FACTORY FARMING

Startups got us hooked on faux meat. Now the food giants are jumping in. Inside the mad dash to make the perfect plant-based burger.

BY COREY MINTZ

This past January, back when people were allowed to gather in groups and travel to other countries, I found myself in a Lucky's Market in Naples, Fla., nearing the end of a research trip for my book. Waiting in the checkout line, I struck up a conversation with the woman behind me. She had a small child and was willing to indulge my anxious questions about how afraid I, a new father, needed to be of sugar. What a time it was, half a year ago, when my biggest concern was sugar.

The woman had a package of plant-based meat in her basket. I asked if she was trying it out. No, she said, it was just another item on her weekly list. Not long ago, that answer would have surprised me. In early 2019, when I asked supermarket employees in Toronto and Winnipeg where to find plant-based meats, they said that they had maybe heard about something like that. But today, the shops near our home have three different faux burgers on the shelf: Beyond Meat, Lightlife and The Meatless Farm Co.

In just a few years, these products have entered the mainstream. In 2019, sales of plant-based meats, a category that didn't exist a decade ago, grew to US$800 million in North America, up 37 per cent from 2017. According to research firm Euromonitor International, that could reach US$2.5 billion by 2023. Every day, I get a pitch for another plant-based beef, pork, yogurt or ice cream, yet I rarely hear as much about traditional non-animal proteins and fats, like tofu or margarine.

Until recently, the faux meat conversation was dominated by two California-based startups, Impossible Foods and Beyond Meat. But you can sell only so many science burgers before the big meat companies decide that you're muscling in on their turf. Last year, for example, Perdue Farms launched Chicken Plus, a series of nuggets that blend chicken with cauliflower,

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW BILLINGTON