

## Veg-centric Menus

### Introduction

Whether it's meat-loving chefs embracing "vegetable butchery" or the new ways veggie burgers are showing up on even the beefiest of hamburger menus, the topics of vegetarianism, veganism, flexitarianism, pescatarianism and "Meatless Mondays" get weekly attention in newspapers across the country. Beyond the media hype, a few forces are driving the interest in meatless fare: the local food movement and the popularity of farmers markets have been giving produce a boost for several years now. Consumers are trying to find interesting ways to eat better-for-you foods. Once limited to tofu and other meat stand-ins, today's meat-free options have improved greatly, and chefs are seeing the value in letting produce star on the plate. And as beef and other protein prices rise, vegetarian menu options become a cost-effective alternative. Meat-free options are getting a second look, and when they taste good, diners will return to them.



While vegetarians and vegans may represent a small part of the market—experts put the figure around 3%—there are plenty of reasons to add more vegetable options to any menu, and inventive menus are showing that there are more tantalizing ways to do so. This reports takes a closer look at the "why's and how's" of taking a more veggie-centric approach to menu development, through all segments of the industry.

### Room for Growth

Vegetarian menu item claims are up 28% (2011 vs. 2008). Pizza emerges as the number one vegetarian menu item. Much vegetarian menu development happens outside of the top 10 list, with Italian panini and calzones coming on strong as vegetarian options. Mexican cuisine emerges as an area of steady growth, which makes sense because most Mexican entrees come with a bean protein option.

Beyond Italian and Mexican restaurants, there's a mixed bag of menu news bringing more vegetarian and vegan fare to restaurant tables; from "Meatless Mondays" in fine dining to new vegetarian restaurant concepts emerging in the quick service restaurants (QSRs), and lots of menu development in between.

### Fine Dining Puts Produce on a Pedestal

As with many trends in foodservice, ripples start in fine dining venues and work their way downmarket, and that's true of the flexitarian approach to the menu. Fine dining and independent chefs and operators were the first to get behind the locavore movement, and using the local bounty is bound to put the spotlight on produce. Many chefs have taken this a step further by developing more veggie-heavy menu standards, by offering special fixed price vegetarian menus or by having harvest celebrations that may not be entirely vegetarian, but that focus on one or two garden-fresh ingredients.

This segment is also leading the way with offering "Meatless Monday" specials. In earlier times, the nation pulled together and skipped meat because of scarcity during wartimes, but today's "Meatless" days have more to do with chef creativity, menu variety and diners' desires. None other than Mario Batali gave "Meatless Mondays" a boost when he signed his restaurants onto Meatless Mondays. Batali has also committed some of his Eataly food emporium real estate to a mostly vegetarian restaurant, Le Verdure, where meat-free or pescatarian fare takes a "chalkboard" menu approach to the daily harvest.

- **Adour** in Washington, D.C., features a 5-course vegetarian, wine-paired menu every Monday. A recent dinner included a beet salad, gazpacho, mushroom risotto, poached asparagus with a slow cooked egg and a dessert of roasted pineapple for \$65.
- Philadelphia's **Meritage Restaurant** prepares an elegant Tuesday-night vegan prix fixe. In Healdsburg, CA, Cyrus restaurant gives equal billing to its multi-course garden-themed menus.
- In Las Vegas, **Wynn Resorts** recently added vegan options at all the restaurants in its two casinos, where a veggie burger blends soy, pea and wheat protein with grains like kamut and quinoa. Even its steakhouse, SW, made room on the menu for a grilled royal trumpet mushrooms entrée.

### Vegetarian Global Cuisine

Vegetarian claims are more likely to be found in global cuisines, with Mexican, Italian, Chinese, Asian, Sichuan and Greek cuisines leading the way. Here are some examples of the veg-friendly fare diners can find in both vegetarian concepts and otherwise:

- **Candle Café** – This casual vegetarian café in Manhattan has an extensive menu of 72 wholesome, healthful items like the Paradise Casserole, with layers of sweet potato, black beans and millet over steamed greens with country gravy. Sesame Crusted Tofu is served with black rice pilaf, steamed greens, sautéed gingered vegetables and green coconut curry sauce. Served with arame coulis and kimchee.

