

FOODIE BUZZ

# Meet the Vegan Cheese Brand That Changed the World

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While mouth-watering plant-based proteins, milks, and even ice creams have long been delicious enough to satisfy omnivores and vegans alike, vegan cheese is another matter.

Just ten years ago, there were perhaps no two words more disappointing than “vegan cheese.” They made most people, vegan or not, cringe at the thought. The greasy, waxy foodlike stuff did not melt — even if Daenerys’s dragons were to mouth breathe on it. You could blast it under the fire of ten suns, or cast your very best **magic spell** upon any brand of vegan cheese. It didn’t matter. It. Would. Not. Melt.

Beyond the unmeltable factor, most vegan cheese products tasted less like the creamy, tangy richness associated with dairy cheese, and more like old American cheese slices left in the sun. For a few years. Some nondairy cheeses even contained dairy milk proteins to help the cheese melt, defeating the purpose for vegans entirely. Others were so loaded with unhealthy trans fats and other processed ingredients that health-seekers wouldn't touch them. Many vegans, myself included, just learned to live without cheese, defending the saucy goodness of cheese-less pizza and the many functions of nutritional yeast (which makes an excellent [mac and cheese sauce](#), by the way). We learned to just smile and bite our tongues when our non-vegan friends and family members would inevitably utter that infamous lament while we quietly ate our cheeseless nachos: "I'd go vegan but I could never give up cheese!"

But for the committed vegans, the how-can-you-live-without-cheese query was never as strong as the realities of dairy farming. While vegetarianism, which permits dairy and eggs, was popular in the 1960s and '70s as an ethical diet choice, the reality of dairy farming — the constant impregnation of cows, the tearing of newborn babies away from their mothers, male cows suffering to become veal, and the constant infections, pains, and problems dairy cows experience in their udders, not to mention the environmental issues — makes abstaining from cheese a no-brainer. No matter its flavor, texture, or cultural relevance, cheese is not worth the price of animal suffering, environmental degradation, and the human health risks.

Fortunately, going without vegan cheese turned out to be only a minor glitch in the big scheme of things.

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes of unmelted casein-tainted sludge, there came Daiya Foods. The Canadian-born vegan cheese company hit the market in 2008 with products that tasted and melted like "real" cheese in what seemed like a miraculous anomaly. How had they finally done it?

With tapioca flour, a blend of oils, the ever-popular [pea protein](#), and a few other ingredients, Daiya redefined the vegan cheese market. But it was no small task.

"It's incredibly difficult to have the smooth rich creamy texture of cold cheese and still have the same product melt or pool under typical heating conditions," Daiya co-founder Andre Kroecher told me via email. "If you achieve that, it's even harder to have it brown on top, and have the chew and stretch of a milk protein based cheese."

It's why even so-called dairy-free cheeses often included casein, the milk protein that helps it melt and stretch.

Daiya, says Kroecher, has been able to create a "dairy-like" experience "both in flavor and texture that satisfies the cravings of meat and cheese eaters alike," while still being a vegan product. The brand even took its name, which comes from the Sanskrit language for "loving kindness and compassion", because it sounds so much like the word "dairy" even though it's routinely mispronounced as "dye-uh" (the correct pronunciation is "day-uh").

“We wanted a name that sounded like dairy but that could become a household brand synonymous with great tasting dairy alternatives,” Kroecher says about the name – and the founders don’t mind if you mispronounce it, either.



*Daiya co-founders Andre Kroecher and Greg Blake*

Kroecher grew up vegetarian, turning to veganism as he got older. His experience echoes that of most vegans, “there was very little available as far as dairy free cheese went,” he says. “I always felt like I was missing out when I’d see other’s indulging in great tasting foods made with fine cheeses. I’d try every new dairy free cheese offering that came out but they were so terrible that I’d usually have to throw them out.”

It was this repeated experience that turned Kroecher, and Daiya co-founder Greg Blake, both musicians and entrepreneurs, into vegan cheese gurus.

Kroecher experimented for years on his own, eventually creating prototypes that would become the foundation of Daiya. “They were so convincing,” says Blake.

It took more than a year to create the mozzarella and cheddar products that launched Daiya into the U.S. market, revolutionizing the vegan cheese category.

