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# ‘It’s our job to evolve with consumers’: Tyson Foods on alternative protein

Justin Whitmore is the head of alternative protein for one of the world’s largest meat companies. In this interview, he shares his views on the future of food.



**The food industry** may well look back on 2019 as the year when alternative proteins went mainstream. After all, it’s the year in which Tyson Foods—the largest US food company and the world’s second-largest meat processor—named its first-ever head of alternative protein. Justin Whitmore took on the new role in February. Just months later, Tyson Foods introduced Raised & Rooted™, its first brand of plant-based and “blended” (made of both meat and plants) products.

In August, Whitmore spoke with McKinsey associate partner Jordan Bar Am in Chicago. They discussed food trends, how Tyson Foods will stay competitive, and what lies ahead in meat and protein consumption.

**McKinsey:** *For a big food company to put a top executive in charge of alternative protein is a huge step, especially considering how small the alt-protein market is relative to meat. What was the tipping point for Tyson Foods?*

**Justin Whitmore:** Alternative protein plays an important role in our “future of food” agenda. A question that’s on many minds about this market is, “Is this double-digit consumption growth just a fad?” But when we look at the data, we see a fundamental change in eating patterns among meat eaters across demographic groups. It’s not just in the cities, not just on the US coasts, not just with young people. So we see it as more of a lasting component of the broader protein-consumption landscape than a fad.

Consumers’ tastes will continue to evolve. It’s our job, as one of the world’s largest food companies, to evolve with them. So, it’s an “and,” not an “or.” I fully expect that beef, pork, chicken, and turkey will continue to be on people’s plates, and alternative protein will be another great option.

**McKinsey:** *Yet it's becoming a crowded playing field. Well-funded Silicon Valley start-ups as well as traditional players—Nestlé, Perdue Farms, Smithfield Foods—have all jumped into the alt-protein market. What does Tyson Foods have to do in the next decade to be not just a competitor but a leader in alternative proteins?*

**Justin Whitmore:** It's true that there are interesting new start-ups, and we've been investing in several of them through our venture-capital arm, Tyson Ventures. We realize that there are specific needs for specialized expertise when it comes to individual substrates like pea-protein isolate or concentrate, fava beans, wheat, or soy, so we'll be looking to bring in those experts to help us make the right decisions about the types of protein we work with and the propositions we can create from those proteins.

But I think some of the conversation about R&D and technology as the drivers of growth in plant-based protein doesn't match the reality of how the industry is behaving today. I'm not seeing a very robust list of new technological developments or patents. What I am seeing is pretty extraordinary culinary advances: companies making food that tastes good and providing that food to people in ways that resonate, with new brands and new market propositions. That's the same kind of blocking and tackling that Tyson Foods has always done successfully.

In my view, there are four things that position Tyson Foods to win: a great supply chain, great-tasting products, healthy products, and consumer and customer relationships built on trust. Those foundational things will set us apart and allow us to lead in the alt-protein space faster than many companies that have to build all that from scratch.

**McKinsey:** *Speaking of moving fast, Tyson Foods has been able to bring Raised & Rooted to market quickly. Speed and agility aren't typically core competencies of companies as big as yours. What do you think is the key to getting things done fast?*

**Justin Whitmore:** Big companies are going to have to figure out ways to move fast and respond quickly to how marketplaces are changing. You'll see some other players struggle in this new world because I think the spirit behind how leadership teams lead and invest will be different over the next 20 years than over the past 50. At Tyson Foods, we're setting up teams that behave like start-ups. They can operate on their own, with their own budgets. They're able to move capital around quickly and take risks that may not work out. "Failing forward," which is a term you hear often, is something that we're preaching in our company.

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## Justin Whitmore biography

### **Vital statistics**

Born in 1982 in Cleveland, Ohio

Married, with one child and one on the way

### **Education**

Holds an MBA from the University of Notre Dame

and a bachelor's degree from the University of

Alabama at Birmingham

### **Career highlights**

#### **Tyson Foods**

(2019)

Executive vice president, alternative protein

(2017–19)

Executive vice president corporate strategy

and chief venture & sustainability officer

#### **McKinsey**

(2014–17)

Associate partner

#### **Booz (now Strategy&)**

(2010–14)

Senior associate

#### **Johnson Controls**

(2005–09)

Various roles in production management, process

engineering, and procurement

### **Fast facts**

Serves on the corporate advisory board of the University of Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business

Is a member of the Executive Leadership Council, an organization for the development of global black leaders

Is included in *CNN's* 2019 list, "Risk Takers: The 20 leaders driving global business forward"

Was named as one of the 2018 Most Influential Blacks in Corporate America by *Savoy* magazine and one of the 300 Most Powerful Executives in Corporate America in 2017 by *Black Enterprise*

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### **McKinsey:** *What metrics are you watching closely in alternative proteins?*

**Justin Whitmore:** We're looking at growth rates across different demographic cuts. This is a growth industry that's coming off a small base, so we'll want to see that momentum continue, and we'll watch the categories where growth is occurring. We'll also be looking at the structure of the industry and where profit is generated. Is it through the retailers that ultimately serve the consumer and distribute the products? Or is there going to be more vertical integration in alternative proteins than in other packaged-goods industries? Tyson Foods has experience in these areas, and we understand the markers of success, so we're confident that we'll be able to compete.

Finally, we'll be looking at product development. Where is the best-tasting product showing up? Who are the chefs and the R&D experts helping to create these amazing products, and how do we either partner with them or bring them in house? We'll be able to identify them and attract them to Tyson Foods because our scale and the impact that we can have on the world of food are appealing to people—particularly when they see our internal commitment to the alternative-protein space.

**McKinsey:** *Your core business is meat. How are your investments in alternative proteins being viewed by people in the traditional meat industry? Is that something you think about?*

**Justin Whitmore:** We think about it all the time. Many farmers view alternative protein as a threat to their livelihood, so it's vital for us to communicate to farmers that our core meat business will remain central to our vision for the future of food.

Unfortunately, when you look at a lot of the media out there about alternative proteins, you see a different narrative—one that excludes farmers. We cannot, as a company, leave behind farmers who are the bedrock of who we are around the world. It's critical for us to partner in this process and work together to improve upon what we do today. We have people on the ground working every day alongside farmers, helping them deploy new practices that will create an even more sustainable future.

**McKinsey:** *What impact has the growing demand for alternative proteins had on the environmental and social practices of Tyson Foods?*

**Justin Whitmore:** Alternative protein itself is not going to compel Tyson Foods to behave differently. Instead, our values and our responsibility as the largest food company in the United States is what compels us to behave in new ways. My view is that alternative protein becomes another element in our business that must operate as sustainably as possible. For example, topics like deforestation affect plant-based protein. So rather than thinking about sustainability in proteins as “one is good, one is not,” we need to think about creating the right supply chain in the most sustainable way possible across proteins.

**McKinsey:** *Any controversial predictions about meat and proteins in 2030?*

**Justin Whitmore:** In 2030, Tyson Foods will be the global protein leader.

**Jordan Bar Am**, an associate partner in McKinsey's New Jersey office, conducted this interview.

[For more from Justin Whitmore, see the videos accompanying this article on McKinsey.com.](#)

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