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# Building a greener dining scene: How do veg-friendly restaurateurs 'crop up'?

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## ABSTRACT

### *Purpose*

Of all industries, agri-food has one of the largest environmental impacts. Reducing the production and consumption of meat, dairy and seafood, and moving to predominantly plant-based diets, is key to lowering our environmental footprint. Veg-friendly restaurants play a key role in this transition as they have the capacity to build a greener dining scene (e.g. positively change consumer opinions towards vegan food). Hence, the purpose of this work is to understand the entrepreneurial journey of veg-friendly restaurateurs.

### *Design/methodology/approach*

We employed an inductive-qualitative approach to analyse 12 veg-friendly restaurants in three countries (Spain, Australia, and Colombia). In addition to inspecting available data on the restaurants and their menus, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the restaurateurs to uncover: 1) the impact of their venture for customers and society, 2) the drivers to establishing their businesses, and 3) the challenges faced and strategies used in the management of veg-friendly restaurants.

### *Findings*

Our work recognizes veg-friendly restaurateurs as key actors in building a sustainable future through a greener dining scene. We uncover the main drivers of the entrepreneurial journey and propose a multi-dimensional approach to identity and passion as key antecedents of entrepreneurial intention. We also discuss how social and sustainable entrepreneurship may be the expression of an activist

behaviour. Finally, challenges and strategies to manage veg-friendly restaurants are discussed with directions that contribute to both theory and practice.

### *Originality*

A switch towards vegan and vegetarian diets has important implications for ecology, society, and the economy. While most research has focused on the consumer side, this paper is unique in understanding how veg-friendly restaurants emerge. This is quite distinctive in the literature regarding sustainable restaurants, which until now, has focused on the managers' adoption of sustainable practices rather than the restaurateurs' entrepreneurial journey. Our work additionally builds new insights in the entrepreneurship literature, through uncovering the motivations, experiences, and challenges of entrepreneurs that, in most cases, show activist attributes.

## KEYWORDS

Agri-food systems, Restaurant business, Restaurateurs, Entrepreneurial intention, Sustainable future, Plant-based foods, Qualitative case study

## INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the United Nations defined the 2030 agenda for sustainable development through 17 grand challenges; serving as an urgent call for action to improve health and education, reduce inequality, and stimulate economic growth, while addressing climate change (United Nations SDGs, 2015). Looking at these challenges, agri-food is one of the most resource-intensive industries that has a profound impact on the environment due to its production, packaging, transportation and consumption activities (Bryngelsson *et al.*, 2016; Erb *et al.*, 2016). Contemporary research specifically highlights the high environmental footprint in the production of meat, dairy and seafood and recommends a global transition to a predominantly plant-based diet (Erb *et al.*, 2016; Castañé and Antón, 2017; Lu *et al.*, 2019; Twine, 2021).

While the adoption of vegan, vegetarian and flexitarian diets has increased in the last decade, the consumption of plant-based food by the general population is still limited (Curtain and Grafenauer, 2019; Dedehayir *et al.*, 2019). Veg-friendly restaurants that (either partly or wholly) serve vegan and vegetarian meals play a key role in changing consumption patterns. For example, Niederle and Schubert (2020) found that vegan restaurants significantly contribute to consumers reducing their meat intake, in some cases motivating up to 75% of consumers to stop their beef consumption. Additionally, restaurateurs can lead the development of new products to meet customer tastes (e.g.

veggie burgers, nut-based cheeses) and have the capacity to modify consumer opinion of emerging food trends (Jacobs and Klosse, 2016; Higgins-Desbiolles and Wijesinghe, 2019).

In this paper, we draw attention to the veg-friendly restaurateur, a particular kind of entrepreneur that owns and operates restaurants that consciously offer vegan food products on their menus (including menus that are fully vegan, vegetarian plus a few vegan items, or having only a portion of vegan options). The specific literature focusing on veg-friendly restaurants and restaurateurs is scarce, with those available mostly focusing on the impact they have on consumer perceptions and behavioural change (e.g. Niederle and Schubert, 2020; Lim *et al.*, 2021). There is subsequently a noticeable gap in our knowledge of why and how veg-friendly restaurateurs do what they do. And yet, improving understanding of how veg-friendly restaurants emerge through the entrepreneurial efforts of restaurateurs is crucial to building and supporting entrepreneurial ecosystems that can facilitate the transition towards a more sustainable agri-food system. In addressing this knowledge gap, we refer to the entrepreneurship literature, which provides a good theoretical starting point to explore the factors that influence entrepreneurial behaviour and performance (Simpeh, 2011; Liñán and Fayolle, 2015; Jafari-Sadeghi and Biancone, 2018; Fauchart and Gruber, 2020).

