

# Kerry Group advances plant-based protein innovations through partnership, technology, and research

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**A**s New Year's resolutions transition into more long term, attainable goals, many look to their pantries and fridges as they plan change. Studies have shown that while 93% of consumers want to engage in healthy eating habits, only 10% feel as though they stick to a healthy diet all the time.<sup>1</sup> With this interest in health, the more conscious consumer is now looking for better plant protein options that align with their values of nutrition, sustainability, and clean-label ingredients. But delivering products that live up to these environmental and nutritional demands while maintaining a great taste can be challenging to achieve. Kerry Group, a leading global supplier of delicious, healthy, and responsible solutions designed to nourish people, society and our planet, has cracked the code, combining and integrating their portfolio of

Taste, Protein, Functional Ingredients, and Food Preservations solutions. One example of this is via Kerry's partnership with Ojah, in developing delectable, plant-based proteins with Plenti: a range of whole muscle textured plant proteins from soy sources with local taste profiles to suit every market. With this high performance, versatile and cleaner plant protein, Kerry has enabled the creation of more nutritious, authentic, and satisfying plant-based foods, supporting evolving desires.

Consumer demand for more nourishing, resource-efficient, clean-label products with shorter ingredient declarations is a key driver of innovation across the alternative protein market. European markets have long been at the forefront of this sector, playing a pivotal role in shaping these trends through extensive consumer panel testing and wider product adoption. The growing taste for

wholesome, clean foods, is also very visible in other regions but a slower adoption of alternative proteins to the mainstream. Kerry's proprietary research initiative, "Future Lens," which surveyed over 15,000 participants – ranging from vegetarians and vegans to meat eaters – has provided valuable context into the barriers hindering the wider adoption of alternative plant-based proteins. From this research, our team has gleaned key insights into how manufacturers can develop to directly appeal to the needs and wants of consumers. As studies show 1 in 4 consumers consider themselves to be flexitarian and 30% of global consumers would like to see more plant-based proteins available, Kerry offers solutions that support manufacturers in delivering on the consumer trend towards healthier, cleaner and more eco-friendly food choices.

In the early stages of the introduction and expansion of plant-based and alternative proteins, the focus was largely on ground meat options. The improvement of plant-based products from generation one, during the early phase of the category, to generation two products was a significant shift. Consumer expectations were set high for the next phase and development of products. Recent shifts in consumer preferences have sparked growing interest in developing alternatives for more diverse products, such as chicken, beef, and fish. The industry faces the challenge of creating products that meet these consumer demands, at an affordable price, while ensuring they don't compromise on quality and flavour. To overcome these hurdles, innovation is increasingly focused on converting non-users into consumers by improving taste, reducing costs, and expanding the range of plant protein meat alternatives available on the market to suit every eating occasion.

Currently, the majority of plant-based meat alternatives are formulated using traditional ingredients like soy, pea, and wheat proteins. These ingredients are commonly used due to their affordability, availability, and well-established functional properties. With future demand expected to grow to feed our ever-growing population, there's a growing shift toward exploring new, environmentally friendly protein sources that compliments the existing available



protein sources in terms of taste, texture, functionality, cost-effectiveness, and overall availability. As the demand for clean-label products continues to rise, the industry is continuing to invest in scalable technologies and focusing on sourcing proteins that align with consumer expectations for natural, sustainable ingredients.

Plenti is a key example of this innovation. In 2024, Ojah launched to the market four new product formats to increase the eating occasions in which their technology can be enjoyed. The launch complimented their existing product range ensuring consumers could enjoy their products across every meal. These flaked, shredded, cubed, and pulled chicken alternatives are designed for versatility in a wide range of dishes and applications. While patties and nuggets have been the norm, Plenti paves the way for manufacturers to develop a wider range of options to appeal to a broader audience. What sets these products apart from the competition is their clean-label profile; they contain between just five and six ingredients, including soy, water, oil, salt, and natural flavours. Using minimal ingredients, the product comes ready to cook, ready-marinated, enabling fast innovation. The properties and quality remain stable in various cooking conditions and the neutral taste provides a clean canvas for manufacturers to layer in desired flavours.

Plenti's clean, streamlined formulation allows manufacturers to meet consumer demand for transparency and simplicity in labeling, while offering flexibility in flavour and texture. Since the launch in October 2024, these products have been met with positive feedback based on the innovative approach to alternative proteins, and new product rollouts are expected in the U.S. and Europe this year. With the support of Kerry, manufacturers can match consumer desires, providing tasty, cleaner label and planet-friendly plant proteins with optimized nutritional value.

In recent years, as the category experienced growth, there has been an influx of new alternative protein products on shelves that have not always been fully tested for consumer acceptance. Poorer quality products can lead to poor consumer experiences, low repeat purchases, and slower market adoption. Now, however, the market is beginning to consolidate as brands that were unable to grab consumers' interest are beginning to fade away. Products that continue to meet consumers' needs demonstrate lasting consumer appeal and strong repeat purchase rates. Kerry have supported many of the product developments that are market leading in the category, driving confidence in our portfolio and solutions that resonate with the consumer. Innovations in flavour, texture, and hybrid products could be key to accelerating the adoption of plant-based diets, particularly among non-users, and driving overall market growth.

