

VEGETARIAN beyond meatless Monday

BEYOND MEATLESS MONDAY

Veggie-centric center-of-the-plate
is no longer optional on
menus—it's expected.

By Karen Weisberg





When meat, wheat and lots of other staples were scarce during World War I and World War II, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration urged Americans to do their part for the war effort by foregoing consumption of these items on meatless Mondays and wheat-less Wednesdays. In those war-torn years, the paramount need was conservation of resources.

However, by 2003, it was evident that American consumption of meat had skyrocketed. On average, we were consuming as much as 75 pounds more per person, per year than our parents and grandparents had consumed. The meatless Monday concept was given new life and relevancy by former adman/health advocate Sid Lerner, who teamed up with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health’s Center for a Livable Future.

Over the past dozen years, the Meatless Monday nonprofit initiative has been embraced by renowned chefs, by Oprah Winfrey, by Baltimore City Public Schools (the first school system to join) and by weight-loss specialist Jenny Craig. Participation in Meatless Monday has become a worldwide movement—with a basis in common sense. When choosing to eliminate meat from the diet once a week, Monday is recognized as the best day for it, psychologically. Studies show that people are most optimistic about starting a new diet or resolving to give up a bad habit on the first day of the week.

In March, Meatless Monday partnered with Natural Gourmet Institute (NGI), a New York-based provider of health-supportive culinary education, for a presentation during the International Restaurant & Foodservice Show of New York at the Javits Center. The discussion highlighted the potential health benefits—reducing the risk of preventable diseases, including cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity—of going meat-free one day a week. Diana Rice, a registered dietitian with Meatless Monday, cited the benefit to the planet “by conserving fossil fuels and water and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.” Olivia Roszkowski, a chef-instructor with NGI and a umami flavor specialist, offered tastings.

school vegan

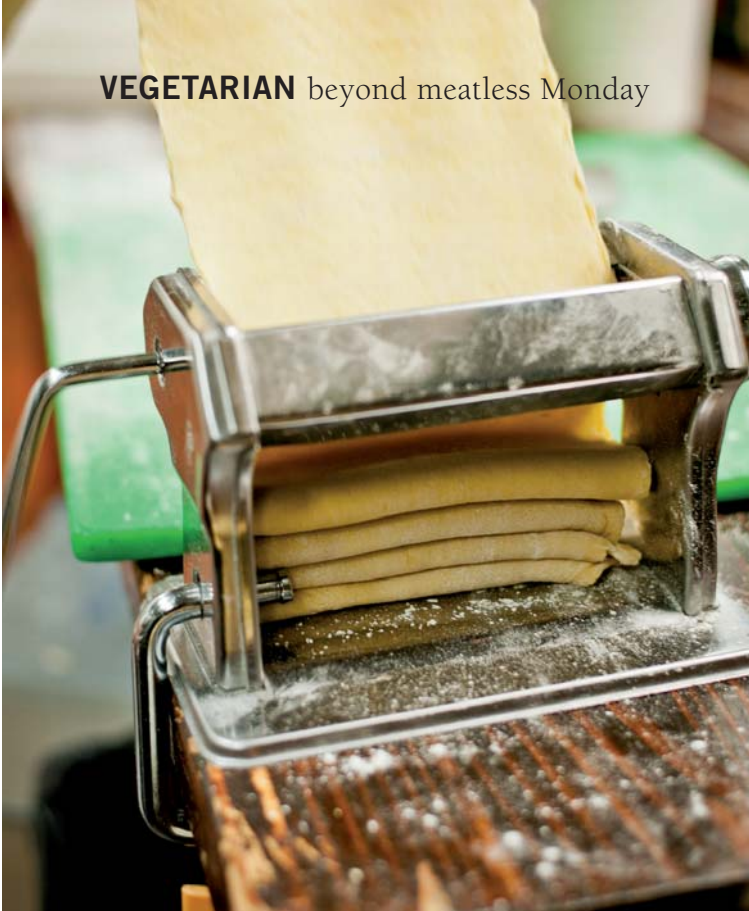
Bon Appétit Management Company, Palo Alto, California, aims to offer guests the freshest foods using locally grown products prepared healthfully and deliciously. At the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, there’s at least one Meatless Monday option provided each week at B & T Cafe in Hill College House. Donald Stauffer, executive chef, says he’s delighted to find a large, vocal vegan contingent involved.

