A new Food Court at Bristol University scheduled to open on May 17th will have a section dedicated to plant-based dishes. It is just one part of go-ahead food plans, says catering manager Caroline Wynn.

Q: Can you give us an overview of the student catering at Bristol?
Caroline Wynn: Developed over the last ten years Source is our in-house catering brand that has been designed to promote the fact our food is being procured from ethically and sustainable sources. We are the University’s ‘In-House’ catering operation running 12 cafés and bars on the university’s campus together with catered halls of residence for approximately 1,500 students.
Source is committed to using Fairtrade products and locally-sourced ingredients wherever possible. Key to our ethos are credentials such as only using Red Tractor Meat, MSC-assured fish and promoting seasonal produce. We care about the food we produce and our customers.
We actively support Refill Bristol, the City to Sea campaign providing mains drinking water as an alternative to purchasing bottled water that helps in reducing the number of plastic bottles on campus.
Source is currently actively involved with the Sustainable Food Cities bid to be a Gold Level city for food in Bristol. We were very proud to become the first ‘Champion’ in the city due to the huge number of initiatives we have going on.
The university won three South West Fair Trade Business Awards in 2019. Sadly the 2020 awards were cancelled due to the Covid pandemic and no announcement has been made about 2021 yet, but we are really hopeful this year that we will be awarded Fair Trade status.

Q. You already have a focus on plant-based options, particularly with your Meat-Free Mondays, what has been behind that decision?
Caroline: We have long supported ethically and sustainably sourced produce in our catering operations, initially having one ‘Less Meat’ day in our catered halls of residence menu cycle back in 2015-2016. In 2018 we ran a ‘Plate up the Facts’ campaign to communicate to students the importance of knowing about the carbon impact of the food they were choosing, especially with regard to protein choices.
Meat Free Mondays were then introduced into all catered halls at the university in September 2019, with communications to students spreading the environmental messages underpinning this campaign. In 2020 we achieved a 42% sales increase on the previous year for our plant-based food served in our catered halls of residence. For 2021 we have been developing our cooked breakfast offer, which now contains only 9% meat options and we are soon to be introducing Flexitarian Fridays, further increasing our plant-based ranges and promoting meat as a supporting factor in protein choices.
We have teamed up with PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) on a number of occasions in our catered halls of residence to promote meat alternative foods and join in on campaigns such as ‘Taste the Future’ to promote world vegan month. During this campaign, we had a PETA representative on site in various halls of accommodation to give students information regarding
the meat-free alternative foods being served and the fact that 90% of greenhouse gas emissions were omitted from the meat-free option. Partnering with PETA showcased our commitment to animal welfare and a more sustainable future, and this is enhanced by our meat-free Monday menus across our catered halls. At Source we believe it is a meat-eaters duty to care about animal welfare, which is why we ensure the sustainable procurement of our meat; knowing where our meat is from, and how the animals were treated.

That is why through Source we try to:

- Purchase meat from suppliers that have strong and meaningful practices in place to cover animal welfare
- Ensure products carry the ‘Freedom Food’ and ‘MSC’ and ‘Red Tractor’ logos where possible
- Choose free-range eggs
- Promote the consumption of less meat but better quality

www.publicsectorcatering.co.uk/plantbasedweek
Q. How available are plant-based options on campus?

Caroline: In 2020 we achieved the removal of beef from all our ‘Grab and Go’ ranges in our cafés, and we have the ambition of reducing ruminant meats from all our menus. We offer a selection of vegetarian and vegan sandwiches and salads, cakes, plant-based meals and hot snacks, with a focus on value for money and flavour. This is all in response to the university’s ‘Food for Thought’ survey at the end of 2018, the university then declaring climate emergency and simply a reflection of modern and sustainable ways of eating. Some of our most popular sandwiches are plant-based, with vegan sausage sandwich being the most popular at £3.15 and a Coronation chickpea with fresh lettuce at £2.70.

Our flagship Source outlet, ‘Source Marketplace’, a food court scheduled to open on May 17th will have one of the counters entirely devoted to plant-based foods. Located in the heart of the campus, this new facility will be open from 8.30am to 10pm to students, staff and the general public.

Q: Does Source work with wider university initiatives on student health and sustainability?