### Top 10 Vegetarian Menu Items/Dishes:

1. Pizza
2. Sandwiches/Sub
3. Burrito
4. Tofu
5. Burger (Veggie/Garden)
6. Soup
7. Wrap
8. Asian Delight
9. Vegetable Platter
10. Enchilada



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# Culinary Trends

- **Pasta Pomodoro's** menu has 19 vegetarian options, and many pasta dishes are available with a cannellini bean add-on, upping the protein quotient for meat-free eaters. For instance, the Verdure Fettuccine al Fredo isn't the usual cream-heavy dish. Here, a seasonal vegetable medley is sautéed with extra virgin olive oil and garlic or spicy pomodoro sauce. Diners can add Tuscan cannellini beans or organic farro for a heartier meal.
- **Roti Mediterranean Grill:** With six units in Chicago, Roti builds on an Eastern Mediterranean inspiration. Diners take a three-step approach to building sandwiches, salads or plate meals with chicken, steak, kabobs, falafel or roasted vegetables and a bounty of toppings, including hummus, olives, eggplant and flavorful sauces like red pepper aioli and a Middle Eastern hot pepper sauce called skhug.
- **Maoz:** Also focusing on the garbanzo bean, Maoz is an entirely meat-free QSR in growth mode, targeting urban centers and college towns. Here, the very simple menu includes falafel sandwiches and salads with hummus, eggplant, avocado, baba ganoush and hard-boiled eggs offered as extras. Sides include Belgian, sweet potato or mixed fries.

## Veg-Centric Menu Tips

**Make Beans Count:** Garbanzo, edamame, refried: a side or add-on of beans can turn any meat-free dish into a main course for vegetarians

**Resize Sides:** Offer bigger side dish portions or a side sampler for diners who want to skip the main event

**Make a Note:** Many restaurants, like True Food Café, make note of vegetarian and gluten-free options in menu copy, but don't create a separate section, which might get overlooked by flexitarians.

**Let Veggies Shine:** Instead of using vegetables, grains or vegetable protein to make meat-like "steaks" or "chicken," let mushrooms, root vegetables, grains and beans stand on their own merit.

**Give it a Day:** Not all operations are ready to skip meat, but giving a day over to vegetable specials is a good way to start a more flexitarian approach.

**Celebrate the Season:** Seasonal specials and harvest celebrations are another way to put the focus on produce.

**Have Options:** Adding a tofu and/or a grilled vegetable option to a protein line-up of beef, chicken and fish is an easy way to make sandwiches and salads vegetarian ready.

**Bank on a Better Burger:** With handcrafted, smashed and slathered versions of veggie burger, diners are willing to take another look.

**Let Them Build It:** Several emerging chains (and many established ones) make meals easy for any dietary restrictions with build-your-own service lines that offer an interactive way for diners to choose their ingredients.

## Demand for Better Health Will Yield more Vegetarian Menu Options

Beyond media attention, two other forces are bringing vegetarian menu options to the front burner in foodservice. First, there is the growing acceptance and endorsements from public health organizations for increased produce

consumption. In June of this year, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) released its new and greatly revised *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and "My Plate" icon, the two primary recommendations of which were: enjoy what you eat, just eat less of it and to save half your plate for fruits and vegetables. The USDA, the Mayo Clinic and the American Heart Association have all added statements to their eating guidelines that say that vegetarian diets can meet all the recommendations for nutrients and provide tips for eating the right variety and amounts of foods to meet eat a balanced, meatless diet.

The other significant force behind vegetarian eating is consumer demand. Mintel consumer surveys show that a significant percentage of consumers—30%—see vegetarian menu options as a way to eat more healthfully when dining out and want to see more of those vegetarian options on the menu. This figure is even greater among the 18-to-34 age group, a demographic that has experienced more vegetarian options in college dining. This group of consumers is some of the heaviest restaurant users and will continue to be heavy restaurant users in the decades to come, so paying attention to their dining demands will yield great results for produce usage and flexitarian menu options in the future.

## Veggie Burgers Get Some Respect

Just as hand-formed, fresh "better burgers" have given burgers a boost, better vegetarian burgers have been getting culinary attention lately, both from notable chefs and in some of the up-and-coming burger chains.

Trade magazine *Nation's Restaurant News* recently (6/14/11) put veggie burgers in the spotlight, with a recent roundup of some of the more notable versions in growing chains. Here, operators stress that a signature meatless burger helps an operation stand out from the crowds serving the same frozen patties.

- Five-unit **Burger Lounge** developed its own quinoa, brown rice and chickpea burger, punctuated with veggies and given a textural boost from panko and cheese. The chain also offers a salmon burger for flexitarians.
- **Smashburger** will extend its signature smashing technique to a veggie burger being added to the menu later this summer. The chain's scratch-made black bean version will be "smashed" on the grill like the chain's namesake beef burger.
- **Elevation Burger**, with 18 units, offers two meat-free burgers; the vegetarian version uses cheddar and mozzarella cheeses as the glue keeping brown rice, veggies and rolled oats together. The vegan option holds the cheese and adds soy protein to the mix.



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