

madre brava

Britain Backs Beans

Health and affordability is driving
market growth of plant proteins



Britain Backs Beans: briefing

The latest sales data from market researchers NielsenIQ (1), analysed by NGO Madre Brava, shows the UK plant-based protein market is changing shape, with strong growth in healthy whole foods and budget-friendly products, alongside declines in products that are perceived as ‘ultra-processed’.

In the first half of 2026, unit sales of beans,¹ pulses, tofu and tempeh grew 7.3% (and 10.1% in value) compared with the same period last year, while plant-based alternatives designed to imitate meat, such as burgers and sausages, declined 4.3% in units and 2.7% in value.

Shoppers are not abandoning plant proteins – they’re shifting toward simpler, higher-fibre foods, whose prices are rising more slowly than food inflation, widening the price gap with meat (2). This indicates that, while food inflation and affordability remain key factors, nutrition and health benefits are also driving purchasing decisions.

Civil society organisations are asking retailers to set targets to rebalance protein sales in favour of more plants to help consumers eat more healthily and sustainably.

This briefing highlights the sectors and ingredients driving growth in unit sales, and the retailers responding to consumer demand with new ranges of high-fibre vegetable, bean and tofu-based products.

The data reveal that, in the first half of 2026:*

- Combined unit sales of beans, pulses, tofu and tempeh grew 7.3% (and 10.1% in value). Dried beans, peas and lentils increased by 16.7%, canned and jarred beans by 6.4%, tofu by 7.2%, and tempeh by 71.5%.
- Meat-free products made of vegetables and pulses, such as sausages and pies, including new products on the market, grew by 0.16 million units (24.6% on a small base of 0.64 million units).
- While plant-based alternatives designed to imitate meat declined 4.3% in units and 2.7% in value, mycoprotein (Quorn) bounced back, increasing by 2.4% (0.82 million units).
- Plant-based milk, which accounts for 7% of the total milk market (3), grew slightly by 21,809 units (0.02%), with oat milk further dominating the category and growing by 1.55 million units (2.7%).
- Baked bean sales fell by 4.2% (in units) – but a switch from single cans to multipacks means the drop is just 1.2% on a per-can basis. The fall in baked beans is mainly in those containing sausages. Sales of baked beans that did not contain processed meat were stable at 166 million cans sold.

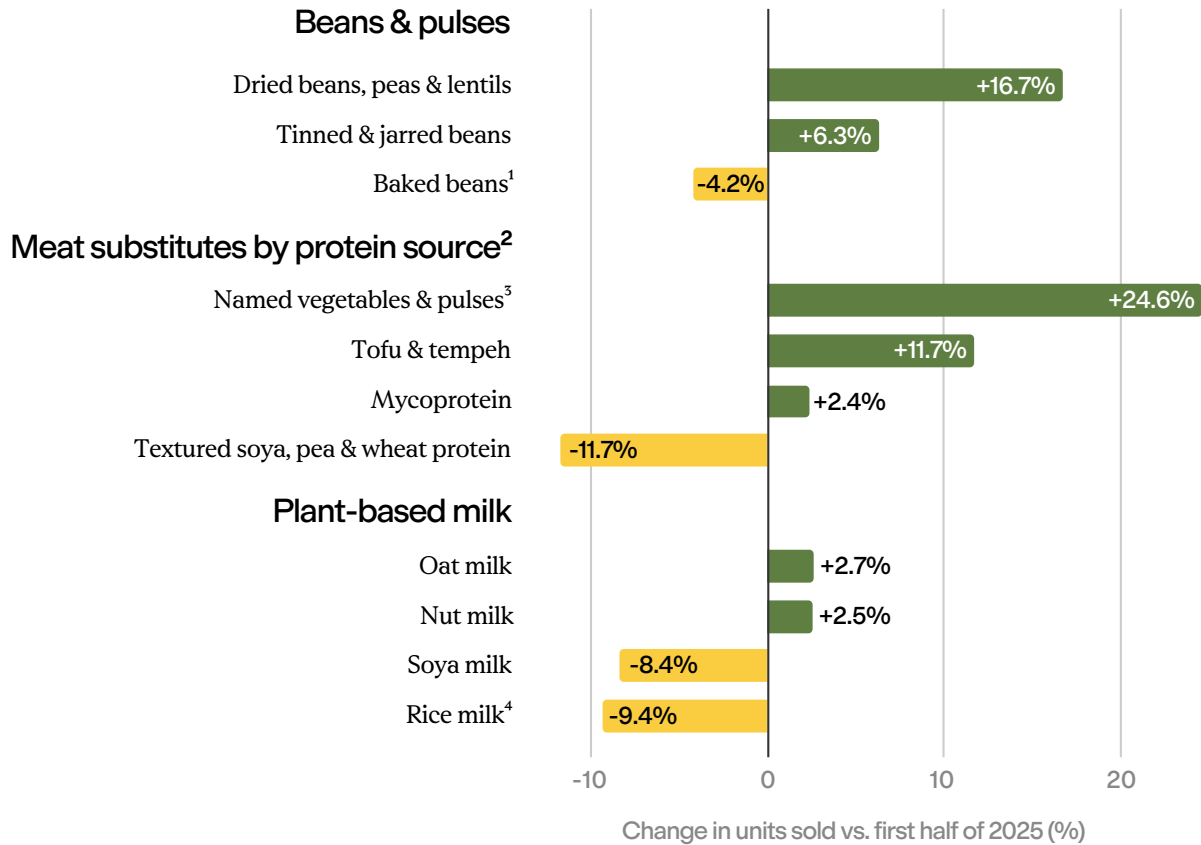
*compared with the same period in 2025.

