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## **OP-ED by Annette Toft**

### **Beyond meat denominations – 3 reasons to support the attempt to clarify the marketing of plant-based imitation products**

Plant-based imitations of meat and dairy products are currently on the rise in Europe and, according to their promoters, aim to become mainstream. However, as farmer and food producers, we know that with becoming mainstream comes great responsibility. This is why a debate on the use of meat and dairy denominations for plant-based imitations, such as vegan sausage or soya milk, has escalated in recent years, pushing national as well as European authorities to set rules to regulate this market. For more than 30 years, there has been legal protection for dairy terms to ensure that consumers are not misled when it comes to dairy products' characteristics related to their natural composition. Just before the European election, MEPs decided to propose an amendment to protect meat denominations in the framework of the future CAP. This also follows a previous European Court of Justice judgement from 2017 that reconfirmed the protection of milk and dairy denominations<sup>1</sup>.

From a distance, I can understand that these controversies can seem like an outmoded, rearguard debate in which traditional producers hold the conservative seat. However, when you take a closer look at the merits of the debate, plant-based imitations raise fundamental questions about consumer information, our cultural heritage and the power of modern marketing, which blithely mixes business and values.

It will always be in farmers' and Cooperatives' DNA to meet market demand and satisfy consumer aspirations. We will produce the type of proteins that are requested, whether they are sourced from plants or animals. Protein-rich plants, provided that they are sourced in Europe, also present us with opportunities. We respect both consumers and the industry that is growing around meat imitations. However, as primary producers, we want fair and consistent marketing that respects consumers and the work carried out by generations of farmers. This is why there are at least three main reasons to support the protection of meat denominations:

1) **Avoid misinformation** – With urbanisation, consumers now have limited knowledge of farming production processes. At the same time, they are more interested to know the origin, the footprint or the welfare standard of the product that they consume. In this context, the marketing of imitations can give rise to misunderstandings or misperceptions. Substitution is a powerful marketing concept that can reassure consumers that they are simply replacing a product with another. However, substituting has many dimensions and cannot be considered to be neutral from a nutritional point of view. A plant-based drink or a plant-based sausage, even if it resembles the colour and texture of its original counterpart, does not guarantee the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2017-06/cp170063en.pdf>

same nutritional intake. According to a study conducted in France on consumers' perception of plant-based drinks, it was proven that six in ten people believe that plant-based drinks can replace milk in terms of nutrition. Similarly, one in two French people think that plant-based drinks provide the same nutrients as milk, and one in three believe that plant-based drinks and plant-based desserts contain cow's milk. What is even worse, one in five French people state that plant-based drinks are sufficient to meet the nutritional needs of babies<sup>2</sup>!

In the past, when vegan products represented a niche market and people had to go to specialised shops to find alternative products, this issue was not a cause for a concern. By becoming more mainstream, supply has boomed and traditional retailers have opened their shelves to plant-based imitations and are displaying original and imitation products closer to one another. According to a study conducted recently in the UK, one in five vegan and vegetarian consumers gave up being vegan or vegetarian because food labels were just too confusing<sup>3</sup>. In this context, using concepts and cultural elements from the meat/milk cuisine is no help. Investing in marketing that could create a truly alternative culture with plant-based flagship recipes is a more sustainable and ambitious avenue to explore.

2) **Avoid cultural hijacking** – Meat and milk denominations are deeply rooted in our cultural heritage. Butter, Cheese, Milk, Bacon, Ham, Carpaccio, Steak, Filet, Chops and Salami are all traditional denominations that have been shaped over time. No one today needs to explain what these products are or what to expect when buying them. This is also why these denominations have never needed protection up until now. If we protected our local and regional heritage with Protected Geographical Indications (PGIs) and Protected Designations of Origin (PDOs) we should be consistent and also protect this for more common goods. This common heritage is now at stake due to the boom in marketing of similar products. The industry of imitations has somehow been taking advantage of a European loophole and hijacking these powerful common denominations for their own gain. MEPs and national governments have decided to act and the European Court of Justice has released its ruling in order to close this loophole. We can only respect this willingness to protect common goods.

3) **Be creative, be fair** – The plant-based imitation sector is claiming to be creative and trendy. The European Court of Justice's decision on the interpretation of the legal provisions protecting dairy terms and MEPs' willingness to draw up rules on meat denominations should not be considered by these new industries as an attack but rather as an opportunity. An opportunity to create new denominations, to gain consumer's recognition and to achieve financial success. If the imitation lobby considers that meat denominations "convey important information such as texture or taste", I am convinced that many concepts and puns could successfully reflect such meaningful information on the final product. Developing a multitude of creative marketing concepts and products that do not copy existing meat/milk products is also a way to resolve the plant-based imitation industry's fundamental paradox. An industry striving to become mainstream does not need to mimic existing products.

In my opinion, the meat denomination fight is not a fight against but a fight for. A fight for consumers, for the preservation of traditional denominations and a fight for a more creative vegetarian and vegan industry. As farmers and agri-cooperatives, we provide the possibility

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.agra.fr/lait-et-boissons-v-g-tales-le-cniel-alerte-sur-les-risques-de-confusion-art446516-6.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://metro.co.uk/2018/10/15/vegetarians-and-vegans-are-accidentally-eating-animal-products-because-of-unclear-labels-8038565/?ito=cbsshare>

to have a nutritious, balanced and diversified diet, which should include both plant-based and animal-based products, as highlighted in all nutritional recommendations.

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Note to the editors:

- The following op-ed was released first on Annette Toft's [Linkedin account](#).
- For more information about EU farmers' and agri-cooperatives' priorities for the EU institutions 2019-2024 please head to [www.wefarm4.eu](http://www.wefarm4.eu).

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