In turn, we employ a qualitative methodology to study the entrepreneurial journeys of 12 veg-friendly restaurateurs located in Spain, Australia, and Colombia. Through semi-structured interviews with the restaurateurs and complementary secondary sources, we aim to answer three research questions: 1) What is the impact of the veg-friendly restaurant for customers and society?; 2) What are the drivers of establishing a veg-friendly restaurant?; and 3) What are the challenges faced by veg-friendly restaurateurs and how are these overcome?

The structure of this manuscript is as follows. First, we outline the theoretical background for our work, including a synthesis of research on restaurants and sustainability, as well as entrepreneurial behaviour and performance. Second, we introduce the methodology employed in our study, including the data collection strategy and analysis. This is then followed by a detailed discussion of our findings and how they link to our initial research questions. We conclude with the key implications of our work for both theory and practice, acknowledge its limitations, and define opportunities for future research.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Rethinking the agri-food system, and changing overall consumer habits in relation to food is crucial for achieving macro-level social, economic and environmental goals (Arrieta and González, 2018; Alexander *et al.*, 2019; Lu *et al.*, 2019). Despite numerous recent innovations that have lessened their environmental impact (Adams *et al.*, 2016; Secinaro *et al.*, 2021), the meat, dairy and seafood

industries still represent a major environmental threat (Erb *et al.*, 2016; Notarnicola *et al.*, 2017; Van Mierlo, Rohmer and Gerdessen, 2017). Approximately 70% of agricultural land is currently associated with livestock production, contributing significantly to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, land degradation, soil erosion, deforestation, biodiversity loss, the contamination of surface and groundwater due to poor waste management and soil salinization (Van Mierlo, Rohmer and Gerdessen, 2017; Lu *et al.*, 2019; Twine, 2021). Indeed, studies suggest that 18% of global GHG emissions can be attributed to animal agriculture, which is a larger percentage than that of the transport sector in its entirety (Arrieta and González, 2018; Twine, 2021).

Greater awareness of these issues has led to heightened interest in environmentally-friendly food consumption and dietary preferences (Notarnicola *et al.*, 2017; Van Mierlo, Rohmer and Gerdessen, 2017), with consumers – including omnivores – becoming increasingly aware of the negative environmental and health consequences related to the consumption of animal products (Castañé and Antón, 2017; Martinelli and Canio, 2021). In tandem with (and driven by) demand-side dynamics (Bryant, 2019; Plohl and Stern, 2020), there is growing interest in building supply-side capacity – from food science and manufacturing, through to restaurants and supermarkets – to fulfill the growing demand for vegan products (Bryngelsson *et al.*, 2016; Curtain and Grafenauer, 2019). Restaurants, in particular, can play a key role in shifting from the traditional production and consumption system to a more sustainable, green dining scene that holds great potential for tackling the aforementioned environmental concerns (Castañé and Antón, 2017; Arrieta and González, 2018). They are central in meeting some of the main challenges for the increased adoption of plant-based diets in society: namely, the availability and accessibility of natural, nutritious, and enjoyable products (Piazza *et al.*, 2015) as well as increasing awareness among consumers (Niederle and Schubert, 2020). Hence, restaurants and restaurateurs are indispensable in growing a greener dining scene that, in turn, positively impacts the sustainability of the agri-food system as a whole (Jacobs and Klosse, 2016; Higgins-Desbiolles and Wijesinghe, 2019).

## RESTAURATEURS AND SUSTAINABILITY

In response to Jacobs and Klosse's (2016) suggestions, a number of researchers have explored what factors promote or obstruct restaurateurs in developing sustainable menus and practices. While some work links passion for sustainability and organic produce to a restaurateur's likelihood to adopt sustainable cuisine (Enthoven and Brouwer, 2019), restaurant managers are primarily influenced by supplier pressures or customer demand (Raab, Baloglu and Chen, 2018). Indeed, it has been found that sustainable practices (e.g. organic products) positively contribute to the competitiveness of restaurants and greater customer satisfaction (e.g. Cantele and Cassia, 2020).

Recently, Niederle and Schubert (2020) found that vegan restaurants play a significant role in shaping more sustainable models of food production, distribution, and consumption. Research on vegan (and vegetarian) restaurants is scarce and mainly looks at their potential to influence customer preferences (Bacon and Krpan, 2018; Niederle and Schubert, 2020; Choi *et al.*, 2021). It is suggested that restaurants hold strong potential to guide consumers towards more sustainable eating habits (Higgins-Desbiolles and Wijesinghe, 2019; Kim, Hall, and Kim, 2020). Despite the impact of veg-friendly restaurants on consumer behaviour and sustainability (Plohl and Stern, 2020; Martinelli and Canio, 2021), little is known about the entrepreneurial journeys of restaurateurs that found them. Moreover, considering that vegan and vegetarian consumers only represent a small portion of the global market, this is an important focal point to better understand how these restaurants emerge.