Looking ahead, emerging trends point to the development of whole muscle meats as the next frontier in plant-based protein innovation. Replicating the texture and complexity of products like steak and chicken breast is a significant challenge, but it holds the potential to elevate the plant-based protein category. Additionally, the growing interest in fish alternatives presents its own unique challenges in terms of texture, flavour, and sourcing. Hybrid products which are comprised of both plant-based and animal proteins are also gaining traction, particularly in European markets. These solutions, which contain 10-50% alternative proteins, may be critical as a steppingstone for non-plant-based eaters, helping

them gradually reduce their meat consumption while promoting a more sustainable, flexitarian diet.

The dedicated team of experts at Kerry continually explore emerging technologies like fibre spinning, and cultured meat to enhance product development and expedite bridging of the consumer expectation gap. Our assessment of new technologies focuses on the scalability of the technology in delivering, high-performance plant-based proteins that maintain quality and performance. These advancements allow us to create complex textures and structures that closely match traditional meat products, helping to address formulation and labelling challenges effectively. While there are many exciting new technologies that the market is actively testing and developing, scalability will always be a key test for success. In the meantime, we are largely focused on how we can further enhance and alter existing, proven technologies to innovate and enhance products.

As consumer preferences continue to evolve, the team at Kerry expects to see a broader array of flavours and product formats emerging in the alternative protein space. A major area of focus will be aligning U.S. market offerings with global trends. One of the key challenges in the U.S. market is the substantial price disparity between plant-based proteins and traditional animal-based meats. While European retailers and manufacturers have successfully reduced this price gap, in the U.S., plant-based proteins are often priced at nearly a 40% premium over their animal-based counterparts, which has hindered market growth with American shoppers. However, the success of European markets in driving price parity offers a hopeful model for the U.S., and further afield moving forward.

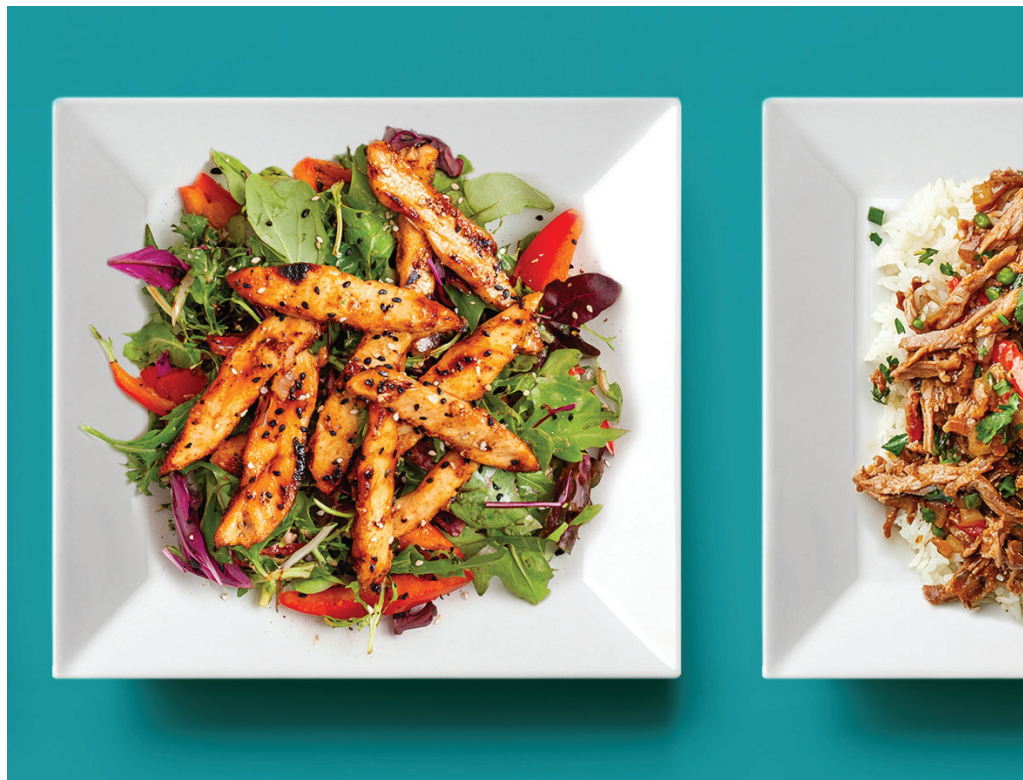
Scientists and experts at Kerry are dedicated to advancing plant-based solutions with a strong emphasis on taste, nutrition, and sustainability. By leveraging our deep expertise in food preservation, functional systems, and flavour enhancement, Kerry aims to successfully support the transition to healthier, more sustainable food options. Our

ongoing research and development efforts are focused on creating protein solutions that align with the evolving needs and preferences of consumers, ensuring that we stay at the forefront of the alternative protein industry.

Our team of experts takes great pride in leading the charge toward innovative, more enjoyable, and environmentally friendly solutions. As the alternative protein market continues to rapidly evolve, Kerry is driven to support manufacturers in meeting and exceeding consumer desires. Through extensive research and cutting-edge innovation, the industry is making significant strides in overcoming long-standing challenges related to price, taste, and variety, paving the way for a broader array of options that appeal to a growing consumer base. With an increasing focus on discovering new protein sources, hybrid products, and whole muscle meats, the future of alternative proteins is incredibly promising. By continually refining product offerings to meet consumer demand for affordable, high-quality, and sustainable alternatives, the industry is well-positioned for ongoing growth and widespread adoption in the years ahead. As consumer awareness and demand for sustainable options increase, the alternative protein sector stands poised to play a central role in reshaping the future of food.

**Reference:**

1 <https://foodindustryexecutive.com/2019/03/consumers-say-they-want-to-eat-healthy/>



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