Vegan Restaurants - between Culinary Mainstream and Sustainability. Case Study: Rawdia Restaurant in Bucharest

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Abstract: This study explores sustainability of vegan or plant-eating based restaurants. The chosen case study is Rawdia, a restaurant in Bucharest known for its raw-vegan dishes and eco-friendly approach. The research analysis the impact of sustainability on customer experience and the strategies used by Rawdia to highlight its ecological practices. Based on a survey and participatory observation, the results indicate a high level of customer satisfaction, particularly regarding the freshness of ingredients and the use of biodegradable packaging materials. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of responsible resource management and the need to expand this sustainable model within the restaurant industry. The conclusions suggest that vegan restaurants increase their role in promoting an environmentally friendly and healthy lifestyle, with the potential to positively influence consumer eating habits, being at the same time aligned to one of the culinary mainstreams.

Keywords: *hospitality, veganism, plant-based diet, food-waste*

1.Introduction

In recent decades, interest in plants-based diets has increased substantially, driven by factors such as health considerations, ethical concerns, environmental protection, and the pursuit of sustainability. Diets that exclude meat and animal-derived products manifest in various forms, each with distinct characteristics and well-defined rules. These dietary choices are adopted both for personal health reasons and as responses to global challenges such as climate change and animal welfare (Clarys, 2014).

A vegetarian diet eliminates meat, including fish and seafood, while permitting the consumption of certain animal-derived products. Vegetarianism encompasses several subtypes, all of which exclude meat. Lacto-vegetarianism includes dairy products but excludes eggs. Ovo-vegetarianism permits eggs but excludes dairy. Lacto-ovo-vegetarianism allows both dairy and eggs. Pesco-vegetarianism (or pescatarianism) excludes red meat and poultry but allows fish and seafood. Flexitarianism is a predominantly vegetarian diet that allows for occasional meat consumption (Chai, 2019).

Veganism, by contrast, entails the complete avoidance of all animal-derived food products, including meat, fish, dairy, eggs, and honey. Historically, veganism can be traced back to Indian philosophical traditions dating from 3,300 to 1,300 BCE, and it emerged as a structured movement in the 19th century in the United Kingdom and the United States (Hargreaves, 2024). While strict veganism was not explicitly advocated by most ancient religious traditions, many promoted

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vegetarianism or predominantly plant-based dietary practices rooted in spiritual, ethical, and ritual frameworks. These traditions often share significant philosophical and moral parallels with contemporary vegan values (Grumett & Muers, 2010). Thus, nowadays, dietary practices, veganism is often associated with a broader ethical lifestyle that avoids the use of animal-based materials such as leather, wool, and cosmetics tested on animals.

The raw vegan diet merges the principles of veganism with the consumption of uncooked or minimally heated foods. Foods are consumed raw or prepared at temperatures below 40°C to preserve enzymes and nutrients (Cousens, 2000). This diet typically includes fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, and fermented products. The "plant-based" dietary concept closely aligns with veganism but emphasizes whole, minimally processed plant foods while avoiding refined sugars, oils, and ultra-processed items—even when plant-derived (Campbell & Campbell, 2006).

Among the primary motivations for adopting a vegan diet are ethical concerns related to animal rights, with veganism founded on the principle of non-violence and the rejection of animal exploitation for human benefit.

Health-related motivations are also significant; a growing body of research suggests that vegan diets may reduce the risk of cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer (Vilette, 2022). Among many research, Tuso et al. (2013) and Le and Sabaté (2014) reviews or underlined the clinical benefits of plant-based diets in the prevention or reversal of chronic diseases.

In recent years, sustainability has become the most frequently cited reason for adopting a diet that excludes animal products. The environmental impact of meat and dairy production is considerable, contributing significantly to greenhouse gas emissions (Dorgbetor et al. 2022), deforestation, and excessive water and resource consumption associated with livestock farming. Currently, approximately 1.1% of the global population identifies as vegan, while 22% identifies as vegetarian (Raphaely, 2015). On the other side, veganism is a potential way to address environmental and ethical concerns associated with conventional food production (Dedehayir et al, 2020).