“Shoppers are not abandoning plant proteins – they’re shifting toward simpler, higher-fibre foods, whose prices are rising more slowly than food inflation.”

1 Baked beans are reported separately as they include sauce and other ingredients, such as animal protein, including processed meat.

Shoppers are moving towards whole plant proteins

Change in UK unit sales of plant proteins, first half of 2026 compared with the first half of 2025. Plant-based milk overall was flat, up 0.02%. Growth in oat and nut drinks offset the decline in soya.



1. Almost half of all baked beans are sold in multipacks, so packs understate the beans bought: 347m cans in 2025, against 343m in 2026 is a decline of 1.2%, not 4.2%.
2. Excludes 9.2m units whose recorded ingredient names a product format or a claim rather than a protein source - 'other', 'vegetable', 'vegan meat', 'not determined'.
3. A small base, 0.6m units, so this percentage is volatile and should be read with caution. It is also very likely an undercount: veg-led products are scattered across NielsenIQ categories that are not part of this dataset, so many are not counted here at all.
4. A small base, 0.4m units; treat the percentage with the same caution.

Source: NielsenIQ / GB Total Coverage / 26wk w/e 27.06.26 vs 26wk w/e 28.06.25

Analysis: Madre Brava

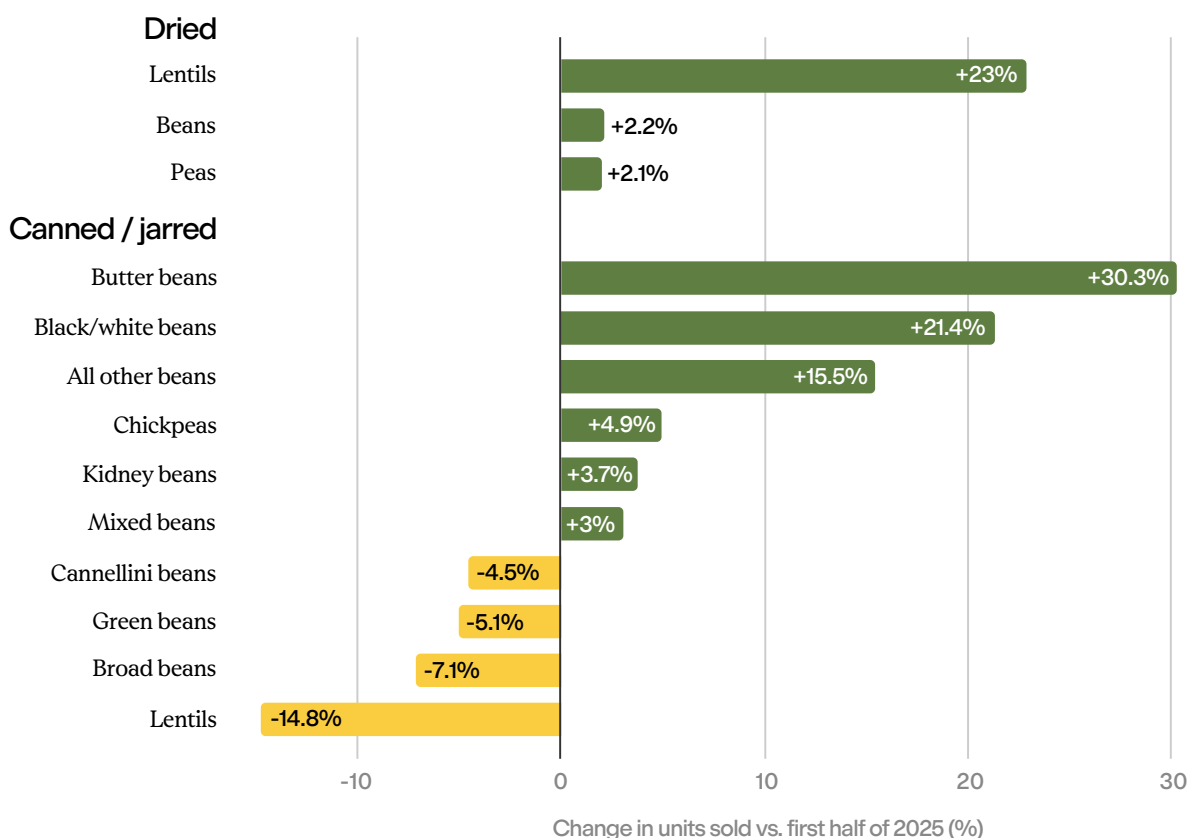
What's happening in the plant-based categories?

Beans and pulses are the clear winners in 2026

Most categories of canned or jarred beans and dried pulses increased in demand between the first half of 2026 compared with 2025. The biggest increases were canned and jarred butter beans, black beans, white beans and dried lentils.

