Real chefs. REAL SOLUTIONS



Ten easy ways to pump up the protein

It used to be that patrons left their nutritional concerns at home when they went out to eat, but not anymore. With the growing popularity of GLP-1 drugs and myriad meat-forward diets, operators are noticing a leveling-off of the plant-based trend as more and more diners demand protein-rich plates.

In fact, according to the International Food Information Council (IFIC) 2025 Food & Health Survey, a "high protein" diet ranks as "the most followed eating pattern for the third year in a row" and a whopping 70% of Americans are "trying to consume protein."

Most nutrition experts advise consumers to get their protein from natural sources, including eggs, beans, legumes, fish, poultry, meat, and dairy. Due to the breadth of the dairy category, milk-based ingredients in particular offer tremendous protein flexibility for the menu.

For ideas on how operators can use California dairy to keep pace with the high-protein trend, we went to Dr. Ty Wagoner, Senior Innovation Manager for the California Dairy Innovation Center. Dr. Wagoner claims that, "Dairy is the next white meat," adding "like white meat, dairy delivers on nutrition and has an overall mild flavor profile that makes it versatile enough to be used across a range of cuisines and applications."

Here are some of Dr. Wagoner's favorite ways to use California dairy products to raise the protein profile on any menu.

- Top bowls, soups, or salads with crunchy cheese "croutons" made from baked or fried paneer, halloumi, or other non-melting cheeses.
- Incorporate Ricotta into scrambled eggs to add flavor and lightness as well as protein.
- Replace a portion of water with yogurt or farmer's cheese in baked goods to increase protein.
- For a simple, high-protein savory dip, puree cottage cheese and top with harissa and olives.
- Marinate feta or fresh cheeses with a simple marinade like lemon zest, olive oil, and Aleppo peppers and add on top of a salad or pasta dish.
- Mix peanut butter and Greek yogurt to make a delicious high-protein dip, spread for sandwiches, or topping for baked goods/pancakes. Adding cocoa powder creates a decadent, mousse-like texture that is a good source of fiber and protein.
- Add grated cheese or cottage cheese to ground meat mixtures for meatballs and meatloaf to keep protein high while reducing the amount of meat and controlling the amount of fat.
- Thicken soups and stews while adding protein with pureed cottage cheese.
- Replace mayonnaise with Greek yogurt in creamy applications to reduce fat and calories and increase protein content. Try Greek yogurt in egg, chicken, or tuna salad.
- Add unflavored whey protein powder to smoothies, milkshakes, or oatmeal-it's a versatile ingredient that adds a creamy texture as well as protein.

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