



The Natural Choice For Investment Banking

Protein... Where's The Beef?

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These days, as I travel through the offices of natural products CEOs and investors, and grocery aisles, and trade show booths at Expos North, South, East and West, I find myself constantly informed of the protein content in food and beverage products. Do you also notice this trend accelerating? It's getting to the point where I sometimes walk into industry events expecting to see nametags that read, *"Mike Jones, CEO, Oat Milk Smoothie Co., 18,720 grams protein (but I'm working on it! Ha. LOL.)"* This obsession with protein content in modern food marketing is giving me pause (and, oddly, no extra muscle mass as I contemplate it on my couch).

In 1980 I was a middle-class kid living in a working-class neighborhood on Long Island (yes there are—not everyone comes from Great Neck). I was fourteen and I worked in a print shop after school. On one Saturday my boss's son, a printer in his mid-twenties, invited me out to lunch. I ordered a burger and he ordered a salad and a macrobiotic brown-rice-some-thing-or-other, and went on to inform me that he was a vegetarian. *Vege... tarian?....* It didn't make sense. He didn't look like he was from an Asian country. His head was not shaved. I literally didn't get it. He went on to explain what he had learned from reading "Diet For A Small Planet" (the vegetarian bible back then) and the writings of Dr. Herbert Shelton on Natural Hygiene. In summary, and at the risk of oversimplification, I understand Natural Hygiene to suggest: Whatever nature created for you to eat, just eat that. You'll be okay. (So that means that it's leaves for giraffes, antelopes for lions, and beer and potato chips for humans. It's not that complicated). Everything that guy said to me over lunch made sense. We are more anatomically similar to primates like chimps, and not omnivores like pigs. Our small intestines are ten to twelve times the length of the trunk of our bodies (like other herbivores or frugivores) while the small intestines of carnivores and omnivores (who get amazing nutrition from consuming red meat but then eliminate it before it starts decaying inside of them) are much shorter (three to six times the length of the trunk of their bodies), our dental structure was made for eating plants (despite the fact that we have residual incisors for fighting, like apes).... So I got those books. I got several actually. And a week or two later I stopped eating meat.

Becoming a vegetarian at fourteen in 1980 was not easy. Some of you who have met me hanging around the industry over the years may have heard a bit of this story, but some of the details I generally spare the listener. Let me share a few now: Reagan was in the White House, interest rates were high, McDonald's was kicking ass and the four food groups posters were everywhere at school. And my parents quickly determined that I was going to die. Their first move was to drag me to the local pediatrician. "Hey pal," he said, "I heard you're some kind of vegetarian now..."

"Yeah, so what?" I responded, defensively.

“No, that’s great,” he said. “My wife is too. I want to do it...”

“We’re never seeing that quack again,” my father said without looking up from a plate of pot roast.

Then, it was on to the most well-regarded nutritionist on Long Island. I entered his office with trepidation, my mother trailing behind. There was a big bowl of grapes sitting on his desk and he was wiping his mouth. “Sorry about that,” he said. “I was just finishing my lunch when you walked in.”

“You eat grapes for lunch?” I asked.

“Well, I’m a strict vegetarian...”

Bam, boom, on the next one. Stu 2, parents, 0.

I didn’t fare as well with the endocrinologist. I was 14, had not quite yet hit my growth spurt, and was around 5’2” tall.

“If you don’t eat protein from meat,” he said, “you will not grow.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“Because of science.”

“Well, I’ve done a lot of reading lately, and isn’t it true that I can get all of the essential amino acids from plants? Isn’t there some protein in almost all plant food?”

“Um, yes, that may be true, but my empirical observation is that you won’t grow as well. So you can either eat animal protein, or I will have to give you hormone injections.”

“But isn’t that a potential carcinogen?”

“Yeah, but it’s not very likely,” he replied casually.

“Well,” I said, “I’m not going to eat meat, and I think I’d rather take a chance with being a little short than getting cancer.”

Stu 2, parents 1... and the winner was.... Parents. But winning doesn’t necessarily equate to enforcement. I never ate meat again. And by the time I was 17 I was around 6’1” tall. (I think I’m a bit shorter now, but I have a tendency to slouch).

The last chapter is the capper. They dragged me to a psychiatrist. I kid you not.

“So why are you here?” he asked me at the first and only session.

“My parents made me come.”

“Why?”

“Because I became a vegetarian.”

“And what does that mean for you, emotionally?”

“Um... I don’t eat meat?...”

“And?” he asked, probably raising an eyebrow and scribbling a note or two.