Shoppers bought more of almost every bean and pulse

Change in UK unit sales of canned, jarred and dried beans and pulses, first half of 2026 compared with the first half of 2025. Baked beans are shown separately as they are sold as multipacks far more than any other format, so their units are not comparable.



Source: NielsenIQ / GB Total Coverage / Canned & jarred beans, chickpeas and lentils; dried beans, peas and lentils. Baked beans and green beans excluded / 26wk w/e 27.06.26 vs 26wk w/e 28.06.25

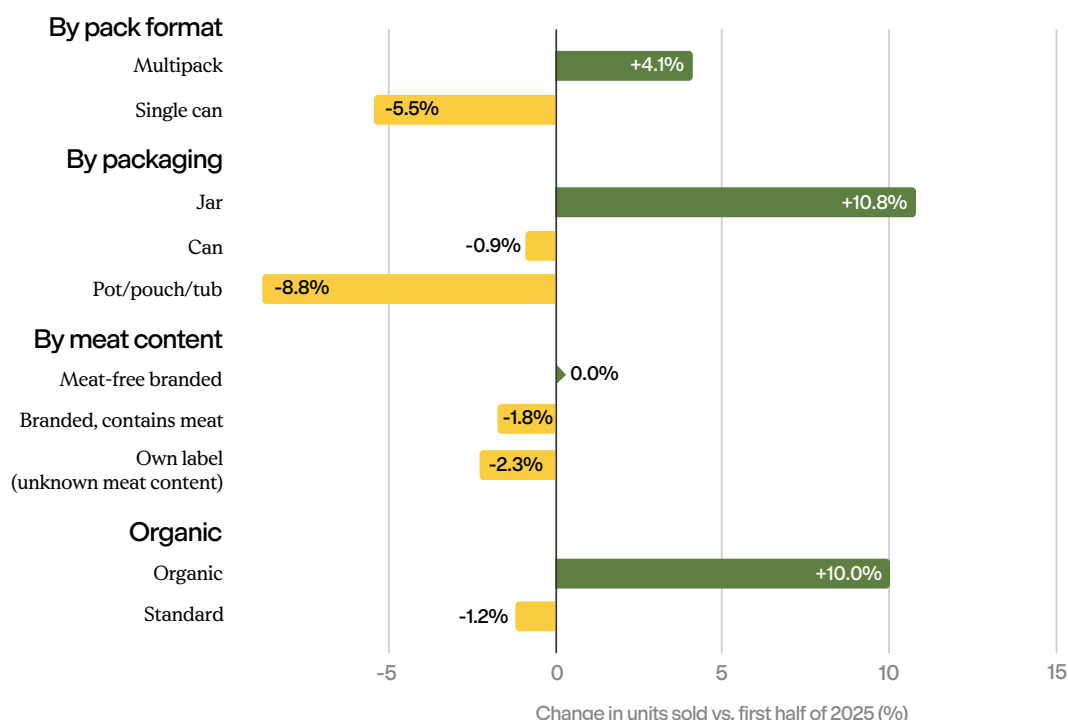
Analysis: Madre Brava

Spotlight on baked beans

Baked beans declined overall by 1.7% in volume (or 1.2% by cans). Consumers switched from individual to multipack sales, and the overall reduction came from beans that contained sausages or other processed meat. There was also a move to jarred baked beans, which increased unit sales by 10.8% and in value by 13.8%. Likewise, organic baked beans grew by 9.7% in units and 15.1% in value, while standard beans decreased. These exemplify consumer shifts more generally, as shoppers seek healthier products, budget savings, and the success of ‘premium beans’ at the higher end of the market.

Baked beans: jars, organic and multipacks grew

Change in UK unit sales of baked beans, first half of 2026 compared with the first half of 2025 – counted as individual cans and jars rather than packs.. The four blocks are alternative ways of splitting the same sales – they do not add together.



Multipacks count as the number of cans they contain. Meat content hand-coded from product names and own-label products cannot be identified.

Source: NielsenIQ SKU-level baked bean data / GB Total Coverage / 26wk w/e 27.06.26 vs 26wk w/e 28.06.25.

Analysis: Madre Brava

Premium and affordable beans are both gaining ground

The category is simultaneously expanding at the premium and value end, demonstrating broad consumer appeal. For four of the six canned and jarred bean categories that grew in demand, the price per unit rose faster than inflation, e.g. chickpeas, butter beans and mixed beans (Table 1). This indicates that people are spending more on premium beans in these categories.

In the same period, demand for kidney beans, dried lentils, black beans and white beans increased faster than value as the price per unit reduced, indicating growth is likely to be driven by affordability. A budget range tin of kidney beans costs between 30-40p in most supermarkets.

Table 1. UK bean² and pulse sales H1 2025 vs H1 2026.

A change in £/unit that is significantly greater than inflation, averaging 2.9% for the first half of 2026, signals premium growth, while change below inflation signals affordability growth.

