



**°coolfood**  
FOR DELICIOUS CLIMATE ACTION

# Making plant-rich dishes work

Practical solutions from food service operators



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## Executive summary

Food service leaders increasingly recognize that lower-carbon dishes are essential to feeding a growing global population. Through Coolfood, WRI's sustainable diets initiative, major organizations are already working to meet a "Coolfood Pledge"—a commitment to cut food-related emissions by 25 percent by 2030. Many Coolfood members are **making significant progress in reducing emissions per plate**. However, when we speak to food service insiders, they tell us that operational pressures often play a large role in the success of an initiative or effort.

While our **Playbook for Promoting Sustainable Food Choices** (the Food Service Playbook) established the behavioral science techniques for progressing plant-based foods, the logistical "how-to" is where many initiatives stall. This guide addresses that friction directly. We look past the high-level strategy to examine the operational challenges and organizational misalignments that operators face every day.

We take a candid look at the barriers that don't always show up in the data—from the disconnect between procurement teams and kitchen staff to the very real fear of customer pushback on menu changes. By drawing on the real-world experiences of a variety of food service companies, this guide provides a practical roadmap for moving sustainability from a corporate vision to a successful, daily operational reality.

We hope this exploration of the opportunities and obstacles will help food service companies and organizations avoid common pitfalls and accelerate the path to selling more sustainable menu items.

A big thank you to all of the individuals who contributed to this guidance; your input was invaluable.





## CHAPTER 1.

# Setting the scene

In 2024, WRI published [the Food Service Playbook](#), outlining evidence-based strategies to create dining environments that empower consumers to choose sustainable, plant-rich dishes.

To develop this resource, WRI researchers reviewed over 350 academic studies to identify 90 different techniques. These strategies were ranked by assessing their effectiveness in changing consumer behavior, which was substantiated by academic literature; and their perceived feasibility and impact, which was evaluated by food industry professionals. Techniques that ranked highly on both measures were selected as “No Regret” strategies, representing those most strongly recommended for adoption by food service operators. Techniques deemed potentially impactful but not yet embraced by industry were labeled “promising.”

We suggest operators continue to prioritize these techniques, and in this guide, we offer insights and tips on ways to operationalize and scale some of these techniques, including how to overcome common barriers.

## Methodology

The guide draws insights from two primary sources:

- 1. Industry consultations:** In 2025, WRI staff consulted food service industry representatives on the barriers and enablers for adopting the techniques outlined in the Food Service Playbook.

More than 30 representatives of the food service industry in the United States and United Kingdom took part in these group consultations in June 2025. In the UK, this took place during the London Climate Action Week in partnership with the Food Foundation and the Sustainable Restaurant Association. In the US, the group consultation was part of the Menus of Change conference. Participants included senior managers, food service directors, operators and chefs from Sodexo, Aramark, Wagamama, OXO Tower Restaurant, National Trust, Morrisons, ISS, and the Santa Clara County Public Health Department<sup>1</sup>.

- 2. Follow-up interviews:** To gather input from companies already committed to reducing their food-related emissions, we conducted one-on-one interviews with Coolfood members Aramark, ISS, IKEA, MAX Burger, Hackensack Meridian Health, and Tetra Pak. We also conducted additional interviews within our broader network including National Trust, Sodexo, Wagamama, and the Santa Clara County Public Health Department.

The next two sections provide an in-depth look at common operational challenges and recommendations for food service professionals who are promoting sustainable menu choices.



## CHAPTER 2.

# Engaging customers

Understanding customer preferences is only the first step. Engaging customers effectively is the key to driving sales. This section details the four most mentioned barriers to successfully marketing and presenting plant-rich food. We offer practical guidance from leading industry professionals to help you immediately address these challenges and maximize customer satisfaction with your sustainable menu choices.

### SOLUTION 1:

## Managing high-demand, high-emission menu favorites

### *Expert insight*

Cross-reference procurement and sales data to pinpoint the top five high-volume, high-carbon recipes for targeted incremental change.

Many diners love juicy burgers, steaks, or other resource-intensive menu items. But while meat-centered dishes can be some of your most popular and delicious offers, they can also be the biggest offenders when it comes to associated emissions. That is a big challenge when you are trying to move to a climate-friendly menu.

Here are three effective ways to reduce the climate impact of meat-heavy dishes, according to operators:

1. Reconsider how often some meat-heavy dishes are featured on the menu and their location. Is it possible to reduce how often these dishes turn up on your menu? Even reducing dishes' availability from five days to four days a week can have a big impact.
2. Revisit the recipes for meat-heavy dishes. Is it possible to change the ratio of meat to plant-based ingredients in these dishes while still retaining flavor and texture?



- Invest in a recipe refresh. Build off a current recipe hit by subtly blending plant-based ingredients into the dish. This technique helps you serve the dishes that diners already love while still significantly reducing each dish's footprint.

Blending plant-based ingredients such as mushrooms, lentils, or legumes into meat dishes is a brilliant way to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of these meals. This action does not require diners to give up meat entirely or even to opt for a vegetarian dish, and in many cases, consumers may not even realize the change in composition. This makes blending, mixing, and rebalancing the ratio in meat dishes a very powerful technique to reach audiences who are not traditionally interested in plant-forward meals.

Success is defined by implementation. To provide concrete evidence of what is possible, we look at two major industry success stories from Coolfood members:

- **Case study 1** details how contract caterer **ISS** successfully blended plant ingredients into meat-based dishes, a strategy that has helped the company to achieve a **28 percent reduction in its per-plate emissions** in the UK.
- **Case study 2** highlights the powerful commitment of Coolfood member **Tetra Pak**, who are on track to achieve a **38 percent per-plate emissions reduction**.

