

# Chefs Across Restaurant Landscape Cater To Meatless Diners



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Plant-based fare now considered part of foodservice's fabric.

BY CAROL BAREUTHER

**T**here's been an edible evolution in meatless cuisine in the foodservice arena over the past few decades. No longer does the obligatory "vegetarian" menu option mean a double serving of sides sans the center of the plate. Many chefs also progressed from a heavy-handed reliance on "faux meat" soy product entrees. Today, it's an amazing array of fruit, vegetable, dried beans and whole grains combos that are increasingly served on the bill of fare in everything from QSR to white-tablecloth restaurants, campus dining and even sports stadiums.

"Dining out well is no longer synonymous with a 32-ounce steak," says Todd English, a Boston, MA-based celebrity chef, television personality, author and owner of eight restaurant brands with locations nationally and internationally. "Chefs today are taking time to look at vegetables and how they are prepared. Even if they are served with meat, vegetables have become a differentiating factor on the

plate rather than an add-on — to the extent that customers, whether they are vegetarian or not, want to order the dish due to the vegetables and how they are prepared. This isn't new to me, as most of my concepts have long been based around Mediterranean cuisine."

English isn't alone in his outlook on the growing popularity of plant-based fare. Sixty-two percent of the nearly 1,300 American Culinary Federation (ACF) member chefs surveyed in the Washington, D.C.-headquartered National Restaurant Association's (NRA) "What's Hot" culinary forecast named meatless/vegetarian items as a "hot trend" for 2015. What's more, 20 percent of these chefs called meatless a perennial favorite and only 18 percent dubbed it yesterday's news.

"Meatless dishes evolved past a fad or a trend and are now becoming a part of a normal way of life for many people. Just look at the popularity of Meatless Mondays," says Christopher Tanner, executive chef of U.S. retail at the Camden, NJ-headquartered Campbell Soup Company and ambassador for the St. Augustine, FL-based ACF.

Consider that while only 3 percent of Americans never eat meat, poultry or fish, 47 percent say they eat at least one vegetarian meal per week, according to a 2012 National Harris Poll, an online poll commissioned by

the Vegetarian Resource Group, headquartered in Baltimore, MD. This presents a profitable opportunity for restaurateurs and producers of plant-based ingredients, such as fruits and vegetables.

## KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

Diners who order meatless meals are no longer easy to recognize by their beards and Birkenstocks.

"Our customers range from high school and college students to senior citizens and everyone in-between," explains Julie Derry, chief marketing officer for San Diego, CA-based Souplantation & Sweet Tomatoes, a mid-scale buffet/cafeteria concept with 128 restaurants in 15 states.

There's even diversity in the meaning of "meatless" within a particular age group. "The definition of vegetarian is large for us," explains Cheryl Garner, executive director of dining services at the University of California, Riverside, CA. "Some students eat eggs and cheese, or just vegetables, or just chicken. The term 'vegetarian' is not specific in students' minds."

Nearly one in every five full-time college students (18 percent) would like to see more vegetarian/vegan options in cafeterias, according to the Chicago, IL-based Mintel International's *Colleges and Universities Food-*

service – May 2014 report.

“The younger generations are the ones who benefited the most from health campaigns, so it makes sense that they better understand the relationship between what they eat and how they feel,” explains Julia Gallo-Torres, senior analyst for food and drink and foodservice reports at Mintel.

This has a beneficial carryover effect on students as they grow older. In Mintel’s *Fruit and Vegetables – U.S., October 2013* report, 18 to 34-year-olds said they are more likely to be high users of vegetables at home. In turn, veggies like kale, cauliflower, squash and broccoli rabe are sought-after ingredients for this generation.

“Baby Boomers are a larger segment of the population now, and one that we see looking more for meatless choices due to concerns over health,” says Patrick Peterson, executive chef and vice president of Moe’s Southwest Grill, a 550-plus fast-casual chain based in Atlanta, GA.

There are several trends driving diners’ request for meatless meals. Health and wellness are huge initiators. Thirty-five percent of consumers say they feel guilty when they don’t eat enough fruits or vegetables. Plus, almost 25 percent of men say their doctor or another health professional has suggested they eat more fruits and or/vegetables, according to Mintel’s *Fruit and Vegetables – U.S., October 2013* report.