Category and format	Units H1 2025	Units H1 2026	Unit change %	Value change %	£/unit change %
Premium growth					
Chickpeas (Can/jar)	30.08m	31.55m	+4.9	+12.3	+7.0
Butter beans (Can/jar)	9.27m	12.08m	+30.3	+41.5	+8.6
Mixed beans (Can/jar)	8.86m	9.13m	+3.0	+9.6	+6.4
All other beans	2.31m	2.67m	+15.5	+34.9	+16.8
Affordability growth					
Kidney beans (Can/jar)	32.52m	33.74m	+3.7	+1.3	-2.3
Black/white beans (Can/jar)	7.89m	9.58m	+21.4	+12.9	-7.0
Dried lentils	7.40m	9.10m	+23.0	+10.6	-10.1
All excluding baked beans		115.61m	123.95m	+7.2	+10.1

Bold Bean Co – who ranked number 16 in the Sunday Times league table of the UK’s fastest growing companies – is disrupting the bean category with premium jarred beans, now stocked in several UK supermarkets (4,5). Its beans are processed differently, with longer soaking and cooking times, making them easier to digest and overcoming one of the barriers to increased bean consumption. Despite being more expensive, their popularity has driven overall growth of beans and spurred retailers to develop own-brand jarred beans. (6)

² Green beans were excluded as they are a pod bean rather than a pulse and are lower in protein.



End-of-shelf and eye-level placement of premium beans at Sainsbury's, Bath, July 2026.

Beth Latham, Head of Category + Strategic Projects at Bold Bean Co said:

“The Canned Pulses category is undergoing a real transformation. It was previously a dusty, highly commoditized aisle in the store that lacked innovation. However, over the last few years, the premium end of the category has reshaped how consumers think about beans, proving they are delicious and can be the hero of a meal. Bold Bean Co is on a mission to make people obsessed with beans, and we inspire consumers to use beans in new ways through over 900 bean-centric recipes. The result is really encouraging, with one in three customers being completely new to the category. Bold Bean Co isn’t about telling people to eat less meat. It’s about inspiring them to use beans in new ways, and showing that beans deserve to be the centre of the plate.”

Marks & Spencer recently launched a summer campaign with Bowel Cancer UK, introducing a new range of jarred beans and pulses starting at just 55p (7). The aim is to encourage people to eat more fibre, after the latest National Diet and Nutrition Survey found that only 4% of adults and children aged 11-18, 14% of 4-10 year olds, and 22% of those aged 18 months to three years met the recommended daily fibre intake. As part of The Food Foundation’s and Veg Power’s ‘Bang in Some Beans’ campaign, which has seen 29 retailers and food brands make commitments to increase bean sales, Marks & Spencer has pledged to increase volume sales of all ‘shelf stable’ bean products by 15%.

Chloe Mackean, Food Business Transformation Manager at The Food Foundation, said:

“We aren’t surprised to see the rise in bean sales. Beans are a triple win for health, sustainability and our wallets. They are a healthy and affordable protein source, high in fibre and emit far fewer greenhouse gas emissions than animal protein. But beans are also tasty, and it is thanks to brands like Bold Bean Co who pepper social media with photos of delicious bean recipes that have helped to change people’s perception.

Large food companies are also aware of the commercial opportunities of beans and 29 companies, including Sainsbury’s, Lidl GB, M&S, Bidfood, Brakes, Compass, Elior, The Compleat Food Group, Subway and Harvester, have all made commitments through our Bang In Some Beans campaign to sell more beans.”

Plant-based dairy products

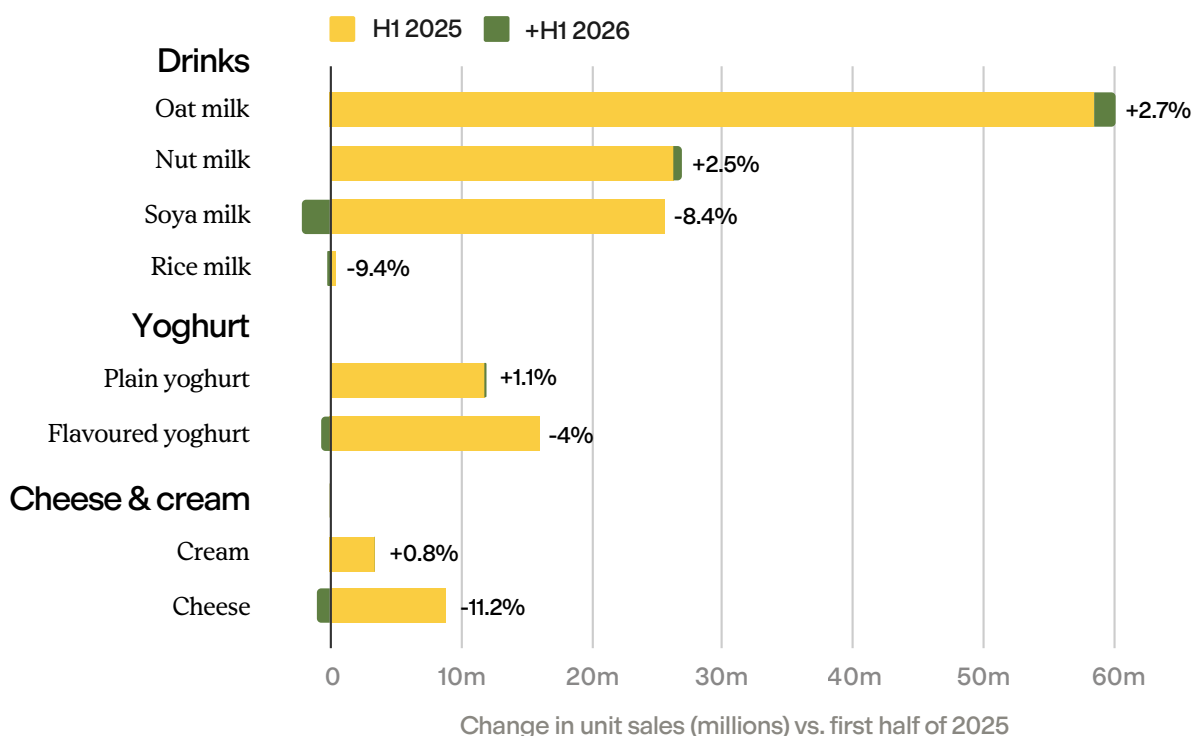
Plant-based milk increased its sales and market share slightly, now representing 7% of the entire milk drinks market and almost reaching the symbolic threshold of 10% market share. Over 30% of UK households now buy plant milks, many alongside dairy purchases (3).