#### CASE STUDY 1:

### ***ISS – Standardizing recipe change to transform outcomes***

In 2022, ISS trialed a new approach to reducing meat content by introducing a blend of beef and lentils in a range of ground beef dishes at more than 250 UK primary schools. The dishes tested included familiar favorites such as lasagna, cottage pie, and spaghetti bolognese. The trial gave the culinary team the opportunity to perfect the balance between protein sources; substituting part of the beef with lentils while ensuring the taste, flavor, texture, and appearance of the dishes were not impacted. The recipe built on the usual ground beef, onion, and tomato base, but replaced a proportion of the ground beef with individually quick frozen (IQF) lentils. The final recipe contained a 70-to-30 beef to lentil ratio, achieving a healthier, more sustainable option that didn't compromise on taste.

Once the ISS culinary team was happy with the quality of the new dishes, they were ready to roll out the product to the rest of primary schools served by the business. The culinary team communicated the new requirements to the procurement team. For the consistent and ongoing delivery of these new recipes, it was critical that this particular type of lentil was purchased in sufficient volume to satisfy this switch for the participating primary schools.

At the same time, the switch was applied across the relevant recipes in the ISS centralized recipe system. Updating the centralized recipe system made it possible for operators to deliver with consistency and confidence. When planning their menu cycle, operators could automatically calculate the right ingredient volumes, simply order the required quantity along with other food purchases, and prepare the dish to the new specification.

At the start of 2026, over 350 UK sites are serving these reformulated ground beef recipes. The following considerations made the switch a success:

- ISS, like many contract caterers, operates in a high-volume, low-margin environment. The recipe needed to allow operators to continue to produce high volume without cost increases.
- The recipes needed to be simple and practical. The blended dishes had to be straightforward to understand and prepare and easy enough to execute to a high degree of consistency. IQF lentils proved ideal as they are quick to prepare and require no soaking or prior cooking, and they can be simply added just 20 minutes before the dish is complete.
- Communicating the benefits of the shift was critical to its success and secure buy-in across the business.
- The results ended up being a triple win for ISS: The new recipe has helped the company serve meals that are better for the environment, better for children's health, and approximately 30 percent less expensive to produce than traditional ground beef dishes!

**Peter Lambie, the lead food architect for ISS behind this effort, offers three key pieces of advice:**

1. If you think you'll get push back on flavor, do a taste test comparing the original recipe and the new one and perfect it before you go any further.
2. Make it simple to execute for operators. Keep any changes to cooking and preparation minimal. The fewer new things to learn or ingredients to add when updating the recipe, the higher the likelihood for success.
3. Make the change traceable—replacing beef with only one ingredient (in this case, lentils) makes it easier to track the impact on emissions and cost savings.

**CASE STUDY 2:**

***Tetra Pak – Innovating for success at Aarhus site***

The Tetra Pak site at Aarhus, Denmark, provides breakfast and lunch to approximately 230 people per day and is demonstrating remarkable progress in reducing food-related emissions. To date, the site has achieved a **20 percent total emissions reduction from food**, putting it well on the way to meeting the Coolfood target of 25 percent. Even more notably, it has surpassed the relative emissions target with a **39 percent reduction per 1,000 kcal**, exceeding Coolfood's 38 percent benchmark. By examining the site's action and implementation, we gain valuable insights into the practical strategies driving change. A number of key changes to the menu helped to make this happen: substituting meat with plant-based ingredients, enhancing flavor profiles using herbs and spices, and elevating presentation with color-coded environmental labels and restaurant-style plating. A clear example of this shift came when the culinary team revised the spaghetti Bolognese recipe, reducing the meat content from 120 grams per serving to 80 grams. This change not only lowered the dish's climate impact but also created room to increase the amount of plant-based ingredients—both within the recipe and across the wider menu. Making a change to a favorite recipe like this requires rigorous testing of the recipe in order to maintain satisfaction.

*"We always want to make sure our customers like the food, that's why we did several rounds of testing amongst the chef team before we brought the dish to our customers. This meant that by the time the customer tried it we were confident that what we were presenting was going to be good enough from a taste, texture and presentation perspective."*

– Tobias Laier, Head Chef, Aarhus, Denmark

## SOLUTION 2:

# Cultivate plant-rich options to meet customers' expectations of innovation

### **Expert insight**

Examine your current promotional schedule and integrate plant-rich dishes into the most high-impact, successful campaign themes.

One powerful avenue to increase demand for plant-rich meals is to recognize and cater to a key consumer desire: innovation and novelty in food.

What industry leaders report often mirrors broader consumer research, which shows that a growing segment of diners actively seeks adventure and novelty in their food choices. This presents a massive opportunity to rethink menus and invite new diners into the plant-rich space. Rather than viewing plant-rich offers as substitutes or afterthoughts, food service can make these options stand out as the most imaginative, cutting-edge, and appealing choices available. By attaching your plant-rich offers to fun, engaging campaigns or positioning them as culinary innovations, you can effectively dispel the outdated notion that plant-based meals are one-note or boring.

This strategic approach is already yielding exciting results across the food service sector. By leaning into innovation, culinary teams are successfully repositioning plant-rich dishes as the most desirable, must-try items. The following examples demonstrate how leveraging seasonal campaigns, bold presentation, and inventive recipes translate directly into increased diner adoption and excitement.

At Wagamama<sup>1</sup>, “Veganuary”—hosted each year in January—is an opportunity to generate excitement around new plant-rich menu items. Sophie Luck, menu and recipe manager at Wagamama, tells us more:

*“A campaign like Veganuary lets us promote something fun, exciting, and delicious—and it happens to be vegan. It’s a chance to get creative, delight diners with something new, and maybe even spark lasting habits.”*

– Sophie Luck, menu and recipe manager, Wagamama



Jocelyn Dubin from County of Santa Clara Public Health Department<sup>2</sup> explains how novelty can boost appeal in local hospitals:

*“Partnering with Greener by Default, one of the County hospital food service teams introduced a vibrant, flavorful dal to the menu. A bold, colorful menu insert made it irresistible, standing out from the usual offerings. This was especially meaningful for patients recovering from strokes, head injuries, and spinal cord injuries, who often stay for weeks or even months and grow tired of the same meals. The result? Patients were curious, they tried it, and they loved it. A simple change, a big success.”*

– Jocelyn Dubin, lead public health nutritionist at County of Santa Clara Public Health Department, San Jose, California

To demonstrate how leading organizations are successfully translating this innovative mindset into practical, menu-wide change, we turn to an industry leader that has spent years refining its approach.

