

The British dairy-free milk boom: the switch to plant-based alternatives

A study by Mintel has found that one in three British people drink plant-based alternative milk, with customers spending over £100 million on dairy alternatives. How has such a high street staple of milk moved so far away from its dairy origins?

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This article takes a look at the reasons behind the dairy-free milk boom and why you might want to consider making the switch.



The dairy industry and environmental impacts

The dairy industry contributes a lot of waste to the environment when raising cows for their milk. The process releases a combination of methane, nitrous oxide, and carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Greenhouse gases are toxic to the environment and are stripping away the ozone layer. The amount of land needed for a dairy farm is staggering as well. Some farmers suggest that each cow needs at least an acre of land for every 24 hours of grazing and roaming. This means converting even more natural land for production space, which can damage the earth if fertiliser and manure go unchecked.

In 2014, American filmmakers Kip Anderson and Keegan Kuhn released *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* which outlines how the dairy industry impacts climate change. The film also encourages a shift to milk and dairy alternatives, like soy milk and nut butters.

The issue of animal cruelty

When talking about what the cows require when being farmed for milk, we must talk about how they are treated.

There is a lot that is obviously not advertised by the industry when advertising their products, but what the cows are subjected to is eye-opening.

Cows, like many mammals, only produce milk when they are pregnant. This means dairy cows have to be artificially inseminated every two to three months to produce milk to be farmed. These cows are often milked by machines in concrete enclosures and are not allowed the freedom to explore and experience farmland like other animals are.

They are also intelligent creatures that are notably maternal. But once they have given birth, their calves are taken away from them within 24-48 hours. This causes immense mental stress on both mother and offspring, with a study showing that calves respond better to stressful situations when raised with maternal contact.

For animal lovers, this is a huge reason to make the switch to milk alternatives. With the information available on how damaging it is to cows to produce milk, it is understandable to want to cut dairy as a whole out of your diet.



The perceived health benefits of plant-based milk

Mintel found that another reason a large number of people have switched to an alternative milk product is due to the perceived health benefits.

They found that one in four viewed plant-based milk as healthier than cow's milk, as well as better for the environment.

Comparing the different substitutes available for purchase, the vast majority are healthier for the human body than cow milk. In fact, most plant-based milks have fewer calories and less fat content, with more water content for hydration. They can also be fortified with the additional minerals and vitamins you get from traditional dairy milk.

It all comes down to your choice of milk alternative.

Some will be more similar to cow's milk, and others will have their own unique flavour. But by trying a wide variety, you should be able to find one that works for you.

There are plenty of reasons for the boom in British supermarket customers switching from dairy milk to plant-based alternatives. Two major drivers come from a matter of morals – concern for the environment and for animals. There is also a focus on improving health, which has inspired the move away from dairy, with people paying more attention to the calorie count of various kinds of milk. ■