Despite the potential benefits, individuals who adopt such diets may encounter several nutritional challenges. The exclusion of animal products can lead to deficiencies in protein, iron, omega-3 fatty acids, calcium, and vitamin B12—nutrients that are abundantly found in meat and dairy (Melina et al., 2016). Fortunately, these nutrients can be effectively sourced from a variety of plant-based foods, including soy, quinoa, flaxseed, chia seeds, nuts, sesame, almonds, vegetables, and fruits (Simeone, 2022).

The aim of the study is to analyse the level of sustainability of vegan restauration practices. The objectives of research are: 1) the setting up of history of vegan restaurants in Romania; 2) the analysis of the customers vs. staff opinions upon the sustainability of this food unit; 3) the identification of needs to fully engagement in the sustainable development.

2. Methodology of research

In order to set up an image of plant-based restaurants in Romania, mining research in literature and documentary to national archives on the subject were carried out. This approach allowed to establish an informational foundation about the study, focusing on veganism and vegetarianism — including historical background, key details, and global trends.

Following the research ethics, asking permission to conduct the research, two semi structured interviews were applied on site to the clients and personnel of restaurant during 20 of November

until 15 of December 2024. The questions were addressed to both Rawdia's customers and employees. This method (Sandu, 2012) contributed to obtaining the sustainability report regarding the restaurant's operations. The customers interview contained 2 open-ended questions about the period of the year in which they have visited the restaurant and about their favourite dish on the menu, 12 closed-ended questions scaled on a 5-point Likert scale to rate their general experience in the restaurant, judging by the culinary experience and by the interaction with the employees. The interview was applied on 15 respondents, 4 of them being vegan, 5 vegetarians, 2 pescatarians, and four that declared they don't follow a non-meat diet (Table 1).

Table 1. Questions for the Rawdia's clients

Questions	Answer options
1. Do you follow a special diet that excludes animal-based foods, or do you have any allergies or dietary restrictions (please specify in the "other" section)?	Vegetarian/Vegan Raw-vegan/Pascetarian/ I only wanted to try out this type of food/Other
2. During which time of year did you use Rawdia's services?	*Open answer*
3. Did you return to the restaurant after your first visit?	Yes/No
4. Do you consider the Rawdia's menu to be diverse, in terms of the range of vegan and plant-based foods and dishes offered?	Yes/Could be/No
5. Is there any specific dish on the Rawdia's menu for which you chose to visit the restaurant?	*Open answer*
6. Would you say that the ingredients used for the dishes you had at Rawdia were fresh and well-prepared?	Yes, everything went great/No, I have had some issues
7. When dining on-site, were you able to ask for leftovers to be packed up for later if you didn't finish your meal?	Yes/No
8. If you answered YES to the previous question: Was the packaging used made from biodegradable materials (cardboard/paper/recycled or bio-based plastic)?	Yes/No
9. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 – unsatisfactory, 5 – very satisfactory), how would you rate your dining experience at Rawdia, in relation to the prices of the items you ordered from the menu?	*Likert scale (1 to 5)*
10. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 – unsatisfactory, 5 – very satisfactory), how would you rate your dining experience at Rawdia in terms of the quality of the served food?	*Likert scale (1 to 5)*
11. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 – unsatisfactory, 5 – very satisfactory), how would you rate your dining experience at Rawdia, in terms of your interaction with the staff?	*Likert scale (1 to 5)*
12. Would you recommend Rawdia to the people who do NOT follow a diet that excludes animal-based products?	Yes/No
13. Would you recommend Rawdia to the people in the vegan/vegetarian/ raw-vegan/etc. communities?	Yes/No

The second interview, with 12 questions, was designed for the employees of the studied restaurant. The questions were designed on finding if the employees are aware of the origin of the ingredients, on what is the most wanted products from the menu and on their strategies regarding food-waste and waste in general. Due to the low number of the restaurant staff, only three employees participated on behalf of the restaurant. The interviews 'questions included both closed and open-ended formats, aiming to capture an experience as authentic as possible (Table2). The data were processed qualitatively, manually, and quantitatively through Microsoft Excel, 2016 by descriptive statistics (percent) and graphic tools, such as the open-source Canva platform.