**Case study 3** details the extensive innovation journey of **MAX Burgers**, a leader in sustainable fast food that has spent nearly two decades evolving its menu, pricing, and operations to make low-carbon choices accessible and appealing.

#### CASE STUDY 3:

### **MAX Burgers – Creating playful novelty to redefine fast food**

MAX Burgers has been a leader in sustainable fast food for nearly 20 years and part of Coolfood since 2019. In this time, the Swedish restaurant chain has reduced its food-related greenhouse gas emissions by 28 percent, on track for the Coolfood target of a 38 percent reduction by 2030. Notably, despite continued business growth, ruminant meat purchases fell from 13 percent to 9 percent of total food purchases between 2015 and 2024—a strong indicator of meaningful change.

#### **How has MAX Burgers made this transformation possible?**

MAX's journey is marked by several pioneering actions aimed at reducing the climate impact of its menu:

- In 2008, the company began measuring emissions and launched the world's first climate-labeled menu.
- MAX Burgers now offers the widest range of low-carbon burgers in the industry.
- The company replaced high-impact ingredients like palm oil with more sustainable alternatives such as rapeseed oil.

#### **Key techniques driving progress**

A major factor behind MAX's success is its evolving menu. Today, the company offers 15 meat-free meals out of a total of 53 meals, and menu development is supported by creative marketing that encourages customers to try plant-based meals.

Since the launch of the Green Family menu in 2016, plant-based options have become central to MAX's identity. The company's bold goal states that at least 50 percent of all meals sold should be alternatives to red meat.

But it's not just about variety—value for money is key. The Unicorn Burger, featuring the Impossible Foods patty, is a fully plant-based burger designed to match the taste and satisfaction of its beef counterpart. Promoted through an engaging and playful campaign and priced the same as the meat version, the Unicorn Burger is appealing and affordable.

*Our guests really have an opportunity to choose the tastiest burger for the same price—whether they are choosing beef, plant-based beef, or veggie. We ensure that our plant-based and veggie options are not more expensive than their meat counterparts.”*

– Kaj Török, chief sustainability officer, MAX Burgers

## The proof is in the numbers

MAX's strategy has delivered measurable results:

- In 2014, non-beef meals made up 16 percent of sales.
- By 2024, that figure had risen to 48 percent.

## Expanding variety and consumer appeal

MAX has steadily expanded its plant-based menu after learning from early setbacks. The original falafel burger, launched in 2009, was discontinued in 2012 due to low demand. Its successor—the Crispy—has become a strong performer, backed by solid sales data.

In 2016, MAX quintupled its green burger offerings in its largest and most successful product launch to date. This expansion attracted new customer segments and helped plant-based and vegetarian burgers grow from 2 percent of sales in 2014 to 12 percent in 2024, peaking at 18 percent in 2020.

The 2022 launch of tastier chicken burgers was also a commercial success, though it partially overtook sales of green burgers, highlighting the complex dynamics of consumer preferences.

## Overcoming operational barriers

To support its plant-based transformation, MAX had to rethink its kitchen infrastructure. Preparing meat and plant-based items separately required:

- New fryers
- Redesigned kitchen layouts
- Additional space and investment

These changes added complexity and cost but were essential to ensure that plant-based meals matched the taste, quality, and safety of the meat counterparts.

By investing in a portfolio with a balance of plant-based and meat-based options and selling the plant and veggie options at price parity, MAX makes it affordable and enjoyable for consumers to choose the more sustainable option.

The success stories of Wagamama, the County of Santa Clara public hospitals, and MAX Burgers prove that plant-based dining can succeed beyond the “substitution” phase. We are entering an era in which these dishes aren’t just alternatives for a specific demographic—they can be the primary site of culinary excitement. When a kitchen treats plant-rich ingredients as

a playground for new flavors and bold presentation, it does more than just lower its climate impact. It tells diners that the organization is forward-thinking, creative, and invested in quality rather than just checking a box.

Ultimately, making plant-rich meals the “innovation hub” of your company is a long-term play for relevance. By leaning into playful branding and price parity, you remove some of the friction that usually keeps diners stuck in their old habits. This isn’t about forcing a change in diet; it’s about offering something so interesting and well-crafted that choosing the sustainable and often healthier option becomes the most natural choice on the menu. When the most exciting thing to eat also happens to be the best thing for the planet, everyone wins.



### SOLUTION 3:

## Bridge the sensory gap between classic meat dishes and plant-based replicas

### Expert insight

Prioritize deep research and development to master the texture and flavor profile of every plant-rich dish. It's better to have fewer plant-rich options that rival classics than lots of options that miss the mark.

Developing plant-based alternatives to beloved meat classics presents a critical challenge: meeting the built-in sensory expectations of diners. Unlike creating entirely new vegetarian dishes, these alternatives must deliver on the full eating experience—including aroma, flavor, and crucially, texture. Whether it is the satisfying first bite of a juicy burger or the pleasing way chicken falls cleanly off the bone when cooked well, the texture of meat is something many consumers enjoy and expect. Overlooking any part of this sensory package, such as the *mouthfeel* or the *satisfying bite* (like the snap of a hot dog), can immediately deter consumers and undermine the success of the plant-based offering.

Winning over diners requires meticulous attention to detail. IKEA's development of its plant-based hot dog provides a perfect illustration of this focus, demonstrating that even a tiny sensory cue is nonnegotiable for consumer acceptance. IKEA, a Coolfood member since 2018, has reduced absolute food-related GHG emissions by 11 percent and emissions per plate by 11 percent.



### CASE STUDY 4:

## IKEA – Pursuing the perfect "snap" for a plant-based hot dog

### Focus on texture

When developing the plant-based hot dog, the focus was to create a product made completely from plants that replicated the texture, mouthfeel, and crucially, the snap of a conventional meat hot dog.