“These attitudes show Americans are looking for ways to eat healthier, including vegetarian/vegan options,” says Mintel’s Gallo-Torres.

What’s more, 69 percent of respondents in Chicago, IL-based Technomic, Inc.’s October 2014-published *Healthy Eating Consumer Trend Report*, say they thought vegetarian fare is healthier and 90 percent report they like the idea of a course containing a full serving of vegetables.



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## LOCAL AND SEASONAL HOT TRENDS

“An increasing number of consumers are concerned about where their food comes from, and they want a menu that is fresh, local, seasonal and transparent,” says Mary Chapman, Technomic’s senior director of product innovation.

This observation translates to greater interest in simpler less processed ingredients such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

“We let the ingredients and menu speak for itself,” says Rob Corliss, who as chef-consultant at ATE (All Things Epicurean), helped to launch the fast-fresh restaurant Unforked in Overland Park, KS, in 2011, and continues to create the eatery’s LTO’s (limited time offers). “We tout where the food comes from, the seasonality and the quality. This creates a powerful connection with the guests.”

Some of the most popular meatless LTO’s at Unforked include: Crispy Avocado Taco (tempura fried avocado topped with seasonal

pico de gallo and micro greens on a choice of jammer lettuce or whole wheat, flour or white corn tortilla); Voodoo Veggie Taco (roasted spiced sweet potatoes and Anjou pears, cranberry-honey glaze, toasted pumpkin seeds, queso fresco and a hint of shagbark syrup); and a vegan selection called Thai Me Up Salad (slivers of green mango, rainbow crunch carrots, Mung bean sprouts, toasted coconut, peanuts, red miso dressing) — which Corliss developed with the National Mango Board.

“Fresh mango is often used to add flavor, texture and color to a meatless dish,” says Rachel Muñoz, director of marketing for the National Mango Board, in Orlando, FL. “Mango condiments (salsa, relish, chutney, pickled) may be used to complete the flavor profile of a dish. Fresh mango can be grilled and roasted to caramelize the sugars and bring out a deeper level of flavor.”

Moe’s Southwest Grill offers seasonal salsas in addition to its year-round offerings. These include Pineapple Cucumber Salsa and Roasted Jalapeno Garlic Salsa last summer and Smoky Jalapeno Salsa and Cranberry Lime Salsa in the fall.

Bob Campbell, owner of Campbell Ranches, in Lompoc, CA, is one of a dozen farmers who make guest appearances at “re-grand openings” of refreshed Souplantation & Sweet Tomatoes locations. Campbell grows 120 acres of broccoli that are exclusively sold to the chain, which uses this popular vegetable in a variety of vegetarian offerings, such as its Joan’s Broccoli Madness Salad.

“In addition to these re-grand opening events, where we hand out bags of fresh produce to the first 100 customers, we tell the

## SUSTAINABILITY DRIVES MEATLESS MENU OPTIONS

On the consumer front, “there’s much greater stress today on vegetable-based proteins, the health of the planet and the larger issue of figuring out how to feed 8 to 10 billion people by 2050,” explains Christopher Koetke, vice president of the school of culinary arts at Kendall College, in Chicago, IL. Koetke worked with the Greeley, CO-based National Onion Association to develop a number of foodservice recipes — including a meatless pasta primavera with caramelized onions.

On the operator side, “proteins tend to be the most expensive plate component, therefore meatless alternatives can be a good way to introduce dishes along the lower end of the price spectrum that add value for consumers and cost management in back-of-the-house for operators,” explains Annika Stensson, senior manager of research communications for the National Restaurant Association (NRA).

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## “Eighty percent of respondents say they want the opportunity to choose the ingredients in their foods.

— Julia Gallo-Torres, Mintel

stories of our farmers in print materials such as table tents, FSI’s [free-standing inserts] in the newspaper and on our website,” says Souplantation’s Derry.

### A TASTE OF MEATLESS

More than one-third of restaurants offer a vegetarian dish according to the November 2014-compiled *Vegetarian Menu Trends Report* by Datassential Research in Chicago, IL. More specifically, 34.1 percent of QSR (quick service restaurants) restaurants menued meatless choices, 41.9 percent mid-scale, 33.9 percent casual and 21.9 percent fine dining.