## ENTREPRENEURIAL BEHAVIOUR AND PERFORMANCE

Restaurateurs who start a veg-friendly restaurant may also exhibit some common entrepreneurial attributes. These can range from simple socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. age and gender), to others such as the perception of opportunities, or an entrepreneurial mindset (Robinson *et al.*, 1991; Ramos-Rodríguez, Medina-Garrido and Ruiz-Navarro, 2012). In founding veg-friendly restaurants, we would anticipate these individuals to follow a broad entrepreneurial process, which is commonly defined by two stages: the 'identification of an opportunity' (such as unfulfilled demand in the marketplace), and the 'exploitation of this opportunity' through the development and commercialisation of a product or service (Eckhardt and Shane, 2003; Jafari-Sadeghi, 2020). The identification of business opportunities may be sparked by internal motivators (e.g. entrepreneur's closeness to a social issue) or external factors (e.g. market trends, policy issues) (Corner and Ho, 2010; Patzelt and Shepherd, 2011; Germak and Robinson, 2014). During the exploitation of business opportunities, entrepreneurial teams need skills and knowledge (including explicit, implicit and tacit), connections to potential stakeholders and other resource owners (i.e. social capital), and access to economic funds (i.e. financial capital) to start their businesses (Davidsson and Honig, 2003; Simpeh, 2011; Gimenez-Fernandez, Sandulli and Bogers, 2020).

Our understanding of entrepreneurial behaviour by and large rests on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which has helped define entrepreneurship as "the conscious and intended act of founding a firm". Within this conceptualisation, entrepreneurial intention is seen to be affected by many factors such as the needs, values, wants, habits, beliefs, social norms, prior knowledge, and skills of the individual. In purpose-based firms, key predictors of entrepreneurial intention may also include passion, personal fulfillment and closeness to a social issue (Germak and Robinson, 2014; Chandra, Tjiptono and Setyawan, 2021). Meanwhile entrepreneurial behaviour is understood as

resulting from the confluence of entrepreneurial identity (Fauchart and Gruber, 2020; Murnieks, Cardon and Haynie, 2020), in tandem with the individuals' personal attitude, social norms and perceived behavioural control (Liñán and Fayolle, 2015).

## METHODOLOGY

To address our research questions, we employed a multiple case study design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Della Corte, Del Gaudio and Sepe, 2018), which allowed us to implement a replication logic (Yin, 1994). The cases included in this study are restaurants and cafés, drawn from a population of businesses that serve vegan food items. To accommodate any contextual factors that may influence our findings, we conducted case studies in three different cultural settings – Brisbane (Australia), Barcelona (Spain), and Bogotá (Colombia) – and selected 12 restaurants/cafés in total (four in each of the cities) through a purposive sampling strategy (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). We chose not to concentrate on a single geographical location to obtain data that could cover a range of perceptions from distinctive locations around the globe, and from diverse contexts with respect to national-economic development. With this approach we are also able to capture levels of adoption of plant-based foods, and national-level institutionalisation of values related to animal ethics. This range of perceptions may provide a wider array of insights from the case studies. Adhering to Massaro, Dumay and Bagnoli's (2019) call for transparency, we have chosen these cities based on their comparable dynamism of the vegetarian and vegan scene (e.g. availability of dedicated restaurants and cafés such as listed on [www.happycow.net](http://www.happycow.net)), as well as city size (larger than 1 million inhabitants) which the research team deemed big enough to allow for the establishment of sub-cultures that can enable the aforementioned dynamism.

The selection process for restaurants and cafés meanwhile has been theory-driven, based on the weighting of vegan food items appearing on restaurant menus. For each city, we have included one restaurant/café with a fully vegan menu (i.e. absent of any meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products), one restaurant/café with only a few vegan items on an otherwise traditional menu (i.e. vegan options), and two restaurants/cafés with a vegetarian menu (hence, a menu absent of meat and fish but including dairy and egg products), which also contains vegan items. By including cases that range in the degree of vegan items on their menus, our ambition was to seek patterns in the perceptions of entrepreneurs (i.e. restaurateurs) that may arise from the type of establishment they oversee. We provide a description of the cases – restaurant and cafés – including the type of menu and location of the restaurant/café, as well as background information of the entrepreneur including

the restaurateur's age, gender, previous business ownership experience (e.g. another restaurant or café, or any other business), and personal diet followed in Table 1.



Table 1: Sample description

Case	Menu	Example Vegan Menu Item	Location	<i>Restaurateur Background</i>			
				Age/ Gender	Previous Business Ownership	Personal Diet	
R1	Fully vegan	Hokkien Noodles	Brisbane	52 F	Yes	Vegan	
R2	Vegetarian	Deep fried Suji	Brisbane	46 M	Yes	Vegetarian	
R3	Vegetarian	Mushroom Stroganoff	Brisbane	42 F	Yes	Vegetarian	
R4	Vegan options	Brownie	Brisbane	57 F	Yes	Omnivore	
R5	Fully vegan	“Rawquefort”	Barcelona	31 F	No	Vegan	
R6	Vegetarian	Palak Paneer	Barcelona	31 M	Yes	Vegetarian	
R7	Vegetarian	Jackfruit Taco	Barcelona	33 M	No	Vegetarian	
R8	Vegan options	Croissant	Barcelona	62 M	Yes	Omnivore	
R9	Fully vegan	Empanada	Bogota	67 F	No	Vegetarian	
R10	Vegetarian	Mexican Arepa	Bogota	37 F	No	Vegetarian	
R11	Vegetarian	Soy-Balls with Rice	Bogota	38 F	No	Vegetarian	
R12	Vegan options	Lasagne	Bogota	40 F	Yes	Vegetarian	