To get texture right, the IKEA food development team and key IKEA suppliers sought out a variety of possible solutions to create the ideal casing. After many trials, algae was identified as the ideal ingredient to create the snap of conventional meat hot dog casing without any unwanted aftertaste. The plant-based hot dog launched in bistros and IKEA restaurants in 2024. To date, the product has featured in 338 restaurants in 25 countries where IKEA operates.

*"When we were developing our plant-based hot dog, we knew it had to have that signature snap—the satisfying bite you get from a traditional meat hot dog's casing. Recreating it took time and tinkering, but it was worth it. Our plant-based hot dogs snap!"*

– Daniel Yngvesson, food designer, RA Food Service & RA Consumer Packed Goods, IKEA

## Business case

When developing new plant-based recipes for the hot dog, IKEA built on the experience and success of the plant ball. Since its launch, demand for the IKEA plant balls has increased consistently 1 percent year-over-year, while meatball performance decreased, showing slower growth in FY23 and FY24 compared to historical trends. FY25 represents a pivotal shift, with the first recorded decline in meatball share.

IKEA leveraged time, expertise, and creativity in its commitment to culinary innovation, leading to plant-based alternatives to classic meat dishes that are both appealing and enduring for diners.

*“Texture and aroma play a vital role in recreating meat-based foods with plants, because diners already know what a hot dog or meatball should taste and feel like. When developing plant-based versions, we have to meet those expectations using completely different ingredients, which makes getting the texture right even more important.”*

– Daniel Yngvesson, food designer, RA Food Service & RA Consumer Packed Goods, IKEA

## Timeline of innovation in plant-based offers at IKEA

- Veggie ball launched 2015
- Veggie hot dog launched 2018
- Plant-based ball launched 2020
- Plant-based hot dog launched 2023
- Falafel ball launched 2025

## SOLUTION 4:

# Winning over indifferent or skeptical customers with plant-rich options

### Expert insight

You don't need to convert customers to become climate champions. Focus on making dishes irresistibly delicious, great value, and convenient.

It's clear that offering a wide variety of plant-rich options is important. It takes time and effort to strike the right balance when changing the ratio of meat to plants in a dish. But even once a recipe is set, there's more to be done. Attention must turn to customer concerns, and more often than not, the top priority is something other than climate change.

This is critical because . . .

## Climate can be a conversation stopper

Not every customer is a plant-based superfan. Many are indifferent or even skeptical when it comes to eating more plants. That's why the Food Service Playbook includes many approaches that do not involve mentioning climate change. Instead, we can create shifts in ordering by making it easy and delicious to eat plant-rich food.

These strategies are essential for audiences who are harder to engage, such as those who are uninterested in the climate message or who just love meat.

We used our consultation sessions to ask industry experts in the US and the UK which customers they considered “hard to reach.” We got a range of responses—from young men influenced by a gym culture that says protein is all about meat, to parents of school children, to people dining out of the home for an indulgent treat. Many kinds of diners can be considered “hard to reach,” but fortunately, there are just as many ways to engage them. Focusing on core customer priorities (flavor, price, and convenience) is particularly crucial when engaging these groups.

*“We know from our Sustainable Food Barometer that a lot of people are not necessarily choosing meals for their climate impact. That’s why plant-rich options must look, sound, and taste appealing so even committed meat eaters pick them to avoid missing out.”*

– Matt Hay, Head of Culinary, Sodexo UK & Ireland

This effective, non-climate messaging approach is echoed by Sophie Luck at Wagamama:

*“The main message doesn’t always have to be directly about climate. Creating delicious food is at the center of our innovation even when we are creating climate-positive dishes, so we can focus on the flavors or how filling the meal will be with the climate goal woven beneath. In this way, we can pursue a climate goal without using climate messaging.”*

– Sophie Luck, menu and recipe manager, Wagamama

This philosophy, combined with broader conversations with industry leaders, led us to include additional impactful operational strategies. These tactics are successfully used by different organizations to reduce psychological barriers and increase the perceived value for the flavor-first consumer and are particularly effective for the “hard-to-reach” groups.

## What works for hard-to-reach groups?

- **Remove polarizing language:** Our research suggests using the terms “vegan” and “vegetarian” do not increase the appeal of these dishes, a fact echoed by many industry experts.
- **Lower the barrier to entry:** Use strategic placement (e.g., offering tasters to customers while they wait in line for the meat station) or provide “micro-upgrades” (e.g., a free side of a plant-rich dip with any order). By making plant-rich options free and convenient, you allow the dish’s quality to be its own marketer. This strategy directly addresses loss aversion—for customers, it is a relatively low risk way to try new flavors without commitment.
- **Introduce hybrid options:** This highlights a meat-plus approach instead of 100 percent plant-based. This approach reduces the cognitive load for customers with choosing a new or different dish and avoids any sense of deprivation by providing a hybrid meat- and plant-protein mix.

These operational efforts help to make hard-to-reach audiences more comfortable with trying plant-based options while still enjoying themselves.





## CHAPTER 3.

# Engaging colleagues

Every successful project begins with the same well-meaning advice: “We need to align our teams!” While this is universally understood, the reality of execution often involves navigating competing departmental priorities, siloed knowledge, and fundamentally different ways of operating. When teams have competing priorities finding alignment can be a genuine challenge, this is particularly true when introducing a major strategic shift like plant-rich menus. This section explores four barriers and solutions for how teams collaborate and work internally and with suppliers to ensure change is implemented smoothly and effectively.

### SOLUTION 5:

## Overcoming operational silos to enable menu innovation

### *Expert insight*

Bring curiosity to the conversation to understand the other teams’ goals and priorities. Bring other stakeholders into the conversations early as key decision-makers.

This barrier is defined by the tension between two competing mandates: procurement focuses on cost stability and contract compliance, while operations strives for consistent quality and kitchen practicality. New and specialized menu items require different plant-rich ingredients, and any gap between operations and procurement can quickly lead to a bottleneck, stalling menu rollouts.