QSR chains such as Chipotle Mexican Grill and Subway are growing more vegetarian-friendly. Last year, Chipotle, a 1,600-plus-unit chain headquartered in Denver, CO, introduced its braised tofu-filled burritos called Sofritas.

Subway, a Milford, CT-based multinational chain with more than 40,000 restaurants worldwide, started test marketing two new all-vegan sandwiches last summer. The Malibu Garden patty is made with whole grains and veggies topped with a fiery roasted tomato sauce. The Black Bean burger is seasoned with garlic, bell peppers, cilantro, corn and comes with a sweet potato curry sauce.

“Taco Bell features a completely customizable menu so those diners who do not eat meat can always sub our seasoned beef, chicken or steak for pinto beans or black beans,” says Ashley Sioson, spokeswoman for the Irvine, CA-based subsidiary of Yum! Brands, Inc., that has nearly 7,000 units nationwide.

In addition, some of Taco Bell’s most popular menu items that do not contain meat are: Bean Burrito, Black Bean Burrito, 7-Layer Burrito, and the 2014-launched Cantina Power Veggie Bowl and Cantina Power Veggie Burrito.

At mid-scale chain Souplantation & Sweet Tomatoes, there are more than 50 selections daily, ranging from fresh produce, salads, soups, pastas and breads to desserts. The chain’s recipe repertoire includes 26 tossed and 52 prepared

salads that are either vegetarian or vegan. These include everything from the ordinary Carrot Raisin and Pesto Pasta to extraordinary Thai Peanut & Red Pepper, Roasted Vegetable with Feta & Olives, and Roasted Potato with Chipotle Chile Vinaigrette and best-selling Roasted Vegetable Kale salads.

Fast-casual chains such as Panera Bread, Noodles & Co. and Moe’s Southwest Grill all make it easy for patrons to eat meatless. Panera, headquartered in Sunset Hills, MO, with more than 1,800 units nationwide, offers vegetarian selections on its menu such as a Mediterranean Veggie Sandwich, Tomato & Mozzarella Panini, Autumn Squash Soup, Creamy Tomato Soup, Black Bean Soup, and Garden Vegetable Soup with Pesto.

“Eighty percent of respondents say they want the opportunity to choose the ingredients in their foods, according to our *Dining Out: A 2014 Look Ahead – U.S. – January 2014*,” says Mintel’s Gallo-Torres. “Customization is an easy way to make something vegetarian or vegan.”

The menu at Noodles & Company, a chain based in Broomfield, CO — with nearly 430 units throughout 32 states — is infinitely customizable.

“Our multitude of noodles and pastas gives us a nice base to develop a variety of vegetarian dishes,” explains Nick Graff, director of research and development in culinary innovation. “Customers who want meat can order it as an add on. Some of the most popular vegetables we use are broccoli, mushrooms and roma tomatoes, as well as seasonal ingredients such as asparagus and corn in the spring. In fact, our Bangkok Curry has four servings of vegetables in every order.”

Other favorite vegetarian selections on the Noodles & Company menu include Penne Rosa (mushrooms, tomato and spinach), Pesto Cavatappi (basil pesto, garlic, mushrooms, tomatoes and Italian parsley) and Whole Grain Tuscan Fresca (linguini, roasted garlic, red onion, tomatoes and spinach).

Meatless has been part of the DNA at Moe’s Southwest Grill since it started in 2007. “We offer more than 20 fresh veggies and organic tofu as an add-on in a customizable format. Additionally, we sell pre-composed menu selections and seven of these are vegetarian. Approximately 12 to 15 percent of our entrée sales are vegetarian,” says Peterson of Moe’s Southwest Grill.

Vegetarian entrees, all with pop-culture names, include Band Camp (a burrito bowl with seasoned rice, beans, cheese, pico de gallo and guacamole), Art Vandalay (a burrito made

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with seasoned rice, beans, cheese, pico de gallo, lettuce and guacamole), and the Personal Trainer (a salad with romaine, beans, pico de gallo, cheese, cucumber and black olives.)