Table 2. Questions for the Rawdia's employees

Question	Answer options
1. Do you follow a special diet that excludes animal-based foods, or do you have any allergies or dietary restrictions (please specify in the "other" section)?	Vegetarian/Vegan/Raw-vegan/Pascetarian I just happen to work here/Other
2. What is your position at Rawdia? Please provide a brief description (max. 3 lines) of the tasks you are responsible for in your role.	*Open answer*
3. How long have you been working at Rawdia?	*Open answer*
4. Which item on the Rawdia's menu is the best-seller (statistically speaking), and what ingredients does it contain?	*Open answer*
5. Do you know the source and the journey of the products used to prepare the dishes on the menu (from harvest to the plate)?	*Open answer*
6. Do you have a space on the premises dedicated to growing vegetables, fruits, or other plants that can be used in the food items on your menu?	Yes/No
7. Rate how sustainable you consider the sources and production of the products used in the dishes (***Gradual answer from 1*** *(Not at all sustainable – e.g., fruits and vegetables are not free from pesticides and chemicals and are imported on a large scale; processed food products are made using preservatives, chemicals, and colorings that are harmful to the environment.)* ***to 5*** *(Highly sustainable – e.g., products that are as natural as possible, sourced from local producers, produced in-house, etc.)*	*Gradual answer from 1 to 5*
8. What is the strategy for managing food waste in your restaurant?	Multiple choice: Compost/Offering products nearing their expiration date at a discount or for free (directly in-store or via food-waste management apps such as Munch, Bonapp etc.) /Partnering with environmental or animal welfare organizations to send food scraps to animal shelters/Other
9. What happens to used oil once it has accumulated?	*Open answer*
10. Do you have bins dedicated to the selective collection of waste, both in the kitchen/storage area and in the area accessible to employees?	Yes, in both cases/Only in the area accessible to employees/Only in the restaurant, for customers/We do not have containers for the separate collection of waste
11. What is the material used for the packaging in which products are wrapped for delivery or take-away?	Multiple choice: Plant-based starch/Cardboard/Paper/Recycled plastic/Plastic/Other
12. Do you currently have a strategy in place to promote Rawdia's offerings to people who do NOT fall into the vegan, vegetarian, or raw-vegan categories (etc.)?	Yes and it works/No, but we are planning on establishing one/No and we do not think we need one

To complete the image of the sustainable practices, the naturalistic observation techniques was used by the author to enable the caption of all reactions of customers (Eby, 2011). Moreover, to complete this research, an assessment of reviews and feedback given by customers on Tripadvisor and Google was undertaken.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. The history of vegan restaurants in Romania

In Romania, vegetarian practices emerged a long time ago, at the beginning of the 20th century, in Transylvania, specifically in the town of Făgăraş. The concept initially appeared in the form of a sect founded by a tax collector, Bicsérdy Béla (Racoviceanu, 2018). The first vegetarian restaurant in Bucharest was Natura, which opened more than 100 years ago, in 1908, on the street now known as George Enescu (Fig.1). It was inaugurated by the Romanian Vegetarians' Association (Rusu, 2023). A study conducted by Reveal Marketing Research revealed that 52% of Romanians living in urban areas regularly consume vegan or raw-vegan dishes, although not all of them necessarily identify as vegans.

One of the first vegan restaurants in Romania was Rawdia, opened in 2012, in Bucharest and specialized in raw-vegan dishes, placing an emphasis on natural, unprocessed ingredients. This restaurant created a foundation for the development of other similar businesses, both in the capital (Fig. 2) and throughout Romania (Fig. 3). After 2015, the demand for vegan dishes increased significantly, and restaurants began diversifying their menus by offering vegan burgers, pizzas with various types of plant-based cheese, dairy and egg-free desserts, and healthy alternatives to traditional products. In addition to restaurants, fully vegan bistros, cafés, and pastry shops also began to emerge in major cities across the country, according to the Romanian Vegan Association.



Luaţi Masa

cel puţin odată pe zi la restaurantul Vegetarian „Natura", strada Alexandru Lahovari 4, (ingă Biserica Albă, Calea Victoriei, (singurul care a fost găsit de Consiliul Sanitar Comunal în cea mai perfectă stare de curăţenie. Restaurantul, instalat într'o elegantă vilă, funcţionează sub auspiciile Asociaţiunei Vegetarienilor din Romînia, condusă de medicĭ. Mîncări variate, preparate cu unt proaspăt, mai sănătoase, mai uşoare şi mai hrănitoare ca cele cu carne. Se poate mînca a la Carte, cu preţ fix (2 lei o masă) şi cu abonament 90 leĭ pe lună pentru amîndouă mesele sau 45 lei pentru una.