For plant-rich menus to succeed, operations and procurement must work hand in hand. The menu team must communicate their specific sourcing needs (e.g., demanding high-quality, pre-cut vegetables or specialized plant proteins), while operations must respect procurement’s expertise in securing these products at the necessary volume and value. It’s about working together to find key ingredients that work with differing goals and limitations.



Jocelyn Dublin, lead public health nutritionist at County of Santa Clara Public Health Department, explains how she approached connecting with procurement to make change happen:

*“To change food across three Santa Clara Valley Healthcare hospitals, I worked closely with procurement. As a dietitian, I knew the health impacts of different foods, but I respected their expertise in sourcing, supplier relationship management, and budgeting. My goal— more vegetables on patients’ plates— meant understanding the full process from sourcing to service. To succeed, I had to step into their world and learn from them.”*

– Jocelyn Dubin, lead public health nutritionist, County of Santa Clara Public Health Department

## How to achieve strategic partnership and mutual exchange

- 1. Operations share the kitchen reality:** Menu developers must clearly communicate how new ingredients perform in bulk, including prep time, yield, and staff training required for high-volume items.
- 2. Procurement shares the market reality:** Buyers must inform chefs and developers about sourcing constraints, market volatility, and price stability for new plant-based ingredients *before* they finalize a recipe.
- 3. Establish joint KPIs:** Success for a new plant-rich item should be measured not just by sales (operations) but also by cost stability and availability (procurement).

Once the strategic supply chain silos are broken and procurement and operations are aligned on ingredient feasibility, attention must shift to the front line: ensuring ease of execution. This crucial step determines whether the menu is a success in one kitchen or across the entire business.

### SOLUTION 6:

## Ensuring consistent, high-quality execution across all locations

### *Expert insight*

Map the full execution journey to identify points of friction and complexity.

A well-designed recipe is only the first step. The true operational barrier lies in execution—ensuring that hundreds of different locations, with varying staff experience and equipment, can reliably produce the same high-quality plant-rich dish. Mainstreaming requires eliminating the friction associated with new, specialized recipes. The key to successful mainstreaming is designing simple execution at critical touchpoints.

This starts with mapping the journey. Before a new plant-rich dish is finalized, teams must meticulously trace every step of the operational process, from the moment an ingredient arrives at the dock to the moment the finished meal leaves the serving line. Each extra step—whether it's requiring a prep cook to dice a specialty vegetable, waiting for a piece of shared equipment, or checking a manual for a temperature setting—represents a potential point of friction. By analyzing the existing workload and skill sets of frontline staff, central teams can proactively eliminate these hidden complexities, ensuring the plant-rich option is always the path of least resistance.

One critical touchpoint for effective execution across multiple sites is the centralized recipe system. This is a key foundation to success. By standardizing recipes and making them easily accessible, organizations remove ambiguity for the frontline operator.

The National Trust, overseeing over 300 UK locations, made execution easy by creating a central cookbook:

*“The National Trust is committed to achieving net zero by 2030, with food playing an important role in that mission. As part of this, we’ve pledged that 50 percent of our recipes will be plant-based by winter 2026. That’s why in 2025, we updated/launched a central cookbook for our 300 cafés, featuring a diverse selection of delicious recipes that balance variety with flavor. Curated by our central team, the cookbook provides operators with easy to access dishes that both delight customers and advance our environmental commitments.”*

– Sasha Beviere, development chef, National Trust

While good recipe management is cornerstone, it is often details hidden in food preparation that can create major barriers to getting plant-based foods onto menus. An example of this is shared by ISS. The company pinpointed that traditional lentil preparation was a hidden friction point to execution. A solution of using IQF (individually quick frozen) lentils proved ideal because they are quick to prepare and require no soaking or prior cooking, they can be added just 20 minutes before the dish is complete. The mapping of the food journey helped ISS succeed by pairing recipe management with the more nuanced preparation friction point of the lentils. (Read more on this in Case study 1.)

*“Once the culinary team at ISS was happy with the quality of the new [plant-rich] dishes, they were ready to roll it out to the rest of the business. The team communicated the new requirement to procurement and changed the recipes in their centralized recipe system. For the consistent and ongoing delivery of these new recipes, it was critical that this particular type of lentil was purchased in sufficient volume to satisfy this switch for the whole business.”*

– Peter Lambie, former lead food architect, ISS

However, centralization marks the beginning of this journey. While a central team can provide the “what,” long-term success goes beyond a perfect recipe file and requires understanding the local “how” to prevent execution issues. Simplicity is achieved by designing the system to circumvent known operational friction points at scale. This means taking the intelligence gained from mapping the journey and developing system-level solutions for issues like inventory and storage complexity (e.g., preportioned kits), mitigating staff skill and confidence gaps (e.g., visual training guides), and designing recipes that avoid challenges stemming from rigid kitchen layout and equipment flow during peak service. Simplicity is achieved through persistent, central design that prevents local failure. This is key to maintaining consistent, high-quality offerings.



## SOLUTION 7:

# Translating climate goals into supplier contracts

### *Expert insight*

Ensure supplier contracts feature climate goals—including penalties or incentives—required to meet them.

If your food service is outsourced to a contract caterer, this partnership offers a valuable opportunity to embed sustainability goals into your agreements. Aligning suppliers with your sustainability objectives fosters shared accountability and strengthens your overall impact.

The most successful collaborations move beyond “best efforts” language, which can often lead to ambiguous results. Instead, the goal is to find a format that creates shared accountability. One effective approach is to explicitly incorporate targets—such as the Coolfood Pledge target—directly into supplier contract language. This can help ensure you are receiving transparent and actionable emissions data. When sustainability is given the same weight as traditional metrics like food cost and labor, it empowers your supplier to innovate and rewards them for their impact. In this way, your supplier sees themselves as an active partner in helping your organization achieve climate goals on food.

Ultimately, this alignment turns the entire process—from data collection to designing plant-rich menus—into a collaborative effort. The following case studies illustrate that successfully using contracts to drive climate action typically follows one of three distinct paths:

- 1. Mandates:** Setting clear, contractual Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with financial consequences to ensure compliance (see Case study 5).
- 2. Collaboration:** Working jointly with the supplier to set annual, incremental targets and accountability scorecards, often tied to bonuses for goal achievement (see Case study 6).
- 3. Data Requirements:** Utilizing supplier’s proprietary data and menu certification programs (like Coolfood Meals) to track and reduce emissions and requiring that data be third-party verified (see Case study 7).