Within the category, oat and nut milks continued to grow, while soya milk sales fell, despite its higher protein content. The price of soya milk increased by 12.3%, with independent price tracking showing the increases in price were primarily of the cheapest soya milk products (9). Six products under £1 in 2025 increased by an average of 37% in price between July 2025 and July 2026. The cheapest on the market increased from 50p to 79p, while those that were over £1 either stayed stable or fell slightly. Where price rises hit the value tier hardest, the shoppers who drop out are those with the least room to absorb them.

Overall, plant-based dairy decreased by just under 1% in unit sales but increased in value by 4.4% across all categories. While plain yoghurt, milk and cream saw increases, flavoured yoghurt and plant-based cheeses fell, with the exception of grated cheese.

Oat and nut milk grew; soya milk and dairy-free cheese fell

Change in UK unit sales of plant-based dairy alternatives, first half of 2026 compared with the first half of 2025.



Source: NielsenIQ / GB Total Coverage / Plant-based dairy alternatives (drinks, yoghurts, cheeses and creams). Cream combines single, double, whipping and crème fraîche | 26wk w/e 27.06.26 vs 26wk w/e 28.06.25 |
Analysis: Madre Brava



Plant-based grated cheese, plain yoghurt and oat milk grew in demand for the first half of 2026, compared with the first half of 2025.

Plain yoghurt, which grew in demand by 1.1%, is sold in larger packs than flavoured yoghurt, which declined by 4%, meaning the shift towards plain yoghurt is likely to be larger in volume than unit demand. The switch is an indication that some consumers are prepared to pay for healthier products as the price per unit rose 4.5% for flavoured yoghurts, which contain added sugar, and 8.1% for plain yoghurt which is lower in sugar.

Plant-based cheese is only 5.8% of the plant-based dairy market. Grated cheese, the largest category, grew by 52,586 units (2.2%). Declines came from block and snacking cheese, with very few products and brands in these categories.

The winners and losers of the plant-based meat alternatives (PBMA)s

Sales of single-ingredient plant proteins increased, with tofu up 7.1% and tempeh up 71.5%. In the same period, 'meat mimic' products, such as burgers and sausages made of textured wheat, pea or soy protein, saw unit sales fall 4.3% and value fall 2.7%. The only exception was mycoprotein (Quorn), which increased unit sales by 2.4%.

What do ingredients tell us?