“There are about 250 Vegan Society student members campus-wide looking out for the health and wellbeing of all students, as well as the ethical treatment of farm workers and animals,” he says. Five or six members meet with the dining services team once a week. “Their big concern is having healthy options available—they push us to reinvent what we’re offering as vegetarian/vegan and to make the items more enticing and healthy.”

With the vegetarian line 100% vegan, he knows it’s also safe for students with dairy or nut allergies. In addition to an entree, often featuring tofu or seitan from a local supplier, veggie burgers are available daily and there’s a Meatless Monday feature at lunchtime. “It’s mostly pasta bars plus seitan, a popular

Opposite: Stuffed savory cabbage with tofu, chard, lentils, brown rice and tomato/tamarind at Pangea.

Above: Hand-cut fettuccine with vegetarian Bolognese is on the menu at Late Harvest Kitchen.



hit,” Stauffer says. “For example, we’ll do a Southern-fried seitan. Of course, just because it’s vegan, it doesn’t mean it’s healthier—it just means it’s without meat or meat products.”

Asian food in general and curries in particular are popular on campus, and Stauffer, who enjoys challenging himself to do more in the way of vegan dishes, created a popular roasted vegetarian curry with eggplant, zucchini and yellow squash and a coconut milk base. He’s also created tempeh marsala as a vegan play on chicken marsala.

healthy business

At Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield in Pittsburgh, executive chef Cameron Clegg makes sure that healthy choices are the first items on the cafeteria serving line each day. Clegg and his Parkhurst Dining Services staff track sales of these options and find that about 85% of those who choose them identify themselves as vegetarians. “We’ve been on trend with vegetarian, and we’re now moving to veggie-centric to showcase vegetables as the main entree,” he says. “That’s been a lot of our thinking and recipe development during the past year.”

A hydroponic garden has been established in a corner of the cafeteria, and seedlings are just about mature enough for Clegg to snip and use. Bell peppers, chives, basil, lavender, spearmint, peppermint, Swiss chard, arugula and mixed baby greens are in the short-term plan. “It’s creating a lot of buzz in the cafeteria,” he says. “My goal is to harvest all our basil and parsley this year—to start with those two so we don’t have to purchase them. It doesn’t get any fresher than this.” He plans to use some of the

hydroponic produce at the Chef’s Table just inside the door to the cafeteria, where he frequently provides menu samples.

A vegan cauliflower steak was a recent hit with guests and is one of his favorites. To prepare, he removes the green leafy outside, leaving the core intact. “Slice as steaks, lay the slices out on a sheet tray, and season with salt and pepper,” Clegg says. “Roast to soften the vegetable, add blackening seasoning and saute. Grill, flip it over like a steak, then cook until it’s nice and soft all the way through.” He suggests serving it with smoked tomato relish on the side, like a steak sauce, finishing with a sprinkle of fresh herbs.

For Highmark guests pining for beef stroganoff but who want a meatless option, there’s a wild-mushroom stroganoff, a stir-fry prepared from some of Pennsylvania’s best local mushroom varieties. Clegg sautes them in light olive oil with onions, garlic and some vegetable broth, and tightens with a cornstarch/water slurry. The mushrooms are served over noodles, with or without fat-free sour cream for added richness.

“Basically, variety is key—plus having all seasonal vegetables in-house—for creating a menu with satisfying vegetarian options,” Clegg says.

Above, clockwise from left: 1) Handmade pasta prepared daily is a popular vegetarian option at Late Harvest Kitchen. 2) Pangea’s roasted whole celery root is plated and ‘carved’ tableside. 3) Tastings were part of a presentation at the International Restaurant & Foodservice Show of New York on the potential health benefits of going meat-free one day a week.