### CASE STUDY 5:

## *Hackensack University Medical Center – Leveraging contracts for climate benefit*

Coolfood members are working to reduce their climate impact by deploying **behavior change strategies** that encourage their diners to make plant-rich choices. This includes Hackensack Meridian Health, a health system that adjusted the ratio of meat and plant-rich options on menus, reduced portion sizes of meat, and celebrated plant-forward cuisine. The health system is also finding great success in utilizing its contracts.

Hackensack<sup>3</sup> has been a leader in environmental sustainability for over 10 years and the system has won multiple awards from **Practice Greenhealth** (a partner in Coolfood) for its leadership. The health system sets sustainability goals and codifies the goals in its performance indicators for its hospitals’ leadership and its contracts with vendors.

Hackensack joined the Coolfood initiative in 2018.

## How has Hackensack leveraged its supplier contracts to support its aims?

Much of the hospital's food service is outsourced, with Morrison Healthcare (owned by Compass Group) managing 17 of its 18 locations. In its contract with Morrison, Hackensack included explicit climate goals as part of the company's KPIs, backed by associated fines if those targets are not met.

In response, Morrison Healthcare acted swiftly to meet its contractual obligations, employing culinary and marketing techniques to increase sales of plant-rich dishes. They even held system-wide competitions to award chefs who came up with the tastiest dishes.

These strategies have worked and Hackensack has cut per-plate food emissions by nearly 60 percent, surpassing the Coolfood relative emissions reduction target of 38 percent. With this progress, Hackensack is on track to meet the Paris Agreement-aligned Coolfood goal for emissions reduction.

Procurement data backs this up—ruminant meat purchases have dropped from 47 percent to 35 percent of total food procured, while plant-based food has risen from 31 percent to 56 percent from 2018 to 2024. This shift has allowed hospitals to continue offering satisfying, nutritious meals while significantly lowering their environmental footprint.

This impressive progress places Hackensack among the top-performing Coolfood members in terms of per-plate emissions reduction. Hackensack's leadership in the cohort reflects a deep, sustained commitment to transforming food service operations. It also illuminates an important strategy that other Coolfood members can employ with food vendors. By giving sustainability goals equal weight to other priorities in contracts—and enforcing them with financial penalties when unmet—Hackensack sent a clear message: sustainable sourcing and menu options are nonnegotiable.

*"We made sure our suppliers understood they were responsible for supporting our sustainability targets around food. These requirements were written into the contract, given equal importance to other business priorities, and backed by financial penalties if not met. There was no doubt—our supplier knew this was a core part of their partnership."*

— Kyle Tafuri, vice president, sustainability, at Hackensack Meridian Health

### CASE STUDY 6:

## **University of Pittsburgh – Climate change commitments in contracts**

### **University of Pittsburgh features Coolfood targets in contracts**

Many institutions struggle to translate sustainability commitments into measurable outcomes when it comes to reducing food-related GHG emissions. Without concrete performance metrics or built-in accountability, contracted food service providers may lack clear direction or incentives to meet sustainability expectations for the institutions they serve.

The University of Pittsburgh, which serves more than 35,000 meals a day from over 30 dining locations, addressed this challenge by embedding measurable sustainability goals directly into its food service contract with Chartwells Higher Education (a Compass Group company). The university established an annual Sustainability Scorecard that formally ties sustainability performance to contractual KPIs. Sustainability carries significant weight within the contract scoring system alongside other key rating categories including Food Safety and Customer Satisfaction, with 30 percent of the total score for the annual Sustainability Scorecard tied to progress toward the Coolfood Pledge carbon reduction target. To ensure steady progress, the University of Pittsburgh and Chartwells set annual incremental carbon reduction goals aligned with the long-term Coolfood Pledge target to ensure steady progress toward the 2030 goal. Each year, Chartwells' performance, determined by the results from the Coolfood Calculator, is evaluated based on this scorecard, which informs both performance reviews and financial incentives.

The University's Dining Services and Office of Sustainability worked closely with the Purchasing Department to embed sustainability requirements directly into the Request for Proposal (RFP) process for the dining service contract. By setting

expectations early and incorporating incentives into the contract, sustainability performance became a key factor in contract proposals, bidding, contract evaluation, and ongoing management. This approach enables Chartwells to translate the university's carbon reduction goals into clear, actionable strategies—such as adjusting purchasing practices and updating menu offerings. For instance, recipes have been modified to reduce carbon intensity, including rightsizing meat portions and adjusting burger patty sizes in its dining halls. As a result, the university has achieved a 35 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions per plate compared to a 2017 baseline, keeping it on track to meet Coolfood's relative GHG-reduction target.

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS APPROACH:

- **Embed Coolfood goals into all parts of the contract process.** Clear expectations when issuing RFPs, evaluating proposals, and agreeing on contractual commitments make priorities easier to communicate and implement across dining and procurement teams.
- **Set annual goals and evaluations.** Regular performance reviews based on timely Coolfood Calculator data help maintain linear progress and accountability.
- **Leverage contractual obligations to drive accountability and progress.** Contracts reinforce commitments and sustain progress to all stakeholders including chefs, managers, and procurement teams.

*"Working directly with our food service provider is key to advancing our carbon-reduction goals. By building sustainability commitments into our dining contract from the beginning, we've made sure those goals translate into real action through the food we serve. Having annual targets and clear accountability keeps everyone aligned and moving forward, and it fosters a sense of collective responsibility across our teams."*

– Nick Goodfellow, sustainability manager, University of Pittsburgh

#### CASE STUDY 7:

### **Aramark – Offering clients climate insights**

A Coolfood member since 2022, Aramark tracks emissions from food served across lines of business with the support of the annual climate impact of food report that's included in membership.

