What's for dinner? Meatless meat

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For years, Indians looking for meaty substitutes have been stuck with the ubiquitous soya nuggets and chaap. But a new bunch of startups is dishing out everything from mock meat tikkas to burgers for not just the growing tribe of vegan consumers but also carnivores looking to switch to alternatives that are pitched as good for the body and the planet.

Udaipur-based Good Dot, a clean meat startup launched in 2017, worked on R&D for four years to get as close to the real thing as possible.

Today, it sells 12,000 to 15,000 packets of mock meat each day.

Co-founder Abhishek Sinha claims that there's good reason to switch to meat substitutes. "Plant-based meats are rich in protein, have six times more fibre than animal meat and have zero cholesterol." For Sinha, though, the inspiration to leave a career in Indian Revenue Service and start selling slaughter-free meat was his love for animals.

For the same reason, Anchit Kawaatra, switched to a vegan diet 10 years ago. This budding entrepreneur in Gurugram says that mock meat options in India are getting closer in taste and texture to the real thing. "I have tried brands like Vezlay. Their kebabs are decent though the chicken is chewy," says Kawaatra.

Vezlay Foods' vegan tikkas are available online as well as offline in Delhi, UP, Bihar, Gujarat and Punjab. "Since we launched eight years ago, demand has increased," says Amit Bajaj, MD.

Veggie Champ, a plant-based gourmet meat brand owned by Delhi-based Ahimsa Foods, offers mock duck, mock fish fillet, pepper salami and vegan burger made with combinations of soy, milk, wheat protein, mustard and spices.

Jackfruit, often known as the poor man's fruit, is also emerging as a popular meat substitute. Last year, the Meghalaya government launched Mission Jackfruit with a budget of Rs 80 crore to promote it as a vegan meat option.

Entrepreneur Amit Mehta's fitness and wellness brand, Unived, sells vegan meat made from jackfruit. "I chose jackfruit to make a meat substitute because it's versatile and looks similar to meat," says Mehta who started Unived in 2010.

A 350g packet of Unived vegan meat costs Rs 275, or Rs 196 for 250g and same amount of Good Dot vegetarian meat comes for Rs 135. Mock meat doesn't come cheap. Buying the real thing would come for about Rs 120 in Delhi.

Vegan restaurants like Carrots and House of Seitan in Bengaluru make their own mock meat, seitan, from gluten found in wheat. "Seitan is present in our bestselling items, like Sloppy Joe Burger, Seitan Stroganoff Pasta and Bombaat Mockmeat Tofu Wrap. About 40-50% of our customers order these dishes," says Susmitha Subbaraju of Carrots.

Roma Roy Choudhury's House of Seitan in Indiranagar is just a month old. A small hole-in-the-wall vegan setup, it sells seitan burgers and sandwiches. "100gm of seitan contains 75gm protein, it's a superfood but sadly most Indians don't know about it," she says. "In India people have this notion that vegetarian food is 'ghas phoos'. That's not true. I wanted to change this and bring indulgence and health together in a vegetarian setup," adds the former IT professional, who moved to India from Singapore.

In India, 71% of people above the age of 15 are non-vegetarian, according to Sample Registration System baseline survey 2014. But rising health concerns and awareness about climate change are pushing Indian consumers to try out plant-based alternatives. A major research published last year in Nature found that globally every person needs to consume 75% less beef, 90% less pork and half the number of eggs to keep climate change under 2 degrees Celsius in the next decade or so.

Dr Nandita Shah, founder-director Sharan, a trust devoted to promoting holistic and sustainable lifestyle in Auroville, says the future of meat is vegan. "More and more people are getting to know about the way animals in our food chain are treated. It's neither acceptable nor ethical," says Shah, a vegetarian who has tried plant-based meats and found them "delicious".

Globally, too, it's a growth story, points out Varun Deshpande, MD, the Good Food Institute (GFI) India. "Visionaries like Bill Gates, Richard Branson, and Google Ventures as well as industry behemoths such as America's largest meat producer Tyson Foods and agribusiness giant Cargill are investing in the sector," he says.

Earlier this week, Maharashtra govt signed an MoU with GFI to promote research and production of cell-based meat in India. However, that's different from plant meat. Just like human embryos are created in-vitro from a single cell, cells from a piece of animal tissue can be grown to create bigger portions for commercial consumption. It's commercially available in very few outlets abroad as manufacturers are still trying to bring down the cost of production while scaling up.