Opposite, top right: This North African vegetable tagine at Late Harvest Kitchen is popular with everyone, including nonvegetarians. Opposite, bottom left: Winter vegetable broth with crisp vegetables, croutons, curry oil, seaweed and basil is on the menu at Pangea.

flavor pop

Three years ago, when Ryan Nelson opened Late Harvest Kitchen in Indianapolis, he planned to focus on bold, hearty flavors. Today, that’s exactly what the menu reflects. Several items may change daily and a handful rotate seasonally, while some—such as the North African vegetable tagine with couscous, golden raisins, feta cheese, apricot chutney and chermoula—have gained a permanent niche. “It’s been on for the last six months and it’s growing in popularity—even nonvegetarians order it,” says Mark Marlar, executive sous chef.

Up to 25 orders are prepared each evening. “For the tagine, we use a small clay pot with vegetable stock in couscous, adding raisins a la minute,” Marlar says. Spring vegetables might include baby carrots, squash, spring peas, broccolini or rapini. A pesto of cumin, coriander, black pepper, olive oil, citrus, fenugreek and other dried floral spices is drizzled over the stack of vegetables in the tagine. The dish is finished with chermoula, apricot chutney and feta cheese (omitted for vegans).

Handmade pasta prepared daily is a popular vegetarian option. Customers have come to expect a rotation of butternut squash ravioli, ricotta cheese ravioli, lemon-stuffed ravioli, bucatini and the ever-popular handmade fettuccine, vegetarian Bolognese and house ricotta cheese.

The Bolognese preparation begins with a basic tomato sauce. “We blanch, peel, seed and rough-chop tomatoes. Then we add carrot, onion and celery, plus mushrooms for meatiness—perhaps nice chanterelles, morels or simple creminis,” Marlar says. Everything is seasonal, and house ricotta cheese garnishes the dish.

As the weather turns warmer, the herb garden on the patio produces flowers, as well as parsley, cilantro, mint and thyme for additional fresh-flavor pop.



a lesson in production, harvest

Theo Roe, an assistant professor at The Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, New York, was in charge of creating and overseeing Pangea, the 60-seat pop-up restaurant “with a focus on Earth’s diverse cultural flavors and influences,” which opened to the public in February. “We must engage in intense conversations about how to produce and harvest the food we eat, and the effect that has on the health of our planet and ourselves,” Roe says.

Guests can choose to order from five-course regular or vegetarian menus. Some items, such as winter vegetable broth (crisp vegetables and croutons, curry oil, seaweed, basil) and Pangea flatbread (edamame salsa, eggplant chutney, red beet hummus) are identical. However, Roe points to wild mushrooms steamed in retsina broth as typical of the dishes conceived to be vegetarian and not just substituting animal protein. “The mushroom dish is full-flavored and can easily replace the regular menu’s mussels steamed in retsina broth,” he says. “And because it doesn’t look much different, no one feels like a second-class citizen.”

The dish is plated with fregola and pine-needle fries that Roe has created as a tongue-in-cheek play on the classic French mussels and fries. “We use real pine needles stuck in with the fries—and set it on fire,” he says.

Roasted celery root, as well as root vegetable couscous tagine (with saffron, apricots, preserved lemon and harissa), are identical on the regular and vegetarian menus. The roasted celery root preparation begins with the root steamed in a combi oven before roasting in a wood-burning oven. It’s finished with herb butter (infused oil can be substituted) and glazed honey, with additional glaze poured over tableside.

“The service style is a great classic approach—it’s plated and ‘carved’ tableside, French service style,” Roe says. “We’re carving it like a rack of lamb—like meat, not a vegetable. Celery root is probably not the sexiest item, but the way we can break it out tableside is unique.”

In creating the Pangea menu, Roe went vegetable first. Then, he suggests, “Add meat if you want to, not the other way around.” ■



NEW YORK-BASED AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST KAREN WEISBERG HAS COVERED THE ISSUES AND LUMINARIES OF THE FOOD-AND-BEVERAGE WORLD—BOTH COMMERCIAL AND NONCOMMERCIAL—FOR MORE THAN 25 YEARS.