To take its data to the next level, Aramark developed a custom report for clients to understand the climate impact of food served at their specific sites. Created through a partnership between sustainability and supply chain teams, this client-facing Food Emissions Report leverages the WRI Coolfood Calculator, providing insights and analysis into food-related carbon emissions and the potential to track progress over time. By applying WRI's transparent, science-based methodology, Aramark provides clients with trusted, data-driven reports. The report details total emissions by type of food procured, helping Aramark strengthen client partnerships by identifying opportunities to reduce the climate impact of the food they choose to serve.

*"If Aramark is your food service provider, you can request a Food Emissions Report for your site. It's a simple way to get insight into the types of food being served and the emissions associated with them. The report helps us identify opportunities—in partnership with our clients—to innovate and expand offerings of plant-forward menus that deliver health, environmental, and cost benefits. The goal is to provide the data to empower informed, practical decisions."*

– Kate Hanley, director of global climate strategy, Aramark

Beyond site-level reporting, Aramark brings sustainability to the plate with certified Coolfood Meals offered across its Collegiate, Workplace, and Healthcare accounts. This program empowers menu planning and dining choices that can truly move the emissions needle. For clients, this means that by serving recipes with the Coolfood Meals certification mark, they can signal to students, employees, guests, and customers that a meal is both delicious and climate friendly.

The lesson from these examples is that clear tracking and incentivizing support of emissions reductions can lead to better results. Successfully tackling food-related emissions in an outsourced environment requires moving climate action from a side conversation to a core, part of the relationship. Whether through the strict enforcement of a mandate (Hackensack), the shared ownership of a joint scorecard (Pittsburgh), or the transparency offered by supplier data tools (Aramark), the principle remains the same: Align the supplier's bottom line with your climate goals. This creates shared accountability, transforms the caterer from a vendor into an active partner, and ensures your organizational commitment is translated into real-world menu change.

## SOLUTION 8:

### Providing the executive team with meaningful climate metrics

#### *Expert insight*

Identify a climate KPI that speaks the language of financial risk and revenue.

The ultimate measure of success for any operational change—from aligning procurement to enforcing supplier contracts—is whether it advances the organization's strategic goals. To make this happen, executive teams need to see climate action is not a cost center, but a driver of efficiency, risk mitigation, and brand value.

Failing to engage the executive team in your climate goals will seriously limit their success. Clear data helps the executive team understand how climate targets line up against the financial and operational metrics they already care about—making climate action part of the bigger performance story, not a separate agenda.

Admittedly, finding robust case studies on executive engagement is a challenge. While we know many of you are working on this, there is a natural hesitancy to share the “behind-the-scenes” of boardroom discussions. This lack of public data isn't due to a lack of effort; rather, it reflects how complex these internal shifts can be. We see this as a massive opportunity—an area where we are all learning in real-time. By sharing what *is* working, we can move away from climate action feeling like a separate agenda and start making it part of the primary performance story.

We've combined the honest feedback from our members with emerging tactics to help you navigate these obstacles. Think of these not as a final manual, but as an invitation to experiment, lead, and eventually share your own successes with the community so we can all move forward together.



## 1. Connect climate to cost savings

Climate-friendly ingredients can support long-term price stability and cost savings—two outcomes that resonate deeply with executive teams. For food procurement teams, the strongest entry point for this financial story is the ability to deliver certainty of supply at a competitive price.

Some inspiration for evidencing this cost saving story:

- You might find it helpful to look at price fluctuations for your top three high-carbon ingredients over the past 18 months compared to your go-to plant proteins (like lentils, beans or speciality plant proteins).
- Instead of viewing carbon emissions on their own, frame them as part of procurement costs. One storyline to explore is where increasing ratios of plant proteins can reduce cost fluctuations and increase stability of procurement budget.

## 2. Integrate metrics into the core dashboard

Keeping climate goals top-of-mind is easier said than done, especially when they feel like an “extra” item on an already crowded dashboard. The real challenge is often in the implementation—finding a way to make these metrics feel like a natural part of the business rather than a separate conversation.

One approach that helps bridge this gap is to weave climate data (like GHG per plate) directly into the reports your team is already looking at. By placing these side-by-side with familiar KPIs like sales volume, margins, and customer satisfaction (CSAT), you stop treating sustainability as a standalone issue. Instead, it becomes just another vital sign of a healthy, well-run operation.

Wagamama shows us how this integration works internally.

*“Alongside sugar, salt, and saturated fat, we now track the carbon footprint of every dish. When the executive team reviews menus, they see this data alongside sales figures—offering a complete picture of each dish’s commercial and environmental performance. Over time, our goal is to reduce the menu’s overall climate impact, which means the menus of the future are likely to comprise of a few high-carbon dishes balanced by many lower-carbon options.”*

– Sophie Luck, menu and recipe manager, Wagamama

While the idea of a “unified view” makes sense on paper, we know that actually getting different systems to talk to each other is where the heavy lifting happens.

The goal here is to make the “big picture” unmistakable. When a metric like GHG emissions per plate sits right next to plate margins and sales volume in your executive reviews, the connection becomes intuitive. It visually reinforces that these aren’t competing interests, but rather different parts of the same efficiency story.

An area to explore: It’s worth talking to your IT or Business Intelligence (BI) team about automating some of this. If you can pull point-of-sale data and procurement data (like GHGs and margins) into one shared dashboard, it will simplify telling that unified story. Plus, it saves you from having to manually bridge those gaps every single quarter.

## 3. Frame progress as future-proofing

Executives are focused on the long-term health and resilience of the business. Even though some companies have recently scaled back public climate commitments, these goals still matter for attracting talent, meeting investor expectations, and staying relevant to customers. Framing climate action as future-proofing can help connect your work to what leadership already cares about.

Future-proofing can mean different things depending on your context. Your company may be looking to future-proof its business strategy, while you may be trying to future-proof major shifts in the ESG space. Rather than covering everything at once, focus on the one or two areas that clearly resonate with your leadership and build from there.

