Best (and worst) of alternative proteins

By JENN HARRIS
Los Angeles Times

There is an entire universe of alternative proteins that mimic beef, chicken, pork and fish. There's even a hunk of mycelium (the fibers that make up nature's fungal network) created to look, feel and taste like a chicken breast.

What follows are the results of our (somewhat subjective) taste test of more than two dozen alternative proteins, evaluated on appearance, texture, taste and how closely each one mimics the original protein. There are names you've heard of (giants that have pushed their products into every major grocery store chain and a growing number of fast-food restaurants) along with many newbies. Come, take my sanitized hand and grab a fork as we enter this vast alt-protein world together.

Burgers

• Impossible Foods Burger Made From Plants
Base ingredient(s): Soy and potato proteins
Appearance: Of all the alt-proteins we tried, this product most resembled the look of the original — actual ground beef with a pale red color and juice that was almost bloody.
Texture: Uncooked, the protein felt like a pile of small, hard, wet nubs that were loosely jammed together. Cooked, it firmed up and had a chew that was similar to the real thing.
Taste: Like bland, salty, cooked meat.
How close it is to the real thing: 8 out of 10. With the appropriate condiments and a good bun, you could fool a carnivore.
• Beyond Meat Beyond Burger
Base ingredient(s): Pea protein
Appearance: A grayish color reminiscent of oxidized meat.
Texture: Soft and rubbery.
Taste: Oddly sweet but primarily salty without any beef flavor.
How close it is to the real thing: 5 out of 10.

Chicken nuggets, tenders and breast

• Nowadays Original Nuggets
Base ingredient(s): Yellow pea protein
Appearance: Breaded and shaped like blobs that resemble nuggets.
Texture: The breading was nice and crisp, but the interior of the nugget was like a kitchen sponge.
Taste: Like what I imagine an actual sponge tastes like, although when I bit into it, salty liquid rushed out. There was a faint pea taste as well that was rather off-putting.
How close it is to the real thing: I suspect that whoever developed these nuggets has never tasted an actual nugget. 1 out of 10.
• Daring Breaded Pieces
Base ingredient(s): Soy protein concentrate
Appearance: The golden-brown coating had the look and feel of a chicken tender.
Texture: Tough and elastic (like a firm rubber band) with shreds you could pull apart.
Taste: Amazingly, the tenders tasted like pumpkin spice with notes of ginger and nutmeg.
How close it is to the real thing: Because the tenders tasted like Thanksgiving, 2 out of 10.

• Impossible Foods Nuggets
Base ingredient(s): Wheat flour and soy protein concentrate
Appearance: Like a fast-food chicken nugget.
Texture: The thin coating gave way to a pressed-and-formed middle with that classic nugget yoga-mat texture.
Taste: Almost like a Wendy's chicken nugget. Almost. But what it lacked in taste, it made up for in appearance and texture.
How close it is to the real thing: 8 out of 10. If you add some sweet and sour sauce, 9 out of 10.
• Beyond Chicken Plant-Based Chicken Tenders
Base ingredient(s): faba bean puree
Appearance: Because of their rounded shape, they look like elongated nuggets. Calling them a tender is misleading!
Texture: More pressed and formed like a nugget than an actual piece of solid chicken.
Taste: Salty and juicy. Your brain registers something meaty without any real flavor.
How close it is to the real thing: 2 out of 10 — if you're calling it a tender. If you judge it as a giant nugget, 6 out of 10; 8 out of 10 if you add barbecue sauce to the equation.
• Meati Chicken mycelium chicken
Base ingredient(s): Mycelium
Appearance: Like a frozen, precooked breast of chicken.
Texture: You get the chew of cooked chicken and a rush of juice when you bite into it. The sensation is pretty remarkable.
Taste: Like a bland, overcooked chicken breast that's been seasoned heavily with salt.
How close is it to the real thing: 8 out of 10. For the most part, you think you're eating chicken. In a blind taste test, I'm not sure anyone would be able to tell the difference.
Availability: The mycelium chicken hasn't officially launched, so we'll have to stay tuned.

