

CENTER-PLATE *Shift*

Even protein-loving chefs see the beauty of piling vegetarian, vegan or produce-heavy options onto menus

At Temple Bar and offshoot Russell House Tavern in Cambridge, Mass., cracked-wheat salad is just one meatless offering inspired by chef Michael Scelfo's recent dietary changes and weight loss.



TEMPLE BAR/RUSSELL HOUSE TAVERN

BY JOAN LANG

In this meat-celebrating menu age of cured pork, hanger steak and crispy sweetbreads, what's a vegetarian diner to do? A lot, as it turns out.

Today's chefs and restaurants are nothing if not inclusive, and the popularity of all things local, seasonal and farm-raised has inspired creative menu-makers to prepare innovative and delicious food that also happens to be meatless. Even carnivorous restaurants like Animal, in Los Angeles, where chef/owners Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo are famously in your face about whole-beast cooking, offer vegetarian choices.

Earlier this year, in fact, the pair suspended their regular menu for a week to join forces with chef Jeremy Fox, formerly of Napa's vegetable-centric Ubuntu, for seven nights of an "exclusive, prix fixe, multicourse collaboration

of vegetables paired with thoughtfully chosen wine and beer." The event was total sell-out — of the very best kind.

INCLUSIVE MENUS

The message seems to be: If the ingredients inspire, let them set the menu. Customers can sort out for themselves whether they want to be omnivores or vegetarians, flexitarians or vegans. Many observers have even noted that the trend toward humanely raised and consciously sourced animal protein has convinced many vegetarians to indulge in meat once in a while.

"It's certainly not our intention, but we have gotten some converts," agrees Eric Fenster, co-owner, with Ari Derfel, of Berkeley's new Gather restaurant, which aims to serve as many kinds of eaters as there are out there.

Cleveland's Bistro 185 serves hand-made herb pappardelle loaded with vegetables and available with or without shrimp, salmon or chicken.





TEMPLE BAR

Today's veg-focused chefs are determined to prove that vegetarian meals — like Temple Bar's skillet-baked eggplant entrée — deliver as much flavor and craveability as those with meat.

“Our concept from the beginning was to create the ultimate acceptability, whether you're a strict vegan or gluten-intolerant or a meat eater,” Fenster explains.

Even the name, Gather, speaks to the inclusivity of the menu. The restaurant's meticulous sourcing strategy — with an “unwavering commitment to choosing only foods that are cultivated safely, justly and sustainably” — has helped create what Fenster describes as an atmosphere of trust that invites vegans to sit down with carnivores and feel good about it.

“The kind of meats we serve have even solved some of the problems vegetarians and vegans have with meat,” he reports.

Fenster and Derfel arrived at this point when they worked with Sean Baker at Millennium, the groundbreaking vegan restaurant in San Francisco. There, Baker took a “root to shoot” approach for three years and explored all the possibilities of sustainably sourced and incredibly presented vegetarian and vegan food, says Fenster.

Now the chef at Gather, Baker continues to cultivate new ideas for produce-based cooking. In his hands, even the strict vegan diet, in which no animal products whatsoever are used, is no longer the ascetic choice that the lifestyle implies.

“Our idea at Gather is that 50 percent of the menu will be vegetarian at all times, and half of that will be completely vegan,” notes Fenster. “But most people order things and don't even realize that there's no meat.”

Yes, there are the now-inevitable house-cured meats with seasonal accompaniments, but the menu item propelling Gather into the stratosphere is the “Vegan” Charcuterie, a market-inspired selection of items that might include chickpea pâté with roasted cauliflower; German butterball potatoes with olives; roasted beets with cashew “crème fraîche”; pistachio-garlic pesto; and marinated hen of the woods and king trumpet mushrooms with avocado puree and crispy tofu skin.

The \$16 plate has been a huge hit, says Fenster, who notes it's ordered by more than 25 percent of all parties on any given night.

“It’s very labor-intensive and very, very beautiful,” he says. “We try to get Sean to scale back, but this is the guy who sees a carrot and starts thinking of all the different ways he can serve it — not just the carrot itself, but a carrot-top pesto or a creamed fennel bulb garnished with fennel fronds and fennel pollen.”

The second- and third-best-selling items might be the Prather Ranch burger and the chicken under a brick, but Baker really wants to “get those vegetables to sing that glory,” says Fenster.

FLEXING MEATLESS MUSCLE

It’s certainly true that many operators and chefs view the creation of satisfying, meatless items as an exercise in innovation and skill.

“It’s a great challenge to make delicious food without relying on the usual ingredients that add flavor,” says Michael Scelfo, executive chef of Temple Bar, in Cambridge, Mass., and now Russell House Tavern, a new “modern American tavern” whose parent company is The Grafton Group. “No butter, no blue cheese, no bacon. You have to really think outside the box when you’re not working with the three B’s.”