For each case, we conducted semi-structured interviews with restaurant and café business owners (see Appendix for Interview Instrument) to acquire insights on their processes to start a business that offered vegan food. Our interviews were split into three segments, devised to acquire background information on the respondents as well as to address our three lines of inquiry: 1) the impact of their venture for customers and society, 2) the drivers to establishing their businesses, and 3) the challenges and strategies to manage veg-friendly restaurants. First, to investigate the impact of veg-friendly restaurants for customers and society, we started by exploring what the term ‘vegan’ means to business owners. This was key given the lack of a single, shared understanding of the term, and ongoing shifts in its cultural associations (Harrington, Collis and Dedehayir, 2018; Chinea, Suárez and Hernández, 2020). In this vein, we also asked the entrepreneurs about the benefits of the vegan meals

served at their premises and what they consider regarding the products they offer and the way they run their restaurants (e.g. type of suppliers). Second, to uncover how the respondents became veg-friendly restaurateurs, we investigated their background, how they became acquainted with vegan food, and their main motivational factors to start a veg-friendly restaurant. Third, to get insights on the restaurateurs' strategic directions, we asked them about the main challenges in starting the restaurant, and how they overcame each of those obstacles.

The interviews (approximately 60 minutes in their duration) were recorded, transcribed, and analysed independently by the researchers. Interviews in Bogotá were conducted in Spanish, and those in Barcelona were conducted in either Spanish or Catalan depending on the preference of the respondent. These interviews were translated into English by a bilingual member of the research team, allowing for better comparison and reach consensus on insights connected with the entrepreneurial processes (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989). Methodologically similar to Biancone *et al.* (2021), our inductive-qualitative approach is expected to lead to theoretical generalizations from issues and phenomena drawn from the interviews, all of which are focused on interpreting the actors' sense of action, rather than on the causes of the social phenomena. We supplemented our interview-generated data with observations of the restaurateur's behaviour and interactions with customers and other members of staff at the restaurant and café premises, along with examination of restaurant and café menus and webpages (including social media pages such as Facebook and Instagram). Through these observations we were able to ascertain, for instance, the level of emphasis the restaurateur placed on vegan options on the menu, and the promotional sentiment towards these items. Collectively, these data allowed us to develop a holistic understanding of each case (restaurant/café).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our work aims to understand how to build a 'green dining' scene locally, with a global impact on the agri-food industry. Through the analyses of our qualitative data acquired from 12 veg-friendly restaurants and the restaurateurs that operate them, we were able to identify three key aspects in the entrepreneurial process of these ventures: 1) the meaning of sustainability for veg-friendly restaurants, 2) the drivers to becoming entrepreneurs and restaurant owners, and 3) the challenges and strategies to overcome the obstacles of managing a veg-friendly restaurant. The following three sections have been organized to address each of these findings.

## SUSTAINABILITY FOR VEG-FRIENDLY RESTAURANTS

Building a knowledge bridge between sustainability and veg-friendly restaurants is key to uncovering the impact of these businesses in sustainable development. Whether veganism is considered a dietary choice or a lifestyle, our respondents perceived benefits of vegan meals including their positive impact on the environmental footprint, personal health, and animal welfare (e.g. Harrington, Collis and Dedehayir, 2018). In line with Niederle and Schubert (2020), veg-friendly restaurateurs perceive that, through their menu offerings, they are able to impact customer perceptions of vegan meals (e.g. regarding taste, satiation). Additionally, whenever possible, our respondents integrate sustainable practices into their supply chain decisions (e.g. carefully choosing their suppliers).

### *What the term “vegan” means to business owners*

There was a split (albeit an unequal one) in how the restaurateurs conceptualise "veganism". Some framed it almost entirely as a dietary choice:

A vegan is a person that only eats plant-based products, and never animal products. (R8)

A vegan is a vegetarian that doesn't eat milk, eggs, cheese or anything derived from an animal. So, the vegetarian does eat all of that - butter, milk. (R9)

Whereas other restaurateurs instead considered veganism as being part of a broader lifestyle that also includes the avoidance of any product or service that exploits animals at any point in the production chain:

It means not using animals for food, entertainment, cosmetics - just leaving them alone. (R1)

Veganism is a consumption style and a lifestyle that includes, apart from diet, not consuming products that imply animal cruelty, which is not always that easy, because sometimes you do not even know if there is cruelty behind some products. (R5)