“And my mother doesn’t want to cook me separate dinners.”

“Wait... are you saying that the problem here really is, only your diet?”

“Yup.”

“Hmmm. Uh, literally?” I nodded. “Okay, can I have a phone number for your mother then?” He was a pretty nice guy.

Lately, no one seems to think that it’s a big deal when I mention that I don’t eat meat. However, for the first twenty or thirty years, the reactions and questions—and occasional hostility—were exhausting. The number one question I used to get back in the 80s and 90s was, “Where do you get your protein from?” As strongly as I feel about not eating animals, I feel equally passionate about not telling other people what to do. So I try not to preach. And I also try not to be drawn into pointless debates. I came up with a lot of pithy answers over the years, but I finally landed on this: “I am against protein.” With the folks who seemed sincerely interested I would then go on to try and politely answer questions, but I generally don’t like to discuss religion, politics—or diet—at parties. When fairly prompted I would sometimes pontificate on some of the vegetarian propaganda of the day: The

fastest stage of growth for humans is infancy, the perfect food for baby humans is human mother's milk, and the protein content in most fruit is strangely equivalent to that of human mother's milk.... Gorillas grow to 900 pounds eating mostly bananas.... Over the years, it became so common a question that I consider it an accepted paradigm that Americans consider protein the single most important element potentially lacking in their diets.

I find that curious because, as I learned, the number of Americans who are actually protein deficient is very, very small. Think about that. The disconnect between fact and assumption on that point is fairly amazing. How did it get that way? I have a theory: The beef and dairy industries are pretty big and make a lot of money. They sell delivery systems for protein. It also turns out that they are real good at marketing. Just look at the results: In a market where almost no one is protein deficient, lots of people (customers) think they are in danger of becoming so... that's pretty effective marketing.

According to Healthline.com, "True protein deficiency is uncommon in the Western world." However, they also point out that, "An estimated one billion people worldwide suffer from inadequate protein intake," and add that, "Certain people in developed countries are also at risk. This includes vegetarians and vegans who follow an imbalanced diet." [Were my mother and that guy with the hormones right? Or does "imbalanced" simply mean less Twinkies and more veggies, beans, nuts, and whole grains—meaning that I'm probably going to be okay?]

The US Recommended Daily Allowance (USRDA) for adult men and women is 0.8 grams of protein for every 2 pounds of body weight. The RDA is usually reported as a single value, which makes it the easiest to use. The average RDA for women is 46 grams daily; men need 56 grams of protein daily. I always assume they build in a little safety cushion too. And while I know it seems impossible, is there any chance that the beef and dairy industries may have exerted any influence over those calculations and the marketing of them? While it seems unthinkable, is there any chance that in this mixed-up, topsy turvey world that lobbying groups like the Pharmaceutical industry, or huge corporate producers of food might influence Congress or government agencies?... I guess not. So, anyways.....

Bruce Freidrich, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Good Food Institute told me, "As Kathy Freston and I explain in our book Clean Protein, more than 97% of Americans are getting enough protein even as 97% of Americans are not getting enough fiber. We all know people who are suffering or have suffered from heart disease, cancer, obesity, diabetes – these are the Western diseases, and they are linked to our incredibly high-protein diet and the lack of fiber that we are consuming." Our friend Tara Collingwood, MS, RDN, CSSD, LD/N, ACSM-CPT is the Tem Dietitian for the Orlando Magic and Nutrition Consultant for UCF Athletics and USTA National Campus. Tara said, "I work with a lot of collegiate and professional athletes who have made great strides to reduce animal protein and I have yet to have one athlete have their performance or recovery suffer." (Tara needs 19 letters in order to abbreviate her credentials so I urge you NOT to question her expertise).

Some leading protein bars contain around 20 grams of protein. A hamburger has around 25-30 grams of protein. According to livestrong.com, "Each cup of cooked soybeans offers 29 g protein... White beans and lentils contain about 19 g protein per cup, providing many essential amino acids such as isoleucine and lysine. Black beans contain 15.2 g per cup, while kidney, lima, black-eyed, navy and pinto beans contain about 14 g per cup." It just doesn't seem that hard to get the necessary amount of protein (if you live in America). And you can never get too much of a good thing, right? Well, it turns out that is true for scotch, but not necessarily protein.

