



NACAS Plant-Rich Champion Stories

Lentil Tacos and Jackfruit Meatball Bánh Mì: How CU Boulder Campus Dining & Hospitality Built a Plant-Rich Menu Rooted in a Love for Plants

[University of Colorado Boulder Campus Dining & Hospitality](#) (CDH) does not think of plant-based options as a dietary preference, an allergen obligation, or a box to check for sustainability. Instead, as [Eliah Golden](#), Associate Director for Residential Dining & Culinary Operations, puts it, the CDH team is "*inspired by the plant kingdom*" — and that enthusiasm is felt in every dish. What began in 2010 with a labeling program ensuring one vegan entrée per venue has grown into one of the most ambitious plant-rich dining programs in the country. Today, CDH is firmly on track to reach a minimum of **75% plant-based entrees across campus** — a goal reconfirmed in 2024 and driven by a culinary team that has genuinely chosen into the mission.



University of Colorado Boulder outdoor seating area.

In practice, plants are at the center of every menu planning conversation. CDH dedicates entire hot line and salad bar sections to plant-rich cuisine, accepts new recipe submissions from culinary staff only if they are plant-based or improve an existing recipe to become plant-based, and draws



Examples of CU Boulder Campus Dining & Hospitality's plant-rich dishes.

on biodiversity, global flavors, and local Boulder County produce to keep menus exciting. Analog meats play a minimal role — instead, the culinary team leans on **legumes, pulses, mushrooms, jackfruit, and whole intact grains, prepared in every form**: grilled, smoked, braised, raw, marinated, and stewed. All colors, shapes, and textures are deployed to expand students' sense of what plants can be. CDH also blends plant ingredients with meat-based proteins — not just to reduce meat, but to enhance flavor, texture, and nutritional profile. As Eliah puts it: "*A successful plant-rich menu doesn't feel like 'This or That.'* **Success is when everyone in line is partaking in the plant-based entrée.**"

The great variety of plant-rich dishes on campus today did not happen overnight. Culinary staff were once accustomed to offering a tofu or tempeh dish as the token plant-based option — or felt satisfied knowing a veggie burger was available by request every day. Eliah and her team spent five to six years shifting that mindset, and they did it by **investing in training** rather than simply asking for change. CDH's Registered Dietitian Nutritionist, Lisa Whalen, plays a central role: providing annual plant-based and allergen training, working one-on-one with chefs on



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substitutions — coconut milk, pureed beans, squash, and cauliflower in place of butter and cream — and reviewing menus to identify gaps. **External partners**, including Humane World for Animals, Lentils.Org, the Mushroom Council, and Barilla Pasta, have hosted on-site training sessions that have broadened the culinary team's scope.

Friendly cooking competitions have yielded real results too: walnut and lentil tacos and a jackfruit meatball bánh mì both emerged from staff competitions and made it onto the regular menu.



Lentils training class at CU Boulder Campus Dining & Hospitality.

Student engagement has been a force multiplier. CDH's "Plants First" campaign — a partnership with the Environmental Center, marketing, and student employees — created the peer-to-peer momentum that signage alone never could. A standout operational innovation is the **Plant-Powered Protein Bar** on the salad bar: a simple, low-labor display of whole grains, legumes, lentils, nuts, hummus, and vegetables with a variety of seasonings. Introduced after student feedback flagged difficulty navigating plant-based options, it has since eliminated those complaints entirely and is beloved by all diners — not just those eating plant-based. As Eliah reflects: "*We have to look at things through the lens of the student for some of the answers*", the issue was less about what

was being offered and more about how students were expected to navigate the dining center. The solution was simple — and it worked immediately.



Student Staff at CU Boulder Campus Dining & Hospitality.

For campuses starting their own plant-rich journey, **Eliah's advice** is grounded and practical:

- "Start small and evaluate your status, then set yearly goals to increase your plant-based options".
- Require at least one plant-based entrée per station, make it as craveable as everything else on the menu, and make it fun for your chefs.
- A wide array of beans, lentils, and ancient grains will be your heroes — don't overly rely on tofu, tempeh, or analog meats.
- Look at areas that have grown tired — burrito bars, salad bars, pizza stations, deli bars — and you will find opportunity everywhere.

Above all, embrace a **mentality of continuous improvement**: as CDH has shown, the most powerful plant-rich programs are not built in a single initiative, but through hundreds of small, deliberate choices made with enthusiasm, creativity, and a genuine love for great food.