A helpful starting point is to pay attention to the language your organization used throughout 2025. We consistently heard words like “resilience,” which, even if it feels like a buzzword, signals what leadership sees as essential to the company’s stability. Adapting your language to these themes helps position climate action not as a standalone ESG priority, but as a direct response to the company’s current needs.

It can feel frustrating to downplay ESG when it deserves to be front and center. But aligning with the internal narrative gives your work a stronger, more strategic platform. Partnering with teams who shape executive or financial communications can give you insight into how sustainability fits into your company’s broader commercial or risk story. Even if you can’t immediately tie your work to “financial capital,” starting this conversation shows leadership that you understand the pressures they’re navigating.

Ultimately, translating operational wins into the language of leadership is a powerful way to keep your program moving forward, even in an uncertain landscape. While we’ve discussed strategies for addressing the eight major challenges—from menu design to executive buy-in—the real progress happens through the daily, incremental shifts you make inside your organization.





## CHAPTER 4.

# A parting thought

Having a clear understanding of the operational barriers is indispensable, but the true value lies in the collective wisdom shared by peers across the food service industry. This guide has demonstrated that success is achieved not by changing customer values, but by changing operational execution: making the delicious, convenient, and affordable choice the one that happens to be climate-friendly.

This requires you to move confidently on two fronts:

- **Winning the customer:** By focusing on flavor, price, and frictionless ordering, not climate messaging.
- **Winning the organization:** By embedding climate goals directly into contracts, procurement metrics, and executive performance data.

Every organization's journey is different, but we often run into the same challenges. While this report offers a roadmap for your own work, you don't have to figure it all out in a vacuum. We hope these strategies help you find new ways to connect and collaborate with others in the field.

We'd love to have you join us as a [Coolfood member](#). Membership provides a platform to share what's working, navigate the obstacles your peers have already cleared, and help shape the next set of industry solutions. The community is ready—let's build on this progress together.



# Appendices

## Appendix A. List of no-regret techniques from WRI's Food Service Playbook

NO REGRET TECHNIQUES	
<b>PRS15</b>	Use indulgent language on menus to describe plant-rich dishes
<b>PRD8</b>	Increase the variety of plant-rich dishes on offer
<b>PRS14</b>	Remove unappealing language describing plant-rich dishes from menus (e.g. meat-free, vegetarian)
<b>PRD5</b>	Improve the appearance of plant-rich dishes (e.g., arrangements, color, garnishes, balance)
<b>PRS16</b>	Use language on menus to selectively recommend plant-rich dishes (e.g., chef's special, dish of the day)
<b>PRD7</b>	Increase the ratio of plant-rich to meat-based dishes available
<b>PRD6</b>	Improve the flavor and texture of plant-rich dishes
<b>PLC5</b>	Integrate plant-based meat alternatives into meat sections in a display (e.g., buffets, shelves, food carts, or stations)
<b>PRM3</b>	Create social media or other group forums where diners can share ideas, recommendations, and reviews of plant-rich dishes
<b>PRC7</b>	Run cross-product promotions (e.g., meal deals, set menus) on plant-rich dishes and selected drinks, side dishes, or desserts
<b>PRM20</b>	Publicize the environmental benefits of plant-rich dishes using marketing materials (e.g., posters, social media, leaflets, table tents, or TV screens)
<b>PRD2</b>	Blend plant-based ingredients into ground or minced meat-based dishes to reduce the meat content
<b>PRD1</b>	Arrange plant-rich dishes so that more appealing ingredients are most visible (e.g., via layering, stacking, toppings or other arrangement)
<b>PPL8</b>	Train chefs and food preparation staff how to cook and prepare appealing plant-rich dishes
<b>PRM26</b>	Publicize the taste and flavor benefits of plant-rich dishes using marketing materials (e.g., posters, social media, leaflets, table tents, or TV screens)
<b>PLC6</b>	Introduce a dedicated plant-rich food section (e.g., buffet section, shelf section, food carts, or stations)
<b>PRS4</b>	Add environmental footprint labels to menus
<b>PRM23</b>	Publicize the local benefits of plant-rich dishes using marketing materials (e.g., posters, social media, leaflets, table tents, or TV screens)
HIGHLY PROMISING TECHNIQUES	
<b>PRC6</b>	Reward diners with financial coupons, cash back, or loyalty card points to redeem on plant-rich dishes (e.g., 10 cents earned per dollar spent)
<b>PRC9</b>	Sell plant-rich dishes at a lower, or subsidized, price compared to meat dishes
<b>PRS13</b>	Offer default plant-rich menus, with meat-based dishes available on a separate menu or via request from a server

PRC = Price, PRM = Promotion, PLC = Placement, PPL = People, PRD = Product, PRS = Pres

## Endnotes

1. Wagamama is committed to Net Zero by 2040
2. County of Santa Clara Public Health Department is enrolled in The Good Food Purchasing Program on behalf of three of the County's public hospitals.
3. Hackensack Meridian is an American healthcare system based in New Jersey. The system comprises 18 hospitals and employs approximately 40,000 people. Its food service departments collectively serve over 14 million meals to patients, employees, and visitors annually.

## Resources

IKEA veggie hot dog: [The plant-based goodness of the veggie hot dog - IKEA UK](#)

NYC press release [Plant Based Default in Hospitals \(2/2025\)](#)

Greener by Default promotional video [Healthcare Institutions Move Towards Plant-Based Dining — Greener by Default](#)

Good Food Purchasing Program – [Version 3.0](#)

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Finally, we thank our WRI colleagues and the broader Coolfood community for their continued commitment to helping food providers make plant-rich, climate friendly dining both feasible and delicious.

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## About Coolfood and World Resources Institute

World Resources Institute (WRI) is an independent research organization and global nonprofit that leverages data to catalyze change across critical systems, like food. Coolfood is a WRI initiative that helps food providers use environmental and behavioral science to serve healthier, plant-rich meals. It offers practical strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and achieve business goals. As a founding member of SBTi and host of GHG Protocol, WRI's globally trusted reputation stands behind Coolfood's work.

If you would like to learn more about Coolfood visit us at [www.coolfood.org](http://www.coolfood.org)

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