The Mayo Clinic points out that "some high-protein diets include foods such as red meat and full-fat dairy products, which may increase your risk of heart disease. A high-protein diet may worsen

kidney function in people with kidney disease because your body may have trouble eliminating all the waste products of protein metabolism.” According to Healthline.com, “Excess protein in the body is related to several health concerns, especially if you follow a high-protein diet for an extended period.” The list may include: Weight gain, bad breath, constipation, diarrhea, dehydration, kidney damage, cancer, heart disease, and calcium loss. Wait. Back up. Bad breath? Okay, it is clearly time to get serious about the correct protein consumption.

According to the World Cancer Research Fund colorectal cancer is the second most common cancer among women and it's third for men. Lung cancer is number one (gee, what product sold for decades by an overzealous industry might have caused the popularity of that little ailment?) So let's recap for a moment: What is supposed to be consumed by carnivores whose small intestines are typically four or five times the length of the trunks of their bodies and gets eliminated from their systems whereas it starts to decay inside the systems of animals constructed by nature to eat primarily plant food (whose small intestines are ten or twelve times the length of the trunks of their bodies)? Hint: it ain't mangoes. The World Cancer Research Fund states that, “There was strong evidence that consuming processed meat, red meat and alcoholic drinks... increase the risk of colorectal cancer.” (Note to WCRF: I am going to pretend that I didn't hear your lies about scotch.)

In the 1980s Wendy's ran a series of now-famous “Where's the beef?” commercials. Assuming that you do NOT remember them, please keep reading this article. [If you DO, then just call me on my landline and we can reminisce. Or fax me your comments.] She was cute. That meager-looking little, old lady would bark, “Where's the beef?!” and America found that to be hysterical. After all, we needed more beef. More! In the richest nation in the world we now have around 40% of our population living below the poverty line. Yet, in impoverished neighborhoods the one thing you can always find enough of is fast-food burger joints. It's universally American to sell protein. (And sugar. Don't get me started....)

Now don't get me wrong. I am not saying that protein is bad, of course. Relax. Protein good. Protein good. In with the good air.... I'm just suggesting that we calm down with counting grams on packages and remember that diversity is the spice of life. I also think that perhaps we should provide more protein where it is actually needed, which might be in places like Liberia, but probably not LA. The plant-based community, our beloved pioneers of better nutrition and social benefits... They seem to be talking a lot about protein these days. Protein derived from mung beans won't decay inside your alimentary canal. And humans need protein. No doubt. Still, why are they talking so much about protein to Americans? Have they stolen a page from the meat marketer's playbook? Plant-Based Pioneers (PBP's) I beseech you, don't become the Bill Belichecks of food. [Editor's note: Stu is from NY, and oddly, a Cowboys fan.] Don't devolve into nothing more than PP's (Protein Pioneers). Remember that grocery chain that was cutting edge about this better nutrition thing for decades? Remember its name? There's a reason that John Mackey named it that. There was a reason that Shelton talked about “natural hygiene.” When the raw foods movement had its moment in the sun I often found myself thinking, “You want some great raw food? Eat a f*#king apple.” I never said it out loud (some of the most attractive women I met back in the nineties in the East Village were into raw foods) so maybe I can't really prove it or anything, but I swear that I thought it.

I guess what I'm saying, PBP's, is please don't co-opt the marketing spin of the monolithic leaders of the legacy food system. Be yourselves. Give us some whole foods, with simple, clean labels, and maybe that's good enough. After all, you are killing it. Have you seen the stats lately? Those old food brands packed with things like potassium sorbate and HFCS are shriveling up faster than old avocados at my health food store. You are winning! We are. Thanks to you, when I eat out now I get to say, “Well, I'm a vegetarian,” and the listener usually nods with approval instead of smirking or asking, “Oh, why? Did you have a bad experience at a slaughterhouse or something?”

And if you want to be PPs, then put the P back in PP. (Too much? Well, the first P is for protein. The second one was for “Pioneers.” Remember?) Anyway, almost no one here in America has a problem getting protein. I never said that’s the case elsewhere in the world. (And as the current administration will surely tell you, it’s not all about us). There are countless places in the developing world, in Africa and the Middle East and Southeast Asia for instance, where they could use a bit more P. If we keep trying to produce it by growing (and then murdering) cows and chickens—wasting all that water and grain and generating all of that methane—well, you know the line... Things get dicey in 2050. So I want to thank anyone producing plant-based protein, in advance, if you would please do a little more to market it as part of a greater whole, and also focus some effort on supplying it to parts of the world where they could really use some help. In conclusion, in the words of Albert Einstein, “A ship is always safe at shore, but that’s not what it’s built for.” (I know it only has little to do with this article but I just like Einstein and I wanted to go out on a high note). Have a great 2019.

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