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Figure 1. Newspaper announcement about Natura restaurant (Source: Rusu, 2023)

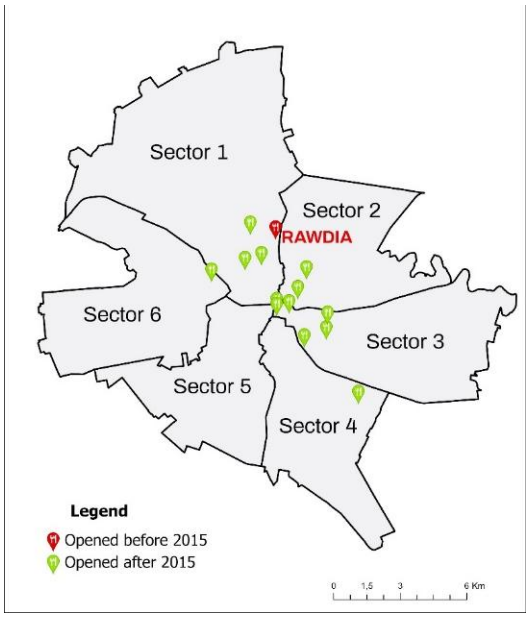


Figure 2. Distribution of vegan restaurants Bucharest (Source: Voinea, 2026)

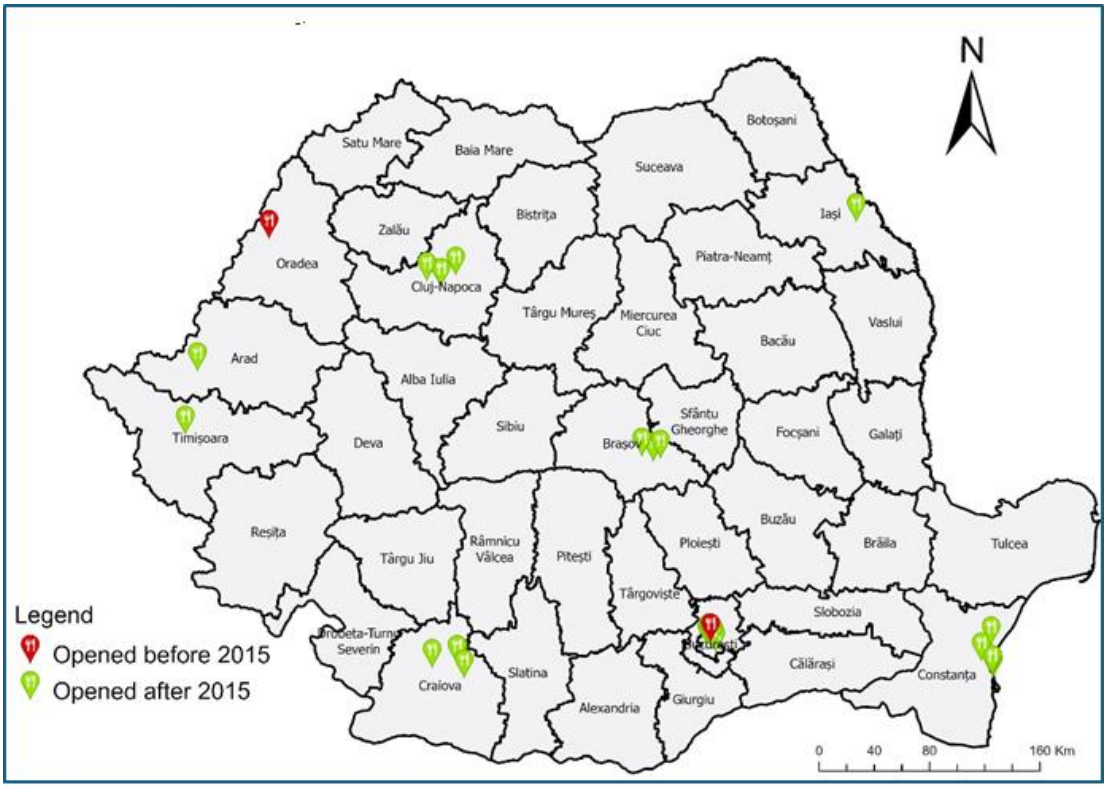


Figure 3. Distribution of vegan restaurants in Romania (Source: Voinea, 2026)