Pork (sausage, bratwurst and bacon)

• Impossible Sausage Made From Plants
Base ingredient(s): Soy protein concentrate
Appearance: Cooked, there's no distinction between Impossible sausage and pork sausage.
Texture: It crumbled like ground pork and had the same satisfying chew.
Taste: Hints of garlic powder, onion powder and cayenne pepper — it resembled well-seasoned ground pork.
How close it is to the real thing: 9 out of 10. In a breakfast burrito, it would be a perfect 10.
• Beyond Meat Beyond Breakfast Sausage
Base ingredient(s): Pea protein
Appearance: No noticeable differences between the links or patties and the real things. They are the right shape and color.
Texture: When you cook the sausages in a pan, a thin film forms like a crust on the surface, and it's sticky. The actual sausage meat is softer and chewier than pork.
Taste: Both the links and patties were on the sweeter side and tasted like sausage that had been dipped in syrup. They were both pretty salty as well.
How close it is to the real

thing: 6.5 out of 10.
• Beyond Meat Beyond Sausage
Base ingredient(s): Pea protein
Appearance: Uncooked, the sausage is paler than most. Cooked, it looks like your average bratwurst.
Texture: Soft and mealy. There's no snap with the casing; it just kind of melts into the meat.
Taste: It doesn't really taste like much of anything, although it's a good canvas for condiments.
How close it is to the real thing: 4 out of 10. It looks like a bratwurst, but that's where the similarities end.
• Nature's Fynd Meatless Breakfast Patties
Base ingredient(s): Fungi protein trademarked as Fy
Appearance: The perfectly round shape and brown color make it look like plastic play food.
Texture: On the rubbery side, but so is most breakfast sausage.
Taste: Salt. It was salty. That was it.
How close it is to the real thing: 5 out of 10.
Availability: For now, you can find the patties at the two Berkeley Bowl locations in California.
• OmniPork Ground
Base ingredient(s): Soy protein concentrate
Appearance: It looked more like ground chicken or turkey than pork, with a pale pink color.
Texture: Chewy and tough
Taste: Salty and just a tad sweet. There was no pork flavor.
How close it is to the real thing: 5 out of 10. To make the protein a viable pork substitute, you'll need to dress it up with appropriate condiments and more seasoning.
• OmniPork Strips
Base ingredient(s): Soy protein concentrate
Appearance: There's no reason to create a plant-based version of pulled pork. You're not fooling anyone with these brown shards and slivers.
Texture: The strips taste more like firm tofu than anything close to meat. And instead of shredding, it rips into pieces.
Taste: No
How close it is to the real

thing: 0 out of 10.
• OmniPork Luncheon
Base ingredient(s): Protein blend (soy protein concentrate, vital wheat gluten and soy protein isolate)
Appearance: Rounded corners — like Spam — with a familiar pink color.
Texture: Uncooked, the protein is loosely held together in a mold but barely holds its shape on its own. Cooked, it's soft and pliable.
Taste: Nowhere on the package does it say that this is meant to mimic Spam, but its description on the website reads: "Luncheon meat is one of the most popular processed meats in Asia, but its potential health risks concern consumers." The OmniPork version packs a punch of salt like Spam, but that's about it. It's a hunk of salty, soft meat.
How close it is to the real thing: 2 out of 10. It may look a little like Spam, but it doesn't nail the texture or that processed-meat flavor.
• MyEats MyBacon
Base ingredient(s): Mycelium
Appearance: Raw, it looks like a flattened mushroom processed to look like a strip of bacon. Cooked, it does resemble that bacon strip— with striping that runs its length.
Texture: Even if you follow the directions and turn it often, it never really gets crisp. After what felt like an hour of cooking (it was really about 15 minutes), MyBacon remained chewy.
Taste: There was a strong artificial-smoke flavor that reminded me of dog treats.
How close it is to the real thing: 0 out of 10.
Availability: The product is available only at Honest Weight Food Co-op

in Albany, New York, but there are plans for a national rollout.

