New frontiers explored through research in plant-based food science.

Simon Jack*

Department of Medicine, University of New Haven, West Haven, USA

Introduction

Modern plant-based meat production technologies can produce great visual similarity and focused molecular-sensory ways, but on a molecular basis, it looks nothing like the meal it's attempting to imitate. Scientists use rheology and tribology to explore the molecular function and impacts of vegetable proteins from various sources in order to find sensory weak areas in plant-based alternatives, providing more information than pure sensory investigations. They claim that muscle proteins emulsify fats and oils in a unique way, resulting in a unique biting action [1].

For a long time, plant-based meat substitutes have been the trend. "Impossible" has become a catchphrase for everything from fast food veggie burgers to meatless options in grocery store aisles. Indeed, modern biotechnology, food technology, and process engineering approaches may produce high optical similarities as well as focused molecular-sensory technologies that can resemble look, taste, and smell to a significant extent.

Plant-based meat, on the other hand, appears to be radically different from the meal it seeks to imitate on a molecular level, which is visible in a variety of ways. Scientists from Germany, which produces over 1,200 different types of sausages, research the molecular function and impacts of vegetable proteins from various sources in Physics of Fluids to uncover sensory weak points in plant-based meat alternatives [2].

"We show the differences in bite, chewing, mouthfeel, bolus formation, and associated enjoyment characteristics of the sausages using direct comparisons of meat-based, vegetarian with egg white, and pure vegan versions," said co-author Thomas A. Vilgis of the Max Planck Institute for Polymer Research.

Muscle proteins emulsify fats and oils in a totally different way than plant proteins, according to the researchers, resulting in a different biting action in the mouth [3].

"Meat sausages' 'crunch' or 'crack' is invariably different from vegan sausages' simply because the molecular characteristics of the proteins are notably different," Vilgis explained.

Vilgis and his colleagues used rheology and tribology in molecular models in addition to tensile tests to assess animal sausages and their vegetarian substitutes, providing more insight than basic sensory analyses.

"We're going far further than what's generally done in food technology," Vilgis explained, "by taking into consideration as many molecular features of foods as feasible."

"We're looking at the proteins as well as the amino acid sequence, which we see as a 'code' from which we can deduce certain qualities to better understand how sausages behave in the mouth when consumed. As a result, fundamental variations in molecular structure and mouthfeel become obvious right away [4]."

The study introduces a completely new approach to experimental food science, building on the authors' past research in soft matter theory and theoretical polymer physics [5].

"We're right at the intersection of basic science and technical application," Vilgis explained. "With these tools, it is conceivable to generate predictions about how to improve the physical qualities of an alternate sausage — and to make specific improvements."

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***Correspondence to:** Simon Jack, Department of Medicine, University of New Haven, West Haven, USA, E-mail: jack-simons@newhaven.edu

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