### *Perceptions of the benefits of vegan meals*

Respondents acknowledged a range of reasons that motivate customers to select vegan meals (and lifestyle), including personal health, the environment, animal rights, personal identity, and social trends, among others:

There is a whole spectrum of veganism; there are vegans who do it for health reasons, others for environmental reasons, and some who want to be different and don't want to be mainstream or commercial. (R4)

Overall, the restaurateurs perceived their meals as having a positive impact, firstly, on the environment:

...in terms of the society, veganism implies less resources, less water, less transport, and in the global scheme it will always be better for everyone because at the end of the day we all leave on Earth and we will all see the benefits of this type of diet. (R5);

secondly on customers' personal health:

For customers it is healthy. (R10)

There is a balance in the food. People feel good and their digestive system is good, and therefore their brain functions correctly. (R12)

Regarding the benefits, they are better for health, your body in general feels better, vegans feel better with their digestion when they decide to stop dairy and meat. (R5);

thirdly on animal welfare:

And when they eat vegan, they are saving animals. (R6)

If everyone stopped eating violence, then society would be less violent. A lot of the violence comes from people eating cruelty and not being conscious about what they eat. (R1);

And, finally, on changing consumer attitudes towards the taste of vegan products:

And for society it's a different message, you can actually make tasty vegetarian and vegan food. (R10)

### *Considerations in the provenance of their products*

We found that most restaurateurs were concerned about the provenance of their products. Whenever possible, they opted to collaborate and work with small producers, local suppliers, and were mindful of Fair Trade. They also recognized that, through these choices, they were making a greater positive impact.

...the coffee, we get it here around the corner, from some guys that roast it and they buy it from Fair Trade. And they also give us some artisan beers. They follow the movement of "slow food" which is like conscious production. And to us, it is a way to support small producers, by choosing good suppliers and a better-quality product, you also generate a social impact. (R5)

...we don't buy the 'Coca Cola' that has been made somewhere else with a high environmental impact, so I sell a juice that I have made myself, and the money goes to the farmer and not to the Coca-Cola man. (R7)

Some respondents, however, did underscore that this decision to engage in more ethical business practice brought with it added complexity. For instance, one restaurateur asserted that accessibility and economic feasibility are key barriers to acquiring eco-certified ingredients:

I have not managed that everything is ecological because it is expensive and hard to find.  
(R6)

## DRIVERS TO BE(COM)ING VEG-FRIENDLY RESTAURATEURS

Understanding the entrepreneurial drivers of veg-friendly restaurateurs is key to providing supporting mechanisms that will facilitate the emergence of a greener dining scene. The background of the respondents is diverse, accounting for restaurateurs that grew up as vegetarians (and others that did not) as well as some with prior exposure to entrepreneurship and hospitality. Our findings suggest that a primary internal motivator to becoming a veg-friendly restaurateur is the (vegan-vegetarian) identity, in contrast to a purely entrepreneurial identity (Fauchart and Gruber, 2020; Murnieks, Cardon and Haynie, 2020). Beyond passion (Chandra, Tjiptono and Setyawan, 2021), activism was also found to be present in the motives to start the new venture, raising the provocative question of whether entrepreneurship can be the expression of an activist behaviour in certain contexts such as that of veg-friendly restaurants. Additionally, envisioning a growing market opportunity may also act as an external motivator to becoming veg-friendly restaurateurs, commensurate with the broad entrepreneurial process.

### *Background of respondents*

Slightly over half of the entrepreneurs had previous experience in owning a business, and most of them had little, if any, experience in running a restaurant. The professional and educational backgrounds of most of the founders differed with respect to their current occupation as a veg-friendly restaurateur – including fashion design, psychology, and nursing.

Two of our respondents self-identified as vegan, and eight of them self-identified as vegetarian. They became vegan or vegetarian by growing up in a vegetarian family (e.g. R2, R3, R6) or through joining specific social networks or activities (e.g. R1, R5) such as meditation classes:

I started a meditation [class] that said I had to have no animal products in my body. (R1)

Another way our respondents became acquainted with veganism was through hospitality (e.g. they had worked in a veg-friendly restaurant in the past):

I worked in the first fully vegan restaurant in Barcelona. So, I became aware of veganism in my first job [there]. (R7)

### *Internal Motivations*

Some restaurateurs appeared to be internally motivated by the need to support the growth and societal knowledge around a vegan lifestyle, which may suggest an activist behaviour from these entrepreneurs:

The only reason the [Name of Restaurant] are up and around the world is (...) to get the food out there and get people eating, because that's the best way to convert people, if they enjoy a meal. (R1)

In this vein, a great number of respondents highlight that being vegan or vegetarian played a key role in their decision to start the restaurant, irrespective of the cultural context:

Being a vegetarian was an important factor for opening this business. (R2)

Because it was the union between my person and my work, and I have worked in hospitality, and I started going to vegan places. (R7)

We (with partner) wanted to venture together into food, go in parallel with our beliefs. (R5)

Consistent with this, we observe a correlation between the self-identity of respondents in Barcelona and Brisbane (which they defined through their personal diet) and the type of restaurant that they run (so, vegan entrepreneurs started fully vegan restaurants, vegetarian entrepreneurs started vegetarian restaurants, and so on). In contrast, this was not consistent in our Colombian sample, where all respondents were vegetarian. We believe that this finding may reflect the relationship between the drivers of veg-friendly entrepreneurs (e.g. the level of avoidance of animal products and the focus on market opportunities) and a nation's level of economic development, as Spain (.904) and Australia (.944) both have a notably higher value than Colombia (.767) on the UN's 2020 Human Development Index (United Nations Development Program, 2020).

