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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Vegans' Bullheaded Beef With Tyson Foods

As a former PETA exec, I'd like to thank Tyson for investing in veggie burgers.



PHOTO: REUTERS

By **BRUCE FRIEDRICH**

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Tyson Foods, the largest meat company in the U.S., recently purchased a 5% stake in the vegan startup Beyond Meat. Many fans of the smaller company's offerings—such as a Beast Burger made of pea protein—were less than pleased. Some took to Facebook to accuse Beyond Meat of 19 shades of nefariousness. “The blood of all the abused animals is on your hands,” went one of the milder posts.

This is exactly the wrong reaction. Don't misunderstand: There's no love lost between me and Tyson. When I was vice president for campaigns at PETA—People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals—I planned news conferences to launch undercover investigations into Tyson's farms and slaughterhouses. I've been a vegan for almost 30 years.

Yet I want to publicly thank Tyson for being the first major meat company in the U.S. to invest in plant-based proteins. I hope with all my heart that others will follow, creating a seamless shift away from animal meat toward healthier and more humane options.

This is an immense investment opportunity. Bill Gates has called plant-based meat “the future of food.” In May, Eric Schmidt, the former CEO of Google, told the Milken Global Summit that alternative proteins may well save the planet from climate change. But it was anybody's guess whether the meat industry would see this as opportunity or a threat. To Tyson's great credit it has chosen the former.

Many of my fellow vegans are horrified that by purchasing Beyond Meat's products, they will be supporting Tyson. I have to admit that makes me uncomfortable, too.

But recall that Boca Burger was bought by Kraft in 2000. Before the acquisition, I had to alert the media that President Bill Clinton was addicted to these veggie burgers, because the company's PR department didn't return my calls. With Kraft, Boca got full-page ads in *People* and *Time*, and placement in grocery stores across the country.

Similarly, Dean Foods' 2002 purchase of WhiteWave, the maker of Silk soymilk, helped transform the drink from a hippy beverage to a hip one. Today alternative milks are almost 10% of the market. As a testament to this success, WhiteWave was acquired again this year, this time by Danone, a dairy company, for \$10.4 billion.

Could the same thing happen to Beyond Meat? Plant-based protein accounts for less than 1% of the meat market. Tyson could help change that. The company isn't making this investment out of the goodness of its corporate heart. Instead, it wants to reap the profits as sales of alternative meats grow. The market-watchers at Lux Research suggested last year that by 2054 plant-based meats will account for a third of the meat market.

If that prediction holds, there's a market risk for firms that exclusively rely on animal protein. An investor coalition spearheaded by the Coller Foundation and representing \$1.25 trillion in assets has urged food companies, including Tyson, to diversify. Its new stake in Beyond Meat is simply one more step in making the vegan firm's products mainstream—and putting a Beast Burger, instead of a real one, on every plate in America.

Mr. Friedrich is the executive director of the Good Food Institute, a nonprofit that promotes alternatives to animal agriculture, and co-trustee of New Crop Capital, a venture fund invested in Beyond Meat.

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