Fish (raw tuna, cooked tuna, crab cakes and fish burgers)

• Kuleana Tuna
Base ingredient(s): Radish, algae and bamboo fiber
Appearance: Sliced thin and draped on top of a roll or chopped fine and stuffed into maki, it's passable as actual tuna, but over time, the color darkens and turns purple, ending the elaborate charade. (At the moment, you can get it only as sushi at Erewhon or in bowls at Poké Bar restaurants.)
Texture: It slices like tuna but the texture is anything but tender. It has a slight crunch that gives way to mush.
Taste: Fresh fish isn't supposed to have a fishy flavor or odor. Kuleana ends up tasting and smelling like aged tuna. The fishiness is present but not off-putting.
How close it is to the real thing: 4 out of 10. It doesn't quite nail the texture or flavor.
• Finless Foods Plant-Based Tuna
Base ingredient(s): Melon
Appearance: The chunks of protein look more like squares of watermelon than tuna with a deep red color.
Texture: Imagine overripe, waterlogged melon that's still crisp but starting to turn.
Taste: Now imagine that melon but salty, with a potent seaweed flavor.
How close it is to the real thing: 1 out of 10.
Availability: The product will be available at select stores beginning spring 2022.
• Good Catch Plant-Based Fish Sticks (and Fillets) Breaded
Base ingredient(s): Wheat flour and Good Catch's "six-plant protein blend" (pea protein isolate, soy protein concentrate, chickpea flour, faba protein, lentil protein, soy protein isolate and navy bean powder)
Appearance: The finger-sized sticks simulate actual fish sticks, especially after a couple of minutes in the air fryer. The fillets are dead ringers for fried fillets of fish.
Texture: The coating is crisp, but there's no flaky fish texture in either product. Instead, it just kind of breaks apart.
Taste: A bland, salty, protein-like substance coated in breadcrumbs. Both products could benefit from tartar sauce and some ketchup.
How close it is to the real thing: 4 out of 10. The texture is way off, but if someone marketed them as breaded protein sticks and never mentioned the word fish, I might appreciate them a little more.
• Good Catch Plant-Based Crab Cakes Breaded and Plant-Based Crab Cakes New England Style
Base ingredient(s): Good Catch's six-plant protein blend
Appearance: Both

resembled crab cakes. The breaded product had a nice golden crust, and the New England style product looked like lumps of plant-based fish.
Texture: I was impressed with both versions, especially the New England style. The chunks of protein were similar to lump crab meat with a variety of sizes pressed together to form the cake. There were also bits of bell pepper and green onion that gave both cakes a more realistic look and feel.
Taste: The cakes were seasoned well with lemon juice, onion powder, paprika and garlic powder. Any discrepancies in texture were mostly masked by the flavor, which really did taste like a traditional crab cake.
How close it is to the real thing: 8 out of 10.
• Good Catch Plant-Based Fish Burgers Classic Style
Base ingredient(s): Good Catch's six-plant protein blend
Appearance: A round, fairly bumpy patty of protein, similar to what you'll find at your local market. You can make out fragments of what look like diced celery and green onion.
Texture: The cakes were larger versions of the crab cakes with a texture that mirrored lump crab meat.
Taste: A mild citrus flavor with some onion powder and garlic powder in the mix. You might not mistake it for fish, but it was enjoyable as a well-seasoned patty.
How close it is to the real thing: 6 out of 10.
• Good Catch Plant-Based Fish Cakes Thai Style
Base ingredient(s): Good Catch's six-plant protein blend
Appearance: Your average fish cake but with a green tint.
Texture: Clumps of protein are mashed together like a fish cake with a nice, crisp exterior.
Taste: I would actually seek these out, and possibly serve them at a dinner party. The cakes were flavored as advertised — with a strong hit of lemongrass and lime juice, garlic and chile.
How close it is to the real thing: 10 out of 10. I can't remember the last time — or if I've ever — eaten a real Thai-style fish cake, but I'd like to think all versions taste similar to this one.
• Good Catch Fish-Free Tuna Naked in Water
Base ingredient(s): Good Catch's six-plant protein blend
Appearance: Slick, glossy, and it clumps in the pouch.
Texture: More like soft tofu than firm tuna; the protein doesn't flake, it just kind of breaks apart.
Taste: The fermented seaweed odor was hard to stomach and smelled like fish food. And I'm guessing it had the same taste — like something dead in a fish tank.
How close it is to the real thing: 0 out of 10.

Ricardo DeAratanha/Los Angeles Times-TNS
From the bowl, clockwise, Impossible breakfast-style pork sausage, Beyond breakfast sausage links, Beyond breakfast sausage patties, Beyond Meat beyond sausage.

Ricardo DeAratanha/Los Angeles Times-TNS
From top left, OmniPork plant-based meat-style luncheon, OmniPork ground plant-based pork and OmniPork plant-based pork-style strips.