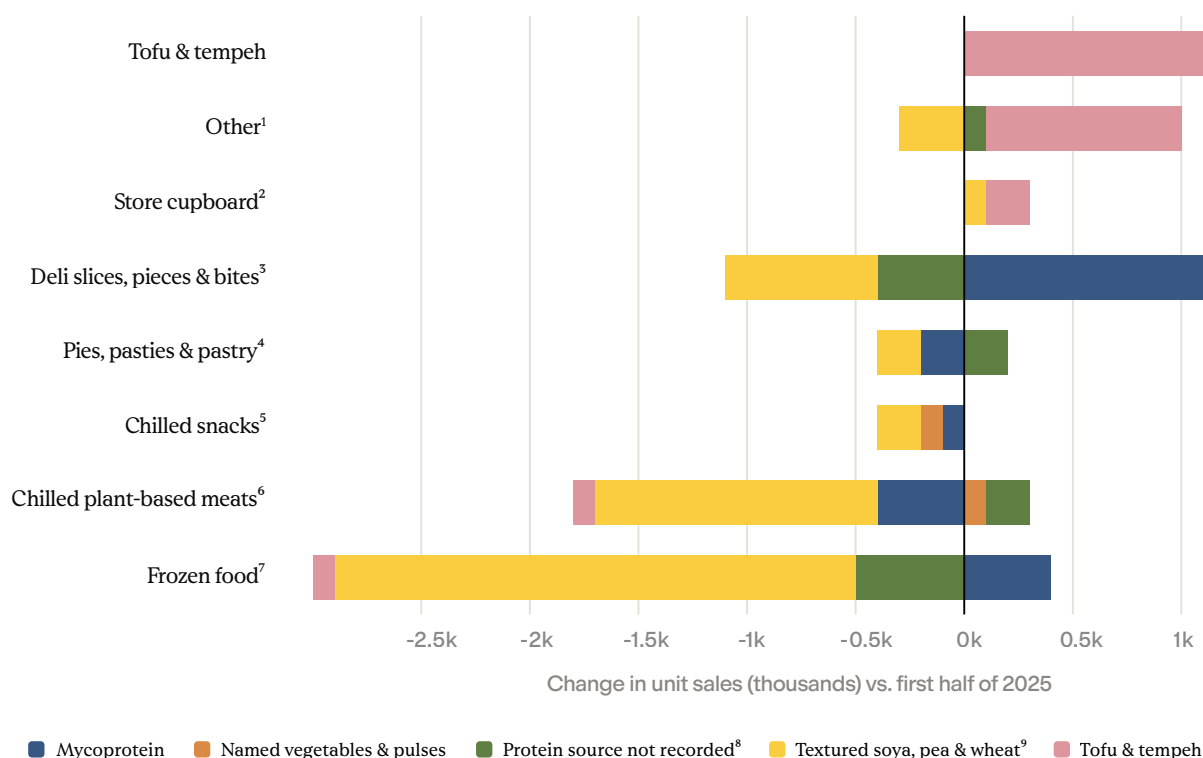
Health and nutrition

'Scratch-cooking' ingredients, combined with tofu, tempeh, mycoprotein, mixed vegetable and pulse products, have all grown in units, while those based on textured vegetable protein (wheat, soy or pea) and other ingredients have declined. These changes likely reflect consumer concerns about health and a move away from 'ultra-processed' products towards minimally-processed ingredients.

One of the largest ingredient gains is mycoprotein – the basis of Quorn. Within the deli sandwich slices, snacking pieces and bites category, it rose by 15.8% (over 1.1 million units). Mycoprotein was one of the first 'meat mimic' ingredients developed in the 1980s and is a complete protein and source of dietary fibre. In 2025, Quorn responded to widespread debates about food additives and 'ultra-processing' by embracing 'clean eating'; reformulating their products to remove many additives and launching a marketing campaign to promote it. Increases in mycoprotein sales may reflect the success of this approach, as well as a longer term customer base and greater trust than newer meat alternatives.

What is driving each meat substitute category?

Change in UK unit sales, first half of 2026 against the first half of 2025, in thousands of units. Each category is split by the protein its products are made from. Some changes are too small to visualise.



1. 'Other' is the residual 'all other' sector in chilled (4.1m) and frozen (4.0m), including kebabs, wings, roasts, bakery items and large-format tofu.
2. 'Store cupboard' is the ambient sector, including 77% long-life tofu, 16% dried soya mince and chunks.
3. 'Deli slices, pieces & bites' is the chilled pieces and strips sector, including cooking pieces, deli-style slices for sandwiches, marinated tofu and tempeh, and snacking bites.
4. 'Pies, pasties & pastry' combines two or three sectors – no sector is ever split between categories.
5. 'Chilled snacks' includes picnic eggs (3.0m), sausage rolls (2.8m) and cocktail sausages (0.5m).

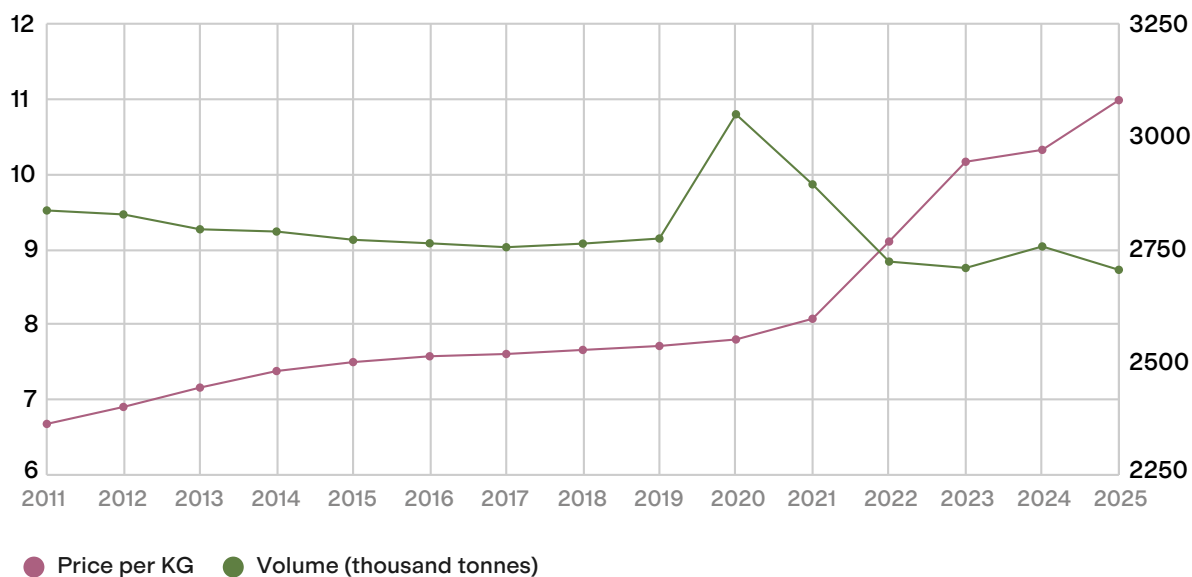
6. 'Chilled plant-based meats' includes bacon, burgers, mince, meatballs, sausages, grills, breasts and steaks.
7. 'Frozen food' is two NielsenIQ sectors of 34.6m units covering pieces, strips and fillets (28%), sausages (22%), burgers (21%), mince (15%), grills and steaks (9%), meatballs (4%), and frozen ready meals (1%). The ingredient data stops at sector level, so it cannot be split further.
8. 'Protein source not recorded' covers ingredient descriptions naming a product format or a claim rather than an ingredient.
9. 'Textured soya, pea & wheat' combines soya, pea and wheat protein, and isolates with seitan.