“We originally just planned to sell in food service as we had been told by experts that it would take millions of dollars to break into retail,” Kroecher says. “We spent a long time developing the technology and then sent it to various restaurants for testing. Virtually every restaurant we sent it to immediately followed up saying they were ready to place an order even though they didn’t even know the price!”



Daiya had succeeded in doing what no other vegan cheese company had done before it. While nondairy milk options and veggie burgers were widespread in mainstream outlets, vegan cheese didn't exist in restaurants – often not even in entirely vegan restaurants. Daiya was all of a sudden finding placement in thousands of retail locations: pizza shops, college cafeterias, restaurants, and in the prepared food section at Whole Foods Market, where customers could find the cheese melted onto the house pizzas, but not yet for sale in the store.

“There was actually a small scale black market forming for our shreds,” says Kroecker. “We had them packed in 5 pound bags but pizzerias and retail stores like Whole Foods were repackaging into smaller bags and trays and re-selling the product like crazy. We needed to keep quality control and capture Daiya branding so when Whole Foods told us we needed a retail product ASAP, we listened. Then they offered us a national listing if we could make the product in retail bags in short order.”

The rest, as they say, is history. Already with a dedicated following, Daiya's cheeses began appearing — and quickly disappearing — from store shelves across the country.

“There was just massive pent up demand and we had the good fortune of having a product that could deliver on unmet needs at a time when people could learn about it almost virally,” says Kroecker. “It was like people were discovering Daiya and then couldn't wait to tell all of their friends, and now they had the tools to tell them instantly and where it could be purchased. Pictures, reviews, emails, blogs, tweets, texts, all word of mouth and spreading the Daiya word for us – it was amazing!”

Timing, of course, couldn't have been better. [Interest in plant-based foods](#) is at an all-time high with people making the switch for health, environmental, and ethical reasons. Sales of plant-based foods hit \$5 billion last year, and they're outpacing growth of traditional meat and dairy categories in some cases.

Daiya's customers follow the trends of other plant-based categories. While there's certainly a dedicated vegan following who helped to launch the brand's initial success, many of the company's core customers fall into the “flexitarian” category (or “balanceatarian”, as vegan meal kit [Purple Carrot](#) founder calls it).

Today, with placement in more than 25,000 locations, Daiya is just one of many successful vegan cheese brands. Kite Hill, [Miyoko's](#), and Follow Your Heart are three well-loved national vegan cheese brands, and there's another phenomenon that can be accredited to Daiya's success: Small-batch vegan cheesemakers are popping up all over the country. Here in Los Angeles we have a handful of [artisan cheesemakers](#) all with different [specialties](#) and focuses. But it's hard to imagine them even attempting to do it had Daiya not broken the vegan cheese barrier and removing the taboo.



At the recent [Natural Products Expo](#) held in Anaheim, Calif., Daiya, which now makes its own frozen pizzas, yogurts, salad dressings, and several shelf-stable mac and cheese products, launched the Cutting Board Collection, a new line of cheeses Kroecher says are “exceptionally authentic tasting” and capable of holding their own against its signature products and traditional dairy-based cheese.

They’re smoother than the original Daiya shreds, more passable as “real” cheese, and true to Daiya form, they melt and stretch like its other products.

“Taste is such a subjective concept that we simply can’t have just a few styles of cheese to satisfy what is currently serviced by hundreds of varieties of dairy based cheeses,” he explains. “The cutting Board Collection is aimed at providing enhanced and highly distinguished product diversity.”

As the category leader, there’s nothing but ooey-goey opportunity for the brand.

“The growing awareness of the relationship between what we put in our mouths and how we feel emotionally and physically represents a massive trend in the food business,” says Kroecher. “These new concepts of health, environment and resource consumption, allergies, food sensitivities and compassion towards animals is quickly becoming mainstream.”

Today’s market is “like a gold rush” for plant-based foods, says Kroecher, as manufacturers, restaurants, and retailers are making every effort to satisfy the demand in all categories.

“It’s where almost all the growth is,” he says.

“[We] dream of a Subway sandwich with plant-based meat options and dairy-free cheese options,” Kroecher says enthusiastically, “or even a Domino’s pizza that can be ordered with plant-based meat and cheese topping options.”

And making that happen is not a stretch. For Daiya, it’s inevitable.

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