3.2. *Rawdia. Customers vs. staff opinions upon the sustainable practices*

A total of 15 customers participated in the interview. Of these, five identified as vegetarians, four as vegans, two as pescatarians (following a diet that excludes meat, but includes fish), and four reported that they did not follow a special diet but were interested in trying this type of cuisine (Fig. 4). Of the 15 respondents, 73,3% reported returning to the restaurant after their initial visit, suggesting a positive level of customers retention. Menu diversity was also evaluated as satisfactory with 11 respondents considering the menu sufficiently varied. In addition all 15 respondents expressed satisfaction with the quality of the food, indicating positive perception of its quality and , freshness.

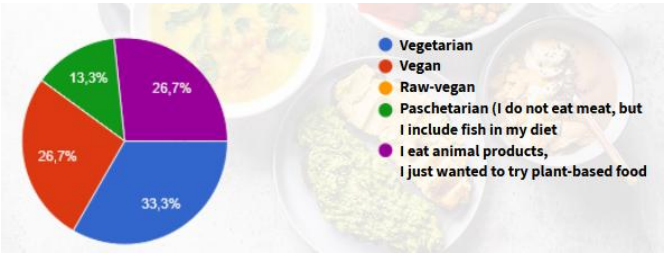


Figure 4. Diets of the 15 study participating customers (Q1)

In 2020, the owner of Rawdia declared for floreasca.com that „*the most requested product has been and remains the cashew cheese."* The owner explained that Rawdia's products target consumers who wish to discover or adopt a healthy, clean-eating lifestyle. Furthermore, consumer feedback has

played a key role in shaping the restaurant menu, influencing both the variety of dishes offered and the development of service packages. The owner also mentioned the evolution of Rawdia's menu since the restaurants first opened. Initially, the menu consisted exclusively of raw-vegan dishes; however, at that time of the interview, approximatively 60% of the menu was vegan and 40% raw-vegan. According to him, this change reflected the recognition that raw-vegan cuisine appeals to a more niche market, whereas conventional vegan dishes attract broader consumer interest. This adaptation shows Rawdia's efforts to respond to the customers preferences while maintaining its focus on plant-based cuisine.

Regarding the food-waste issue most of the restaurants must deal with, the customers were asked if they had the option to take home their leftovers. The European Commission released a study in 2024 saying that restaurants generate annually 14 kg of food-waste per person (Eurostat, 2024). For this question, 14 out of 15 declared that they had and chose the option to take home their leftovers of their vegan food. When asked about the type of material Rawdia uses for take-away packages, eight of them stated that the restaurant uses biodegradable materials, mainly paper and carton, and the other six said that they do not remember this detail (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Answers regarding packaging materials for take-away food (Q8)

Customer satisfaction was assessed using three rating-scale questions. The first question of these three, addressed customers' satisfaction with the balance between food quality and price (Fig. 6). Rawdia received a mean score of 4.47 out of 5, indicating a high level of satisfaction with the perceived value of money. This finding suggests that customers generally consider the quality of the culinary experience and the associated restaurant services to justify the prices charged for Rawdia's vegan offerings.



Figure 6. Price-quality ratio (Q9)

The following question examined the relationship between food quality and the overall dining (Fig. 7). The results yielded a mean score of 4.80 out of 5 rating, showing that the respondents considered food quality a key factor shaping their overall culinary experience at Rawdia. This results highlights the importance of high-quality food enhancing customer satisfaction and suggest that the quality of dishes served plays a central role in customers' perception of the dining experience. In other words, higher perceived food quality is associated with a more positive overall dining experience.

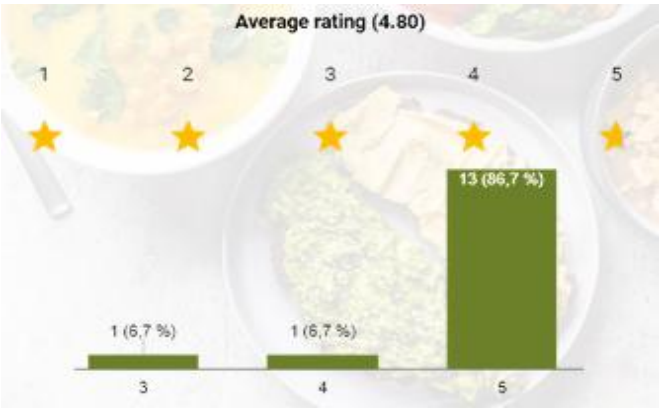


Figure 7. Rating of food quality (Q10)