### *External Motivations*

We found that external factors, such as identifying a market gap, or a growing market trend, influence the entrepreneurial process of veg-friendly restaurants. Most respondents from Barcelona and Brisbane linked veganism and vegetarianism to a growing trend:

Recently, we see a lot of growth in veganism. With our first child we had a lot of challenges when we asked for vegetarian meals at school and they asked for a medical certificate,

but with our second child, even in kindergarten we could already choose from a variety of options. (R6)

Both here and in my previous job, [veganism] has a growing demand, and both here and in that previous job there were more people that were asking for more vegan products. (R8)

Vegetarianism will be part of the future of society. (R4)

In tandem with an increasing demand for plant-based meals, these respondents found that the availability and variety of vegan meals in local cafes and restaurants was limited. This market gap reinforced their decision to proceed with their pursuit of a veg-friendly restaurant:

A plant-based restaurant would be appropriate given that there were none or very limited options in the city at that time. (R3)

### MANAGING VEG-FRIENDLY RESTAURANTS (CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES)

To help build resilient veg-friendly restaurants, it is important to understand the challenges entrepreneurs face when establishing these ventures and learn the strategies that can be employed to overcome them. According to our sample, in addition to common entrepreneurial challenges, veg-friendly restaurateurs face unique challenges when establishing their veg-friendly restaurant ventures, such as creating vegan menus that are attractive to both vegan and non-vegan consumers, gaining support from their families, friends, and attracting customers into their premises:

First there is the challenge of starting - it is still a small place, but having no idea how to administer and manage a place, also the cooking times. In addition to the internal management issues, there is the neighborhood, like the people in the neighborhood. The vegan issue was difficult for them - we received a lot of criticism from people on the street. For example, they would tell us "Why are they going to open a hippie vegan place there? It's going to go bad for them." Because it is also an area with a very particular type of people - but later there were more people who came in. It is a very contrasted issue, on the one hand, you have critics who already think that you are criticizing them and they feel that you are telling them that they eat badly and there are others who do not, who came and loved it. (R5)

We have classified these challenges into the resources needed to establish a veg-friendly restaurant (such as knowledge on how to "create" vegan meals or supportive networks) and customer resistance to visit vegan and vegetarian restaurants.

### *Skills and knowledge*

A key challenge for some respondents was a knowledge gap in their business skills (e.g. financial literacy), especially for those with limited prior entrepreneurial expertise. We argue, however, that this is not unique to the veg-friendly restaurant domain, and is a common concern for entrepreneurs as found throughout the entrepreneurship literature (Miralles, Giones and Riverola, 2016).

However, a challenge unique to this sector is developing original vegan menu items and making more familiar foods without traditional ingredients (dairy, meat, etc.) that will still appeal to omnivores.

It is hard to innovate vegan products when you cannot use some critical ingredients, for example you cannot use egg or butter when baking. (R4)

To address this obstacle, some restaurateurs took cooking classes with a well-recognised chef (R5), others relied on family members to help find recipes and cookbooks (R3), some implemented the “trial-and-error” approach with different ingredients (e.g. vegan butter) and different cooking times until the desired product (e.g. vegan croissant) was achieved (R8), and others sourced replacement ingredients from overseas (e.g. USA) where more advanced vegan products are available (R3).

### *(Un-)supportive networks*

Another key challenge of veg-friendly restaurateurs was the lack of support received from their closer ties, finding that they were mostly *opposed* to the initial concept:

Internally [*refers to entrepreneurial team*], people didn't support the idea because there was not a big enough market, but I fought for the idea and won. (R4)

Some people in my network thought it was a bad idea and that the concept would never work. But I went ahead with the plan anyway, thinking it wouldn't matter if the business failed, as I am still young. (R3)

Indeed, for the most part, the respondents argued that they were mostly driven by their own determination:

I went ahead because when it is your own business you can have the creativity and innovation. (R4)

Interestingly, it appears that once the idea starts to progress, a different type of support network begins to develop (including restaurateurs with similar ventures) and take over for those entrepreneurs:

In the same street there are two other vegetarian restaurants. Its good because it makes us become better at what we do. (R11)