Caroline: We collaborate very closely with the University’s Sustainability Department and the Sustainable Food Action Plan (2021) demonstrates the close working relationship among the catering, sustainability and procurement teams. Food systems are inherently connected to the wellbeing of individuals and communities, and they will both affect and be affected by climate change. For this reason, the university strives to incorporate sustainability, including carbon impacts, into our product and service selection process. The catering team will shortly be completing Carbon Mapping training to enable improved decisions on balancing nutritional content and carbon footprint of menus. We are also supporting Bristol Bites Back Better and the city’s efforts to become a Gold Sustainable Food City through the Going for Gold campaign. The university was the first organisation in the city to get Going for Gold Champion Status.

The Catering department, including Source, is also working with the Sports, Exercise and Health team to encourage and promote healthy eating through sourcing, provision, practice, development and leadership. This collaboration will go hand-in-hand with the our sustainable food action plan - so keep an eye out for upcoming changes in our Source cafés.

Q: Are there any cost-savings in reducing the meat element of menus?

Caroline: Our sustainable food procurement ethos and embracing of modern food trends and techniques; coupled with the need to provide nutritionally balanced, delicious food and support our local suppliers, has always led to a premium price. We have not seen direct costs savings in presenting more plant-based options, but we have been able to offset the effects of industry price increases from Brexit plus farming and supply chain challenges by incorporating a greater range of produce, including locally-sourced vegetables from Evesham, local dairy from Cotswold Dairy, eggs from Greenacre farm, pastries and breads from Hobbs House Bakery, sandwiches from Real Wrap and many more suppliers within our region.

Q: What has been the reaction of students and staff to the focus on plant-based options?

Caroline: Student reaction has been very positive from our cafés, this has helped increase sales in some areas while offering a nutritious plant-based lunch. Many of our students are heading towards a plant-based diet when they come along to live in our catered halls, and for those that may have a more traditional style diet, we ensure that they feel included by giving away samples at point of sale to give everyone the opportunity to try new dishes. By giving away bite-size trials we can take away some of the anxiety people may have when it comes to new and unusual ingredients.

Q: Tell us how you get feedback from them, and how do you then act on it?

www.publicsectorcatering.co.uk/plantbasedweek
Caroline: We undertake routine surveys to gain feedback called our ‘Food for Thought’ survey and invite customers, students and staff to give us their comments. The Sustainable Food and Student Society Forum launched in January 2021 has been set up to challenge the catering department to change norms and deliver the ‘Sustainability Action Plan’ goals. Additionally, we have a catering team ‘Food Development Group’ which was formed to look at trends and ensure that advances are incorporated into what we do. We are determined to build a resilient future through food and this approach enables us to develop our food offer in a consultative approach.

Q: How do you market and promote plant-based foods?
Caroline: Our cafés and bars provide an important social role, providing places to meet, share ideas and gather thoughts. At the same time, we strive to offer well-balanced, healthy and sustainable catering. Our food is procured and produced in ways that avoid damaging the planet, enhance animal welfare and provide social benefits.
We promote this by having a cohesive policy and action plan that underpins our goals. In fact our brand-new food court called ‘Source Marketplace’ in the iconic Senate House university location, has a plant-based menu as we continue to offer healthy balanced and mindful meals. It will also be entirely single use plastic free, supporting our university-wide Plastic Action Plan initiative.

Q: What have been the plant-based options that have worked best on your menus, and are there any that haven’t really worked?
Caroline: In terms of successes, banana blossoms have made a great fish-less ‘fish n chips’. Falafels have continued to be a perennial favourite and advances in food technology have led to some brilliant yoghurt, cheese and other dairy alternatives.
We haven’t had any absolute disasters as yet, but we have had quite a few challenges to overcome. For example, providing a protein-rich diet while avoiding meat and using a reduced number of plant sources where allergies have an impact.
Changing attitudes and perceptions in both the staff and student populace, as well as finding suppliers of quality plant-based products, remain key focus areas.

Q: You have made plans for a Plant-Based Week (May 17-21) on campus. Can you tell us about these?
Caroline: Our cafés are running a plant-based offer with our tantalising meal deals - sandwich, fresh fruit and a vegan drink at a discounted price.
In catered halls we are running a plant-based dessert every night for the week and an increased number of plant-based meals throughout. We will also be unveiling our Flexitarian Friday menu too.

Q: Do you have longer-term plans to develop plant-based menus?
Caroline: We aim to further address this issue by mapping carbon output to all food and drink offerings from Source, and aim to reduce it by 20%. As part of this commitment the catering department is supporting a research project to estimate the environmental and health costs associated with the food that the University of Bristol serves on its campus. Based on this information, we will investigate how to induce changes in food consumption patterns to facilitate more sustainable and healthy lifestyle amongst staff and students.