Scelfo’s embrace of meatless options came at the tail end of a personal experience: losing 75 pounds by approaching eating in whole new ways. Although there were a few meatless items on the menu at the seasonally focused Temple Bar when Scelfo took over several years ago, he was determined to dispel the myth — for himself and his customers — that vegetarians and vegans eat only soy-based, imitation meat and tofu by the tub.

A weekly, three-course, \$38 all-veggie, prix-fixe menu, showcasing the likes of Creamless Sudbury Creamed Corned with roasted chanterelle mushrooms; grilled asparagus and arugula salad; and Michael’s Mom’s Stuffed Zucchini with pan-roasted cherry tomatoes, crispy fennel and basil slaw, was a tremendous hit, bringing in all kinds of new customers.

Though still committed to the nose-to-tail approach, especially at the pub-style, casual Russell House Tavern, Scelfo applied the veg-heavy lessons he’d learned to the Tavern’s menu with such meatless specialties as Hearth Baked Pasta with grilled ramps, sweet peas and Fontina cheese; Cast Iron Roasted Vegetables

The FLAVOR PAYOFF

Pro Tips for Letting Vegetables Shine

Kaegan Welch, the chef for Le Pain Quotidien’s Central Park location in New York City, shares some tricks designed to kick up the flavor and satiation of vegetarian food.

Tea Up: Welch adds Lapsang Souchong tea bags to the poaching water for lentil soup and other bean dishes; the tea brings a deep, smoky flavor, resembling bacon or meat stock. “Just be sure to fish them out after about 20 or 30 minutes, after their flavor has been extracted, to keep the tea from turning bitter,” notes the chef.

Pick Heavy Vegetables: Hearty vegetables like mushrooms, squash and roots are filling and satisfying. Welch’s wild-mushroom-and-vegetable lasagna incorporates celery root and toothsome whole-wheat pasta topped with ricotta, Parmesan and a dusting of porcini powder. “The different layers of flavor and texture create a very satisfying, complex dish that’s also very healthy,” says Welch.

Tweak with Technique: A dusting of porcini powder packs a umami finish. Slow-roasted leeks add complexity and richness to many of Welch’s recipes, while searing firm tofu achieves a crisp exterior.

Like Butter: Welch is a big fan of products like raw cashew butter, which emulsifies just as well as regular butter or cream.

Hit All Notes: Combine savory, sweet and aromatic — like nuts, raisins and garlic — to create full-bodied flavors and depth.

with green-herb pistou; and a batch of Tavern Pizzas that include The Farmer’s Pie, with seasonal market vegetables and herb puree, and The Angry Queen, topped with marinated, roasted tomatoes and basil.

“I learned how to satisfy myself with foods like roasted vegetables and grains when I was dieting, and I built up a whole new repertoire that I could translate to a restaurant menu,” says the chef, who also put items like Painted Hills Steak Tartare, House Charcuterie and Ozark Heritage Pork Trio (loin, belly and shoulder with grits) on the Russell House menu.

“Definitely, in Cambridge, it’s a great thing to be able to serve creative food that happens to be meatless, even when you serve great



Growing franchise Maoz takes an upgraded fast-food approach to vegetarian fare, heavy on hand-made falafel, salads and fries.

steak frites and house-made duck ham,” he explains. “There still aren’t a lot of places around here that do both things right, and if you can, it’s a great feather in your cap.”

VEGETARIAN DEMOGRAPHICS

Urban areas with a dense population of younger, college-age or educated clientele are a prime market for vegetarian options; some might even say you can’t get by in such a location without them. But many operators also realize that it’s not so much the absence of meat that appeals to customers as it is the presence of ingredients that are perceived as healthy.

“In the U.S., the real trend is for nutrition-conscious food, not vegetarian per se,” says Jim Facella, chief operating officer of Maoz Vegetarian USA, the U.S. franchisor of a quick-service falafel sandwich specialist that took root in Amsterdam in 1991.

With units in such college-adjacent locations as Union Square (near New York University) in New York City; Berkeley, Calif.; and New Brunswick, N.J. (near Rutgers), Maoz dishes up a menu of under-500-calorie vegetarian specialties, including falafel sandwiches with fresh toppings from the salad bar, Belgian fries (including a sweet-potato version) with sauce, seasonal soup and other items that appeal to health-conscious young diners who also appreciate the \$8 average check. Additional locations are

opening or being planned in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Austin, Washington, D.C., and Boca Raton, Fla.

“We want to get them while they’re college students and familiarize them with the brand now,” says Facella. “Then they’ll stick around when they become young professionals.”