The last question and final rating-scale question assessed customers satisfaction with their interactions with the restaurant staff (Fig. 8). For this question, 11 out of 15 respondents rated staff-client interactions with the maximum grade, showing that the restaurant is not only efficient when it comes to food-quality and ecology of services, but also when it comes to client relations. Finally, all of the respondent customers declared they would recommend Rawdia's services to both vegans and those who do not follow diets excluding animal-derived foods.



Figure 8. Results regarding staff interaction (Q11)

The general good impression about the services of Rawdia is shown in the Tripadvisior and Google reviews too. On Tripadvisior, Rawdia is evaluated with 4.4 out of 5, being the second best ranked vegan restaurant in Romania, on this platform (Fig. 9), after Samsara from Cluj-Napoca (Fig. 11). According to this evaluation, the Rawdia staff must work a little bit more on maintaining a nice atmosphere for their clients.

According to the Google Reviews platform, the restaurant has 4.6 out of 5 stars, being the best ranked vegan restaurant on this list (Fig. 10). Here we can observe that more people reviewed the restaurant, 448 customers having reviewed Rawdia on Google and only 51 on Tripadvisor.

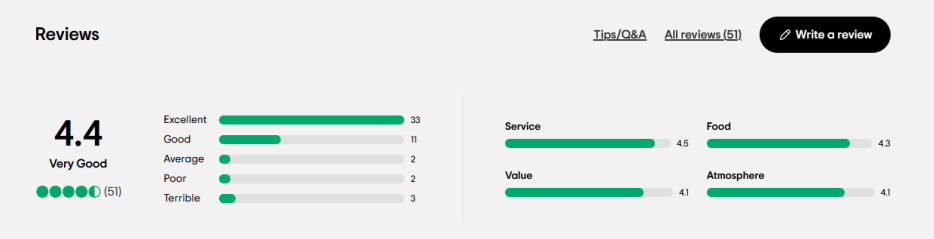


Figure 9. Customers evaluation for Rawdia on the Tripadvisior Platform (Source: Tripadvisior Rawdia Bucharest)

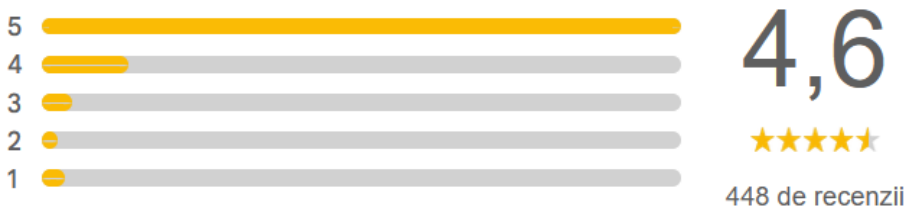


Figure 10. Customers Google reviews for Rawdia (Source: Google Reviews)



Figure 11. Customers evaluation for Samsara Foodhouse on the Tripadvisior Platform (Source: Tripadvisior Samsara)

The questions addressed to Rawdia employees focused on strengthening the sustainability report, based on understanding how aspects related to the ecology of restaurant services are managed. Vegan and raw-vegan foods, by nature, represent a sustainable food option, but their preparation and service must adhere to the same ecological principles.

Out of the three Rawdia respondent employees, two of them stated that they are vegetarians, and one of them said that they are a pescatarian, meaning they follow a diet that excludes meat but allows the consumption of fish. Two of them mentioned that their role is Marketing Manager and one of them is a Waiter. One of them has been working at Rawdia for three years, the second for two years and the waiter has been working there for only five months.

When asked about the knowledge of the sourcing of the ingredients used in the menu dishes, the employees responded that they are fully aware of everything related to these ingredients, from source to plate, as it is one of the sustainable principles in the restaurant. Regarding the presence of a space within the restaurant for growing vegetables, fruits, or other plants that could be part of the food preparation, the answer was negative.

