain. Texturally, they ate like Beyond Meat, but it could have been more flavorful,” noted the 29-year-old female who eats a plant-forward diet.

“I thought they were OK. They smelled good once they were cooked, but the taste reminded me more of breakfast sausage. The consistency seemed on par with other meatless products, but wasn’t the same as a ‘real’ meatball. Regular meatballs have a thicker, more substantial texture to them.

Taste Test



PRODUCT:

**Beyond Meat
Beyond Meatballs**
Italian Style Plant-based
Meatballs

PRICE:

\$6.49 SRP/10 oz.
(12 meatballs);
\$5.99 sale

NUTRITION

PER SERVING (5 MEATBALLS):
Calories 290, Total Fat 21g,
Saturated Fat 7g, Cholesterol
0mg, Sodium 500mg, Total
Carbohydrate 9g, Protein 19g.

I know ‘grainy’ isn’t the right word, but they have more of a crumble to them, so when chewing you know there are pieces of meat there,” explained a male.

Another mom told us, “I was disappointed that I had to sear them before adding them to my sauce; I just wanted to drop them in. The ‘raw’ meatballs had an oily, slimy feel, which I didn’t like and is not typical of a traditional meatball. When they were simmering in my sauce, there was a metallic aroma instead of the usual ‘Italian gravy’ smell. These were rubbery and didn’t taste Italian at all. I usually smash my meatballs to mix into my spaghetti but these wouldn’t smash.” She continued, “I saved my leftovers because I love cold Italian meatballs in sauce, but these were awful! The texture seemed to break down in the sauce and the meatballs turned to mush. And the strange metallic aroma totally permeated my sauce!”

CONCLUSION

Our plant-based eater concluded, “I still prefer making my own (meatballs) out of plain Beyond Meat and doctoring

them up with breadcrumbs, eggs, parsley, seasonings and grated cheese. With not much more work, I can have a more flavorful meatball.”

Other consumers questioned the value: “We were only two people and we ate almost all 12 of them in the one little pack.”

One disappointed female noted, “Beyond Meatballs are a poor contender in winning this meat-eater over. And, I can’t get over the lingering aftertaste.”

“The major holdback with these meatballs is the massive amount of fat grams in a serving, yet they are so delicious you can’t stop eating them,” concluded our vegan. “I wish they could make these using mushrooms, instead of pea protein,” she added, “But, this will not hold me back from buying and eating these in the future.”

Our excited vegetarian concluded, “The Beyond Meatballs are definitely at the top of my list for plant-based meatballs. I have tried a few other brands that were also tasty. I know I can make them myself, but I prefer that these were already formed into meatballs and

seasoned. They look and taste most similar to a true meat-based meatball.”

“I don’t eat meat often so if I want a (real) Italian meatball, I’m going to eat it. This doesn’t satisfy me for taste or texture. The only benefit was that they were conveniently pre-made,” a mom disappointedly concluded.

None of our tasters commented on price, and none told us they were purposely seeking to eat more plant-based alternative meats because of environmental or sustainability concerns. There is so much to learn by just talking with people and often what they don’t say organically is just as important as what they do say.

Our findings indicate there are many different groups open to eating plant-based meats for a variety of reasons but the bottom line is the product must taste good. For some, Beyond Meatballs fit the bill. For others, there’s a long way to go. The plant-based alt-meat category has been introducing new products at a remarkable rate. It will be interesting to see if those who haven’t been wowed so far will keep trying new products.

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

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.