

THE TRUTH ABOUT *fake meat*

The idea of eating less meat is a worthy one, but swapping it out for plant-based alternatives isn't as straightforward — or healthy — as it may seem. Renata Gortan investigates



"If the ingredients list contains lots of words you don't recognise, it's probably not healthy"

— Melissa Meier

Fake meat is having a moment — it's in all the major supermarkets, practically every fast-food chain has a fake-meat burger option and even fine-dining restaurants are getting on board. The rise of fake meat follows more Australians embracing plant-based diets.

While it used to be a niche part of society, in the past few years the trend has gone mainstream. According to research by Roy Morgan, in 2018, 2.5 million Australians — 12 per cent of the population — followed a vegetarian diet, up from 1.7 million people in 2012.

But we're still a meat-obsessed country — more than 90 per cent of Aussie households are still eating red meat and Australia remains one of the world's largest per-capita consumers

of beef, with the average Aussie consuming around 27kg of beef a year.

It seems, though, that even if we're not eating meat, a lot of us would still like it to taste like meat. The sales of meat-free burger products, which have increased by 289 per cent in the past decade, reflect this. And it's estimated the Australian plant-based food industry will be worth \$3 billion by 2030.

For many consumers, fake meat appears to be a sustainable answer to a meat-obsessed food culture that still offers interesting flavours and textures beyond beans and veg. But are vegan hot dogs, burgers and nuggets really healthy, or is fake meat, as TV chef Rachel Khoo puts it, "just another highly processed food with better marketing"?

THE PROCESSED-FOOD PARADOX

Aussie chef Guy Turland is also a sceptic. His main concern is that consumers don't know exactly what they're eating. "We are pushed and sold what they want us to know, but not told the whole story on how these products are made, if they're really healthy for us and what the long-term effects are," he says.

The nutritional labels on fake-meat products often sound more like science experiments than a list of ingredients. A Beyond Meat burger patty, for example, has 18 ingredients, including methylcellulose and potassium chloride, while an Impossible Burger patty has 17 ingredients, including leghemoglobin and konjac gum.

The other big criticism is that fake meat can contain as much if not more salt than meat itself. Recent research from The Heart Foundation found that a serve of fake meat often contains 20 to 35 per cent of your maximum recommended daily salt intake (which is 5g salt, or 2000mg of sodium), and sometimes even half of your RDI. The plant-based Beyond Simply Grill'd burger, for example, contains 1100mg of sodium, only 40mg less than the beef-patty equivalent.