## Variety on the Go: How Ohio State Dining Services Doubled Plant-Rich Grab-and-Go Sales by Rethinking the Menu Cycle

At The Ohio State University (OSU), one of the largest dining operations in the country[1], a simple change to the grab-and-go case produced results most programs only dream of: **plant-rich sandwich sales more than doubled** — in the same locations, with no increase in cost. The architect of that change is **Lesa Holford, Corporate Executive Chef for Dining Services**, who oversees menu planning across OSU's retail, all-you-care-to-eat, grab-and-go, cafe, and culinary production operations. Lesa's defining passion is **volume and logistics**: building menus that feed large numbers of people efficiently. At OSU's scale, that passion is exactly what plant-rich dining needs.

The grab-and-go breakthrough began with a familiar problem: **menu fatigue**. In 2022 and 2023, OSU's plant-based grab-and-go strategy rested on two static core items — an **asparagus and hummus wrap** and a **Mediterranean vegetable wrap**. The challenge, as Lesa observed, is that the students who gravitate toward plant-rich options tend to return to the same cafe or retail location week after week — so two similar wraps, offered unchanged all year, wore thin fast. Across that period, the two core items sold roughly **6,500 units**. Students were giving clear feedback: they wanted to see something different.

So Lesa and her team changed the rhythm. Instead of two fixed wraps, they built a **rotating limited-time-offer (LTO) cycle** — a schedule that refreshes the plant-rich grab-and-go line-up on a weekly interval, introducing variety like a chickpea wrap, a plant-based buffalo wrap, and other rotating features alongside the favorites.



*OSU Grab-and-go Curried Chickpea Wrap with Beets*

The result was dramatic. Between 2024 and 2025, plant-rich grab-and-go sales climbed from that ~6,500 baseline to **nearly 14,000 units** — more than double — in substantially the same set of locations, with no meaningful expansion of venues. The lesson was clear and transferable: **the appetite for plant-rich food was already there; what students wanted was variety.** Offer it, and they come.



*OSU Grab-and-go Power Green Salad*

[1] At the Columbus campus alone OSU runs more than 30 dining locations and serves 35,000 to 40,000 transactions a day, supporting roughly 17,000 meal plans this year. All-you-care-to-eat venues handle about 40% of daily transactions, marketplace-style locations another 30%, with the rest spread across quick-service, cafes, and even food trucks.

Crucially for peer operators weighing a similar move, the change proved **operationally feasible**. The rotating items were built from readily available ingredients with no supply headaches, and the rotation applied specifically to the plant-based line while core menus stayed constant. OSU even saw a **minor decrease in food costs** the following year. In other words, a well-designed plant-rich LTO cycle can deliver a step-change in student uptake without driving up cost or operational risk — the combination that makes a strategy genuinely scalable.

OSU's approach reflects a philosophy of **options, not restriction**. Their goal is to make plant-rich eating so appealing and abundant that students opt in freely, not to take anything away.

Looking ahead, Lesa sees real opportunity to translate the grab-and-go playbook into the high-volume dining halls, bringing a plant-rich rotation to key stations where the same variety-driven momentum could take hold. OSU's story is a powerful proof point: the path to more plant-rich plates may not require new concepts — just the creativity to keep the menu fresh, and the data to prove it works.



*OSU Grab-and-go PlantBased Buffalo Chicken Wrap*

**We are excited about the next steps Ohio State Dining Services will take!**