

## **Dining Out — The Plant-Based Way In Ethnic Restaurants**

By Kay Bushnell

Those who are making the transition to a healthful plant-based diet may wonder how easy it is to enjoy delicious plant based meals in restaurants. Fortunately, the restaurant industry has become aware of the growing demand for plant-based food.

A 1992 Gallup Poll conducted for the National Restaurant Association found that almost twenty percent of diners seeks meatless entrees when eating out, and most college dining halls are now providing vegetarian meal choices for students. Restaurants that specialize in all-vegetarian fare are becoming more numerous. There are a few ethnic restaurants where every dish is 100% plant-based. However, any restaurant can put together tasty vegetarian meals if their patrons help them out by knowing some ordering basics.

When requesting a plant based meal, throw hesitation to the wind and polish up your questioning skills. Both your satisfaction and the restaurateur's goal of pleasing diners depend on clarification of your needs. The few minutes you take to explain politely what you want will make a big difference in your dining experience. Being timid about making requests can help you maintain a low profile among your fellow diners but may lower your chances for a satisfactory meal.

Ethnic restaurants are usually good places to look for plant-based meals. Chinese, Thai, and Japanese restaurants offer noodle, rice, and tofu stir-fried dishes. However, Asian restaurants may use meat flavoring in broths or sauces unless you clearly request otherwise. Ask the server in Thai restaurants to leave out the fish sauce, an ingredient which is pervasive in Thai food.

Indian restaurants can prepare delicious dishes with lentils, rice, and flatbreads. If you wish to avoid clarified butter (ghee) ask which dishes are free of ghee. In Italian restaurants marinara sauce, pasta primavera, and minestrone soup are sometimes made without meat products. Ask if there is meat or beef broth in the sauces and soups. Fresh pasta usually contains eggs; dried pasta often doesn't.

The hearty bean tacos, bean and vegetable burritos, meat-free tostadas, and salsas of varying degrees of spiciness prepared by Mexican restaurants can be delicious and filling. Some Mexican restaurants feature lard-free beans, but unless you know for sure that the restaurant doesn't use lard (pork fat) in their beans, specifically request lard-free beans – “frijoles sin manteca de puerco” (free-hole-ace seen mawntayka day pwairco.)

Middle Eastern restaurants usually offer rich-tasting, creamy hummus made with chickpeas and tahini (sesame seed butter), falafel (seasoned, mashed and fried chickpeas), and tabouli (made with bulgur wheat). Hummus is an ideal fast food and elegant appetizer for any gathering. Serve it at your next social event and watch how quickly this irresistible, nourishing spread will disappear.

For a list of vegetarian-friendly restaurants around the world consult [www.VegDining.com](http://www.VegDining.com). Another resource is *The Vegetarian Journal's Guide to Natural Foods Restaurants in the U.S. and Canada* available at [www.vrg.org/catalog/guide.htm](http://www.vrg.org/catalog/guide.htm) or 1-410-366-8343.