The fact that the menu is 80 percent vegan, 70 percent falafel-based and now offers many gluten-free options is more about being smart than vegetarian, adds the COO. And rather than being the typical falafel joint so familiar to value-oriented urbanites, Maoz’ falafel balls are handmade, cooked to order and flash-fried in oil that’s changed every day.

“That may not help our food costs, but it’s a big reason we’re so successful,” explains Facella. “People may not like to hear the word ‘fried,’ but when it’s done properly, it can be very high in quality and also perfectly healthy.”

CHANGE FROM WITHIN

Bistro 185, a seasonal restaurant with multicultural menu specialties in Cleveland, features a once-a-month Vegan Entrée Night that has become a sellout event and a way to test new items for the regular menu.

“We have a catering chef who’s vegan, and he actually suggested it,” says chef Ruth Levine, who owns Bistro 185 with her husband, Marc. “He said all his friends would come, and sure enough, they do. And I’ve learned a lot in the process about being creative without using animal products.”

The goal, especially with vegan favorites that make it to the menu, was to create food that would appeal to anyone, not just the meat-averse. Successful items like Massaman Curry, with yellow squash, zucchini, sweet potatoes, pineapple and tofu served over tofu noodles or brown rice, are so full of flavor that any moderately adventurous diner can appreciate them. Meanwhile, handmade herb pappardelle pasta with haricots vert, peapods, scallions and asparagus can be topped with an à la carte portion of shrimp, salmon or chicken.

“Let’s face it, chefs can be intimidated by not being able to use things like honey or butter, to say nothing of meat,” explains Levine, “but the

Hearty grains like quinoa and farro are coming to the fore as more people seek healthful, meat-free fare on menus.



CHILEAN HASS AVOCADOS

exercise of cooking without these ingredients really teaches you how to focus on flavor, texture and technique. It's even helped us come to terms with demand for gluten-free items, which can be very difficult to wrap your arms around."

Levine and her staff have always been open to adapting existing menu items for dietary needs, but the vegan experience has taught Levine to think about cooking in entirely different ways. "I can't use eggs but you can use tofu instead to bind other ingredients. I can't use cream, but almond milk looks, tastes and behaves just as well. We've even become familiar with products like seitan," she says.

"As I always tell my staff, in this business there isn't a day that goes by that can't be a learning opportunity, and that attitude works very well for us."

VEGETARIAN LEANINGS

Becoming the chef for Le Pain Quotidien (LPQ) in New York City came with a similar

learning experience for Kaegan Welch. A French Culinary Institute graduate who founded the environmentally conscious catering company Stuart & Welch last year with fellow FCI grad Michael Steifman, Welch has always had a sustainable, farmer's-market approach to cooking. He's taken that sensibility to his duties with the Belgian-based, organic bakery-café chain, which opened a flagship in Manhattan's Central Park, where Welch will cook special vegetarian dinners this summer. He's also been testing recipes with LPQ founder Alain Coumont, who's been nudging the chain and his own diet toward veganism.

"When I make vegetarian food, I try not to think of it as vegetarian," says Welch. "Instead, I try to showcase beautiful, fresh vegetables in season, locally sourced or at least as much as possible. That alone gives great flavor."

In bringing vegan and vegetarian options to LPQ, Coumont and Welch are playing to a receptive and appreciative audience.

"We aren't entirely sure how many of our customers are vegetarian or vegan," says Olivier Arizzi, brand-marketing manager for LPQ, which has more than 100 locations around the world.

"But we recently launched social media, and a lot of the comments we get on Facebook and Twitter are thanking us for the vegetarian and vegan items."

The menu touts such "100 percent vegan/botanical" specialties as a Six-Vegetable Quiche on a gluten-free, buckwheat crust. There's also an Organic Red Quinoa Salad with enoki mushrooms, alfalfa sprouts and basil pesto and Arugula Salad with pine nuts, Parmesan, organic olive oil and lemon.

A roasted-vegetable-and-farro salad includes firm organic tofu, seared on both sides until crispy and paired with a quick sauté of haricots vert with pistachios, raisins and garlic for depth.

Smoky tea adds even more depth: "Lapsang Souchong vinaigrette, heated through until it tastes just like beurre noisette, pulls the whole thing together," says Welch. ☺

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TAKE-AWAY TIPS

ADD, DON'T SUBTRACT: Flexitarian menus mean adding more vegetable-centric options, not necessarily subtracting any meat entrées

THINK BETTER HEALTH: Focusing on better health rather than dietary restrictions is a winning recipe for many chefs and operators

FORGET THE IMITATIONS: Let the produce shine; don't try to create meat-like entrées or use meat stand-ins

ROOT-TO-FROND COOKING: Like nose-to-tail, whole-vegetable cooking uses all parts, including carrot tops and squash blossoms