Source: NielsenIQ | GB Total Coverage | 26wk w/e 27.06.26 vs 26wk w/e 28.06.25 |
Analysis: Madre Brava

Affordability

Meat prices have continued to rise sharply over the past year, while meat volumes appear to have returned to the steady pre-pandemic pattern of decline. GFI Europe reports a 0.7% drop in total UK meat volumes from 2024-2025 across retail, food service and institutional settings, while our own analysis found a 1.8% reduction in retail alone. Both figures are based on data from Euromonitor International³ (10).

UK average retail meat prices and volume: 2011-2025



Source: Euromonitor International, *Staple Foods, Industry Edition 2025*

Price is an important consideration for consumers and there is a widening gap between meat and PBMA, tofu, beans and pulses (2,3). Current data suggests that the price per unit of plant-based proteins rose by 1.6% – below the overall rate of food inflation (2.9%) and therefore cheaper in real terms.

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Health and sustainability – the role of supermarkets

In October 2025, Lidl GB announced it had surpassed its 400% sales target to increase own-label meat free and plant-based milk by 2025 (from a 2020 baseline), reaching 694% (11). In a bid to appeal to customers seeking to eat more plant-based foods, Lidl launched over 20 new own-brand products, including marinated tofu, falafel and tortellini.

Lidl's plant-based sales target supports its commitment to align sales with the Planetary Health Diet (PHD) by 2050 – as part of its own health and sustainability commitments. It has short-term targets to:

- Increase the proportion of plant-based protein to 25% of total proteins sold by 2030.
- Increase the proportion of dairy alternatives to 12% of dairy sold by 2030.

Since introducing these targets, Lidl has progressed plant-protein sales from a 2021/22 baseline of 14.4% to 18% in 2024/25. This is in contrast to other retailers that have published protein sales data such as Sainsbury's, which saw a proportion of 13% plant-protein sales as a share of total protein sales in 2024/25 (12). However, Lidl's plant-based dairy sales dropped slightly from a 2021/22 baseline of 6.4% to 6.3% in 2024/25 (13). It recently published research showing that Britain met its '2026 Planetary Health Diet Overshoot Day' on 25th July – the tipping point where the country exceeds its annual recommended balance of foods for a healthy and sustainable diet, and highlighting their commitment to align food sales with the PHD (14).

The plant-based product range at a Lidl GB branch, July 2026.



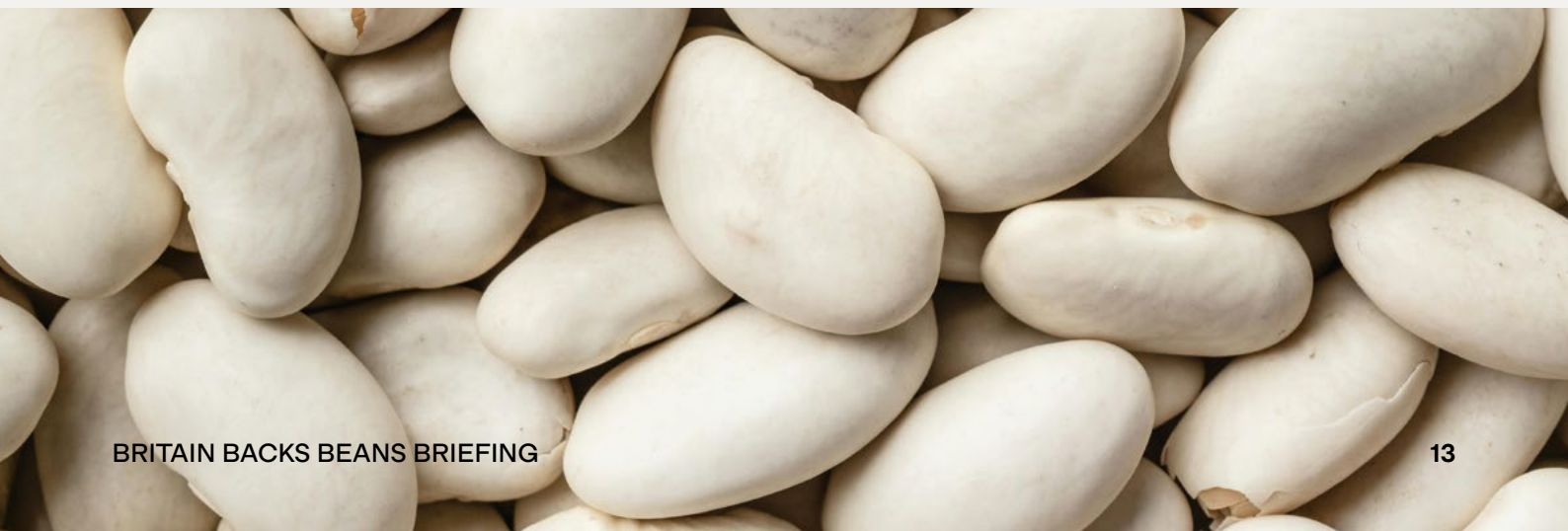
“The sales data shows that retailers can capitalise on the rising popularity of ‘natural’, high-fibre plant protein products, and their relatively low cost, to accelerate uptake of plant-based products among a wider range of consumers.”