There are people doing the same as us but in other areas, and the ones that are in our neighbourhood, in fact if there were more vegan restaurants it would be good and to have like a vegan neighbourhood. I think when people join the movement this can be a change in the paradigm, and it is not competitors. We can unite to make better products, make better things, or I want to believe it is like this. (R5)

### *Customer resistance*

Finally, a key challenge for veg-friendly restaurants is the need to attract non-vegan customers to their restaurants and ensure they become ongoing customers. In other words, for the restaurants in our study, vegan customers appear to form a small percentage of total clientele, which means that these establishments rely considerably on non-vegan customers:

80% of the restaurant's customers are non-vegan, and only 20% are vegan. (R3)

Attracting non-vegan customers is a notable challenge for both vegan and vegetarian restaurants as they face the broader cultural perceptions of their offerings. Vegan and vegetarian meals have typically had negative connotations (Cole, 2008) – in particular, a lack of flavour, perhaps stemming from the omnivorous perspective which defines them by what they *lack* (i.e. meat, animal products) – and the often-negative perceptions of vegans more generally, who are seen and portrayed in Western cultures as excessively ‘preachy’ or boring (see Harrington, Collis and Dedehayir, 2018):

The main challenge is to draw people inside the restaurant and try the food. (R10)

[It is difficult to] to reach people that have never tasted vegetarian food. People become afraid when you say *vegetarian restaurant*. (R11)

I sometimes get a bit worried about the future of the business. I try to be very optimistic, but some days are harder. For example, one of my friends started a vegetarian restaurant and she had to end up adding meat options. (R10)

Restaurant owners suggested that, to attract new customers, restaurateurs should pay attention to the ‘brand’ by making the restaurant itself attractive and welcoming, and complementing it with a virtual presence through a website or social media (R10). Some restaurateurs also suggested proactive strategies to reach new customers through vouchers and discounted prices for customers to try new products (R1, R10) by collaborating with NGOs and organizing events in their premises (R1) or by offering delivery plans (R10):

[We] go to the customer instead of waiting for the customer to come to the restaurant through distributing flyers or arranging delivery plans. (R10)

Despite all these strategies, most restaurateurs still agreed that their best chance of attracting new customers was through word of mouth from satisfied customers:

On the opening day there were only 4 people, but these people brought more people with them the next day to support the business. (R3)

Hence, to ensure satisfied customers and repetitive consumption, restaurateurs highlighted the importance of providing quality food that the customer will want to eat again:

Once a customer tries our food, [they] tend to come back, for the quality and taste, not whether it is vegan or not. (R8)

Restaurateurs also kept an informative approach to veganism through balanced diets rather than the ethical aspects, to ensure that customers do not feel they are being judged by a strong vegan ethical message (R4, R7, R10).

Additionally, some restaurateurs suggested some pro-active strategies through offering special plans for repeated consumption, such as:

Tickets, so that people can pre-pay their lunches or a frequent customer programme where they get a free juice after 10 purchases. (R10)

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The broader growth of a 'green dining' scene can have profound environmental impact. How veg-friendly restaurants come into existence in the first place, as well as how and why they succeed (or not), is therefore of great interest to scholars, practitioners, and policy makers alike. Hence, this paper studied veg-friendly restaurateurs by examining the drivers to becoming entrepreneurial in a veg-friendly context, and how they navigate the challenges associated with starting their businesses. Our findings are key to sustainable development in the agri-food sector and contribute greatly to both theory and practice to empower a more sustainable agri-food industry.

First, complementing prior literature on how a global transition to vegan diets will minimize the current environmental footprint (e.g. Erb *et al.*, 2016; Castañé and Antón, 2017; Bryant, 2019), we found that veg-friendly restaurateurs design their vegan meals to bring benefits to both customers (e.g. personal health) and the environment (e.g. sustainable products, animal welfare). Hence, given the range of benefits of vegan meals and the contribution that veg-friendly restaurants make to the environment, society, and economic development, we find that the implications of our work are not limited to the scope of veg-friendly restaurants. Instead, we suggest that our work has inbuilt synergies, both in theory and practice, that could easily be of interest for *sustainable entrepreneurship*

(or, 'ecopreneurship') in which a new business aims to solve problems related to the environment, and *social entrepreneurship*, in which an entrepreneur sets out to solve some social problem (Germak and Robinson, 2014).

