



  
**wagamama**

**A Case Study**

 **proveg**  
**NEW FOOD HUB**

# INTRODUCING: wagamama

Wagamama is well-known for its Japanese-inspired menu, which is now 50% plant-based as part of their effort to mitigate climate change. Some of its offerings include soya protein-based sweet and spicy 'ribs', as well as plant-based-chicken bao buns.

Demonstrating the success of this approach, Wagamama owners The Restaurant Group recently reported a dramatic increase in orders of plant-based items across its businesses — increasing from 5% to 20% between 2021-22.<sup>1</sup>

# INTRODUCING: wagamama

After launching in the 90s, Wagamama helped to make Japanese cuisine familiar and desirable to the average UK consumer. Today, Wagamama is doing the very same thing for plant-based cuisine. So how are they doing it?

In our full whitepaper, '[Harnessing the power of plant-based as a food-service professional](#)', we identified the key strategies for food-service businesses looking to expand into the plant-based sector. Wagamama is a perfect case study of the following three recommendations:

- 1. Lead with flavour**
- 2. Showcase sustainability**
- 3. Consider the flexitarian consumer**

"Wagamama broadened people's tastes on a national scale.

**DAVID FOX**

*Director of restaurant chain Tampopo<sup>2</sup>*



# LEAD WITH FLAVOUR

If you're looking to launch a plant-based range, remember that plant-based menu items shouldn't be an afterthought or a blend of random vegetables. Rather, they should be positioned as **equally indulgent and flavourful** as other dishes. Wagamama's CEO, Thomas Heier, concurs, "We feel passionately that plant-based food can be just as nourishing and delicious [as animal-based food]."<sup>3</sup>

Wagamama's guiding principle is that of '*kaizen*', a Japanese philosophy that means 'good change' and continuous improvement. The Wagamama website highlights how this idea pushes the chain to provide its patrons with tasty recipes and satisfying soul food.<sup>4</sup>

For Wagamama, the proof is in the plant-based pudding. Compared to pre-pandemic figures from 2019, **like-for-like sales between May 2021 and January 2022 increased by 15%.**<sup>5</sup>

# SHOWCASE SUSTAINABILITY

In 2020, Wagamama became the first major restaurant chain to offer vegan tuna, serving customers a product created with watermelon. In 2021, the restaurant announced it was making **50% of its menu plant-based**, and launched its newly balanced menu later the same year.<sup>6</sup> According to their website, this is part of their sustainability strategy to **lower emissions and reduce their environmental impact**.

“



We hope our new menu will influence a positive spike in plant-based menu participation from our guests.”

**THOMAS HEIER**  
*CEO of Wagamama*<sup>7</sup>

# Wagamama's 'Plant Pledge'

Wagamama also launched its 'Plant Pledge' in 2021, a campaign to encourage guests to eat more plant-based dishes to help tackle the climate emergency. The campaign urged their patrons to pledge a **'small choice for big change'**, whether it was trialling plant-based for the first time or making one meal a week plant-based. As part of the Plant Pledge, Wagamama encouraged people to get started on their journey by offering a **free vegan side order** when they signed up.



## For Veganuary 2022, Wagamama released their take on plant-based fish and chips



The dish was served on newspaper cuttings adorned with climate crisis-related headlines. The Japanese take on a British classic sought to attract both those flexitarians interested in trying the fusion dish, as well as vegetarians and vegans.



Such promotions are a savvy way for Wagamama to increase brand awareness and sales while also having a positive impact on the environment.

# CONSIDER THE FLEXITARIAN CONSUMER

The plant-based market is huge and growing worldwide, with demand rising across the US and Europe. This demand is being driven largely by flexitarians and reducetarians, who are increasingly looking for plant-based alternatives.

30%

Flexitarians represent the market segment that is experiencing the fastest growth, now constituting almost 30% of Europeans.

And 57% say they want to gradually eliminate meat from their diets entirely.<sup>8</sup>

57%

**This presents a huge opportunity for food-service businesses to attract new consumers.**

Wagamama “[feels] a real responsibility and exciting opportunity to make plant-based food as accessible as possible to all guests no matter their dietary preferences.”<sup>9</sup>



Source: Wagamama

## Flexitarians and dietary symbols

Dietary symbols are important for consumers who want a guarantee that a product is vegan or vegetarian. However, these consumers typically make up **less than 10%** of the total market, compared to the larger number of flexitarians who constitute the majority.<sup>10</sup>

For the latter group, dietary symbols can be off-putting. A 2019 meta analysis by the World Resources Institute found that for most consumers "**Vegan**" means "different from me", and "**Vegetarian**" means "healthy but unsatisfying food".<sup>11</sup>

In recent years, food service companies have begun experimenting with alternatives. For instance, replacing 'V' or 'Ve' with 'PB', a leaf symbol, or a similar icon – the logic being that vegans will always figure out what those symbols mean, whereas mainstream consumers will gloss over them and focus on the item description without being put off by the category.



Source: Wagamama

On Wagamama's new menus, a **small star symbol** signifies that a dish is vegan. The menu also uses other symbols to represent different information, such as which dishes are strong sources of protein or fibre.

By taking a quick look at the menu legend, patrons can quickly discern which meals to choose, while those without any dietary specifications can focus on the name of the dish and its ingredients without being put off.



It's about having balance on our menu and working out what great ingredients we can use to move the food movement forward [...] We're not going to be an all-vegan restaurant because we want to try and cater for as many palettes and tastes as we can going forward."

**STEVE MANGLESHOT**

*Global Executive Chef at Wagamama*<sup>12</sup>



Source: Wagamama

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

## → Focus on creating delicious and varied dishes using plant-based ingredients.

Consumers want to eat food that looks and tastes good, regardless of whether it's plant-based or not. To get people to try plant-based and stick with it, it has to taste just as good as its animal-based counterpart.

## → Be bold in showcasing sustainability.

Wagamama proves that increasing your plant-based credentials doesn't harm your bottom line. Being bold in planning sustainability campaigns can provide a substantial pay-off in terms of your reputation and sales.

## → Appeal to the majority of consumers by carefully planning your menu.

Consider replacing conventional 'V' or 'Ve' labels with 'PB' (for plant-based) or unobtrusive symbols such as a leaf.

**If you're interested in learning more about all the ways that your food-service company can maximise a transition to plant-based, click [here](#) to read the full whitepaper, 'Harnessing the power of plant-based as a food-service professional'.**

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