

Plant-Based Dining in American-Style Restaurants

by Kay Bushnell

Think creatively when patronizing restaurants that specialize in traditional American cuisine. Some professional American culinary schools are now teaching their students to produce gourmet meals without relying on animal-based ingredients. As a result, some progressive restaurants are offering an all plant-based menu. However, many chefs in the kitchens of today's restaurants had their professional training years ago.

Numerous recipes in traditional American cookbooks call for meat, meat broth, dairy products, and eggs. American palates have become accustomed to these tastes. However, both diners and chefs are becoming aware that sumptuous meals can be enjoyed without animal products. (See *Cooking Green, Loma Prieta* July/August 2003.) Even a very meaty restaurant menu may have one or two all-plant dishes, perhaps among the side orders or in the appetizer section. Restaurant managers want to please their patrons and need to hear from them. It's a simple case of supply and demand. The more requests for plant-based dishes that chefs receive, the more likely they are to offer them.

If you have time to plan a day or two ahead, call the restaurant and ask if it can fax a menu to you. If there is no plant-based option on the menu you can call the chef during the restaurant's off-hours. Most chefs will be delighted to prepare something that will please you. Try to keep your requests simple, especially if you will be dining when the restaurant is busy. If you can't call ahead, and plant-based choices are conspicuously absent from the menu when you sit down to order, request a plate with a combination of side dishes such as salad, baked potatoes with various toppings, rice, grilled vegetables, and pasta. Very often the chef will present this dish so attractively that others at your table will wish they had ordered the same thing.

Creative chefs will sometimes modify an existing menu item to make it entirely plant-based. For example, a seafood and pasta dish can become pasta with grilled vegetables and herbs. Any restaurant that has both pasta and vegetables in its kitchen can produce a simple pasta primavera. Even several of the nation's largest fast food chains offer veggie burgers (or burger-free buns and trimmings) as well as bean and fruit salads.

Scanning the restaurant's menu for plant-based options and calling ahead are basic steps to enjoying a delicious plant-based meal. Your chance of success will improve if you ask specific questions. For example, the word "vegetable" on the menu may not mean vegetarian. Vegetables, grain dishes, and sauces over vegetables can be flavored with chicken stock, beef stock, veal stock, anchovy paste, or oyster sauce. Butter tends to be ubiquitous in the food of many restaurants. Your server may need to question the chef before providing you with answers, which may or may not be transmitted accurately, especially if the restaurant is busy. This is another reason to contact the chef ahead of time.

Expect the cost of a plant-based meal, even one with smaller portions, to be about the same as other menu items. The cost of labor will be about the same, and the effort that

goes into a specially created plant-based meal in a restaurant that does not feature plant-based dishes may be greater than usual. Politely urge the restaurant's manager and chef to offer more plant-based dishes on the menu. Let them know how much you appreciate their efforts to please you by preparing a special dish.

Be patient and encouraging with restaurant personnel who are learning about plant based food. Express thanks for their efforts with the tips you leave. Remember to focus on the joy of conversation with friends and family so that even a disappointing meal can be a pleasurable social experience. At first it may seem as if plant-based dining out requires too much effort. However, it's worth it, and it gets easier. Soon these steps will become a routine, resulting in delicious plant-based meals that are easy on our planet.

For a list of vegetarian-friendly restaurants around the world consult www.VegDining.com and www.happycow.net. 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 or 1-410-366-8343.