Second, building on the literature on entrepreneurial behaviours, our work identifies three main drivers to becoming a veg-friendly restaurateur: (i) the individual's background (i.e. prior knowledge, skills); (ii) internal motivations (i.e. passion); and, (iii) external motivations (i.e. market growth). However, these drivers do not have the same weight in the entrepreneurial behaviour decision processes of veg-friendly restaurateurs. For example, some restaurateurs started their restaurant business, with all the challenges that it presents, despite their lack of experience. Importantly, we found that rather than these individuals being entrepreneurs first and foremost, they described their entrepreneurship activity as a way to further express their existing vegan (or vegetarian) identity. This contrasts with the existing research about entrepreneurial activity that places an 'entrepreneurial mindset' at the centre, and suggests that more attention is needed in a multi-dimensional approach to both the 'identity of founders' (Fauchart and Gruber, 2020; Murnieks, Cardon and Haynie, 2020) and 'entrepreneurial passion' (e.g. Chandra, Tjiptono and Setyawan, 2021). To take it even further, our findings suggest that, in some cases, these ventures could be seen as a kind of 'vegan activism' (e.g. educating consumers) which poses major implications for the literature on entrepreneurial behaviour: what comes first, entrepreneurship or activism, in forming entrepreneurial behaviour? These findings imply that the canalization of social and environmental activism towards entrepreneurial outcomes can greatly contribute towards social change (e.g. building a greener dining scene). Additionally, policy makers have the capacity to motivate and incentivize entrepreneurial activity, through leveraging resources for organizations (for profit or non-profit) that can inspire their communities.

Third, our research identified unique challenges which veg-friendly restaurateurs face when managing their ventures. On one hand, the restaurateurs in our study were somewhat reliant on a 'virtuous circle', *creating* vegan menus that are attractive to both vegan and non-vegan consumers (which also has its own culinary challenges) while facing the broader negative perceptions of their offerings (e.g. pre-conceptions about a lack of flavour or satiation of vegan and vegetarian meals). There is no best practice on overcoming this challenge, but by describing some of the strategies employed by the respondents, we provide some practical tools to future veg-friendly restaurateurs, and hospitality more broadly. On the other hand, we found that most veg-friendly restaurateurs did not find much support from their closer ties (e.g. family, friends), and that in most cases, these ties were opposed to the initial idea. This contradicts the existing entrepreneurship literature, that places social networks as a key pillar in the formation and performance of new ventures (e.g. Davidsson and Honig, 2003;

Hoang and Yi, 2015; Ruiz-Palomino and Martínez-Cañas, 2021). Beyond theory, this has key implications for policy makers, suggesting that there is a potential to define local entrepreneurial ecosystems that could support the development of a veg-friendly system where restaurateurs (and other entrepreneurs) can access knowledge, skills and supportive networks.

To conclude, we must recap on the limitations of this work, and propose some directions for future research. First, in assessing the sustainability of veg-friendly restaurants, the scope of this research is limited to the entrepreneurs' perceptions and their specific offerings; thus, we believe further research could measure the footprint of different menu offerings and restaurants to get a closer understanding of the impact of veg-friendly restaurants. Moreover, our respondents expressed that they take great consideration to how they operate and consider how they can make their supply chain more sustainable. In general, they were constrained by resources and affordability which suggests a future research avenue to investigate how to make sustainable practices more affordable for veg-friendly restaurants. Second, due to the qualitative nature of this study and the associated size of our sample, when exploring the drivers to become veg-friendly restaurateurs we were unable to test our assumptions and determine these emerging factors with great certainty. We propose that further research employs quantitative methods to explore a multi-dimensional approach to identity, passion or even activism in purpose-based ventures. Additionally, some external motivators were found regarding the perceived market growth which posits an interesting research question regarding how market demand shapes the perceptions of restaurateurs in different cultural settings. Furthermore, a key challenge for veg-friendly restaurateurs was managing unsupportive networks, which is contradictory to prior literature. Because we did not anticipate this outcome in our design of the interviews, we only have limited data on the way that veg-friendly restaurateurs leverage their different networks, and thus may be explored in future studies. Finally, in regard to the strategies employed to manage veg-friendly restaurants (e.g. attracting customers), our work relied on the experiences of our respondents and was not able to test the usefulness of the strategies, which should be explored (and quantified) in further research.

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## APPENDIX. INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

This work is part of a broader research that explores veganism as a vehicle for the growth of bioeconomy. Below are the key questions from our interview instrument that were used in this manuscript.

### Section 1: Questions about the individual

1. What does the term 'vegan' mean to you?
2. How do you describe your own dietary preference (i.e. vegan, vegetarian, omnivore, other)?
3. How did you first get to know about vegan food?

### Section 2: Questions about the product

1. When deciding on what products to sell, what are the things that you take into consideration?
2. What are the benefits of your vegan products for your customers, and society more broadly?

### Section 3: Questions about the drivers to becoming a veg-friendly restaurateur

1. Can you talk me through why you decided to open a restaurant offering vegan products?

or

Can you talk me through why you decided to include vegan products on the menu (for businesses that have only a few vegan items)?

### Section 4: Questions about the challenges of managing a veg-friendly restaurant

1. Did you experience any challenges when starting a vegan business?

or



Did you experience any challenges when including vegan products on the menu?

*(Deepening questions, used when topic mentioned in the previous question)*

2. Would you like to attract more people to purchase your vegan products? And if so, what are your strategies for this?
3. What do you think would encourage “non-vegans” to purchase your vegan products?
4. Do you have strategies to increase repeated purchase of your vegan products, especially by “non-vegans”?