Earlier this year, Tesco announced: ‘Plant-based food back in growth for first time in years thanks to veg-led scratch cooking trend.’ This came after NielsenIQ data revealed growth in volume demand for chilled plant-based food, including plant-based mince, tofu, tempeh and seitan, and plant-based snacking foods like falafel, picnic eggs and mini sausages (15). This is supported in part by the current data, which shows that sales of beans, pulses, tofu and tempeh, and products based on these ingredients, have increased, alongside some established products, like those made of mycoprotein. However, in June 2026, Tesco formally retired a target for PBMA sales that it set in 2019 and was unable to meet. It has yet to set a new public target for diversifying its protein sales – a necessity should retailers aim to meet their climate and sustainability commitments.

The most impactful and cost effective way for retailers to meet their net zero targets is by rebalancing protein sales toward a greater proportion of plant proteins – alongside other measures like reducing food waste and supporting regenerative farming practices (16). A recent report by Eunomia and Madre Brava found that this would achieve 64% of retailers’ supply chain emissions reductions targets, while saving money on climate measures. What’s more, setting targets in line with the PHD benefits consumer, as well as planetary, health. Modelling shows that adoption at scale could save almost 124,000 lives in the UK by reducing diet-related diseases, including coronary heart disease, stroke, type II diabetes and certain types of cancer (17).

A group of organisations, including Madre Brava, The Food Foundation, WWF, ProVeg and the Eating Better alliance, are calling on retailers to set targets for increasing plant protein sales relative to animal protein – with plants accounting for 30% of the protein category by 2030. While several UK supermarkets are acting to shift protein sales, and seven of the 11 major retailers are measuring the balance of plant to animal protein sales, only Lidl has a target (18).

The sales data shows that retailers can capitalise on the rising popularity of ‘natural’, high-fibre plant protein products, and their relatively low cost, to accelerate uptake of plant-based products among a wider range of consumers. Recent case studies from Europe, highlighted by the Planetary Alliance, show that ‘where businesses act, demand responds’ (19) SystemIQ projects that price parity, retailer action and behaviour change has potential to accelerate growth of plant protein in the UK (20).



Data and methodology

What the data can and cannot see

NielsenIQ's categories or sectors are not designed to track the protein shift and some plant-based products are likely to be in categories that this analysis has not covered. This is particularly the case for veg-led brands. For example, GOSH! appears here only through sausages – their range of burgers and other veg-led snacks are not included. This means veg-led products and new products are likely to be missed. As such, the growth reported here is likely higher than the data suggests and should be interpreted as a floor. The data records the number of packs and the retail sales value, not weight or volume in kilograms (apart from baked beans) so a shift in pack size is not visible in the remaining data.

Methodology

Retail sales data was purchased from NielsenIQ and analysed by Madre Brava (1). The data is defined as 'GB Total Coverage' which includes discounters (Aldi and Lidl) and compares two equal 26-week periods ending on 27 June 2026, compared with 26-weeks ending 28 June 2025. Unit sales ('demand') represents the number of packs sold, and value is the retail spend in £GBP. We report both units and value as the gap between them represents the change in average price per pack that can be influenced by inflation, pack size changes and shifts to cheaper or more expensive products, as well as consumer preferences. Based on our calculation of the ONS data, UK food and non-alcoholic drink inflation averaged around 2.9% for the first half of 2026 (21).

Categories included are plant-based dairy (soya, oat, nut and rice drinks, dairy-free yoghurts and cheeses, dairy alternative creams), meat substitutes across fresh, frozen and ambient formats which include tofu and tempeh, beans and pulses (canned and jarred beans, chickpeas and lentils, dried beans, peas and lentils, and baked beans). Baked beans are excluded from the headline figure, despite being the largest bean category, as a substantial proportion of the range contains processed meat. Where we can exclude processed meat, for branded baked beans, unit sales remain the same between the two periods. For meat substitutes, we conducted an ingredients analysis as the NielsenIQ dataset records an ingredients description. We grouped the descriptions into classes for clarity as displayed, apart from cases where descriptions were ambiguous to the protein source, which included product claims, such as 'vegan meat' or 'vegetable' or marked as 'other', 'not determined' or 'not applicable'. These examples were grouped and labelled 'Not specified by data provider'.

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