The rating given regarding the sustainability of the sources and production of the products used in the dishes was 5, the highest level on a scale from 1 to 5. On the topic of food waste reduction, the employees stated that the restaurant's strategy is to sell products close to their expiration date at a reduced price, either directly in the restaurant or through applications that offer these solutions

(digitals platforms for promoting more sustainable food consumption). Their strategy also includes recommending packing food leftovers when the customer does not finish consuming the dish. Among the options for this food-waste management question was the 'Compost' choice, but the respondents did not select it, meaning they do not currently implement this ecological practice. When asked if they are planning on extending the waste reduction practices, one of the respondents declared that they are working on an indoor compost space, as these types of solutions became more popular among food units.

Because the restaurant follows a raw-vegan concept, the dishes are not fried, and therefore, oil is not used for frying in this establishment. Regarding selective waste collection, the employees stated that there are bins dedicated to selective waste collection both in the kitchen/storage area and in the customer-accessible area. The material used for packaging the products for delivery or takeout is cardboard, which is a biodegradable material.

To reach an audience that does not belong to the vegan/vegetarian/raw-vegan category, the employees responded that there is currently an ongoing strategy to promote Rawdia's dishes, which is proving to be effective, with approximately 20% of the restaurant's customers not following a special no-meat diet.

The need to fully engage in the sustainable development and conclusions

Vegan and plant-based restaurant services contribute to meeting the needs of the vegan community in Romania and promoting these diets to the public for a healthier lifestyle, focused on reducing the environmental impact. The Rawdia restaurant adheres to ecological and sustainable standards, which is appreciated by both customers and employees. The results of the customer questionnaires indicate a high level of satisfaction regarding the menu diversity, ingredient freshness, and the use of biodegradable packaging materials. Rawdia implements effective strategies for waste management and food waste reduction, through selective collection, recycling, and the sale of products nearing their expiration date at a reduced price.

Establishing collaboration networks between vegan restaurants to support local farmers could be one of the future perspectives for the industry. Furthermore, the implementation of digital systems to optimize resource consumption in meal preparation is recommended. All activities should aim at raising awareness among customers about the benefits of a sustainable lifestyle with reduced animal product consumption. A proposal to help with this aim could be the displaying (right in the restaurants) of the statistics regarding how much water and how many animals people save when they choose the vegan/plant-based services instead of the traditional ones (Fig. 12).

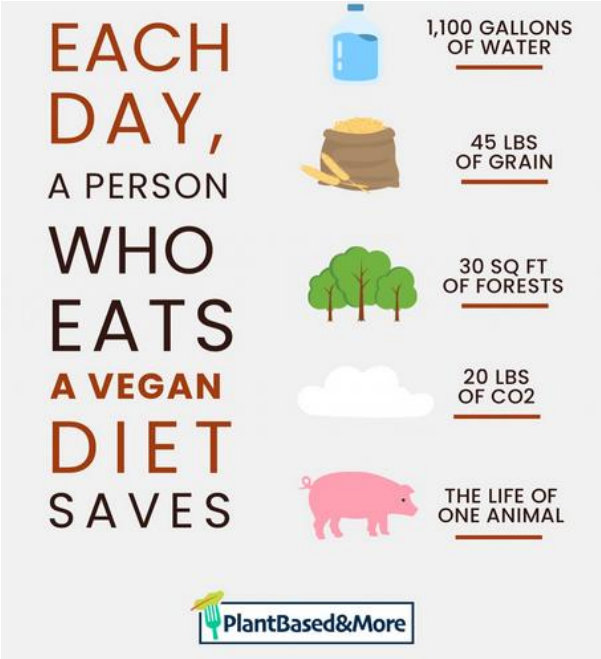


Figure 12. Statistics regarding quantity of resources vegans save each day (Source: PlantBased&More, 2025)

The study highlights the importance of expanding the vegan and plant-based restaurant model in Romania, given the increasing demand for sustainable alternatives. Implementing ecological practices not only enhances the customer experience but also contributes to environmental protection and educates the public about the benefits of responsible eating.

Sustainability directions related to this type of restaurant could propose greater attention to the source of raw materials used in the vegan dishes that are being sold. Furthermore, a development suggestion could involve a more intensive promotion of this type of diet, through increased public awareness regarding the harmful environmental impact of the animal industry.

Another sustainable development aspect could be focusing on highlighting the health benefits of diets that exclude meat consumption. In this direction, awareness campaigns could be carried out, particularly by food establishments with this specific focus.

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