As for fine dining, there are several excellent vegetable-based entree examples on Chef English's menus. One is the English pea ravioli with Beech mushrooms, broccoli and charred corn served at Bluezoo, a restaurant at the Walt Disney World's Swan & Dolphin resort. At Tuscany restaurant, in the Mohegan Sun Casino complex in Uncasville, CT, the Ricotta Gnocchi is topped with crushed tomatoes, fresh herbs, brown butter and a dollop of Ricotta cheese. Finally, there's the Crazy Mushroom Pappardelle, a signature dish served at Olives restaurant, in the Bellagio Las Vegas, which is a mix of King Trumpet, Shitake, Oyster and Crimini Mushrooms, English peas and Piquillo peppers tossed with Parmesan cream and topped with lemony pea shoots.

"Mushrooms fit well in meatless dishes, because they are hearty enough to carry the flavor for the center of the plate," says Katie Preis, marketing manager for The Mushroom Council, in San Jose, CA.

A preference by many Millennials for meatless fare means colleges and universities are catering more now to this segment.

"Some of our college and university accounts are as high as 25 percent vegetarian,

**"There's an expectation foodservice will be on trend and serve a wide variety of great-tasting dishes, including those that are meatless."**

—Cheryl Garner, University of California

others are a minimal group. Either way, they are all entitled to the same level and quality of foodservice," says Kevin Blaney, regional executive chef for the Northeast region of the Charlotte, NC-headquartered Compass Group North America, in the Chartwell Higher Education Division.

Examples of vegan and vegetarian dishes Blaney puts on the menu at campus dining facilities includes Barley and Mushroom Risotto; Quinoa Pancakes with tomato chutney; Eggplant and Provolone Panini; Portabella Mushroom Ravioli with grilled vegetables and an Asian Barley; Wheat Berry and Shiitake Mushroom Burrito.

On the West Coast, Garner at the University of California, Riverside, serves more than

3.5 million meals per year in the campus' residential restaurants and nearly 1 million meals annually at retail and C-store formats to an ethnically diverse student population. Vegetarian and vegan purchases average 20 to 27 percent, depending on dining venue. Selections include everything from Thai Curry, Pesto Pasta and Vegetable-topped Pizza at sit-down eateries to Hummus sandwiches, Vegetarian Sushi, or a mix-and-match meal of three salads such as Curried Cauliflower, Roasted Beet Salad and Brussels Sprouts with Nuts, for example, at retail and C-store settings.

"Students today won't put up with poor dining. There's an expectation foodservice will be on trend and serve a wide variety of great-tasting dishes, including those that are meatless," says Garner.

The Mushroom Council worked with many institutions of higher education across the country to create meatless meals featuring mushrooms. Examples include a Tandoori Portabella Burger and Mushroom and Spinach Bolognese Penne at the University of North Texas, a Mushroom and Chickpea Wrap at the University of Massachusetts, and a Crimini Pot Pie at the University of Southern California.

Vegetarian menu selections are even showing up at one of the bastions of meat-filled dining: sports stadiums. Back in 2009, Aramark, based in Philadelphia, PA, earned a top supplier spot on PETA's "Most-Vegetarian-Friendly NFL Stadiums" by serving veggie dogs, veggie burgers and veggie burritos at stadiums in Philadelphia, Kansas City and Oakland.

"The recognition we received for our vegetarian friendly menus and other culinary innovation is symbolic of our ongoing commitment to working closely with our customers and clients to create great-tasting menus that enhance the dining experience," says David Freireich, director of corporate communications.

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## THE FLAVOR FACTOR IS KEY

"With the right culinary techniques, herbs and spices, vegetarian dishes can be rich and satisfying enough to also attract meat eaters," says Annika Stensson, senior manager of research communications for the National Restaurant Association (NRA).

The increasingly multi-cultural nature of the nation means naturally meatless dishes are moving center stage.

"We're also seeing a fair amount of ethnic influences in meatless items, especially from vegetable-rich cuisines like Indian and Asian, which is also an attractive proposition for today's adventurous diners," says Stensson.

More mainstream, it is pizza, Mexican entrees, pastas and sandwiches that are the most frequently menued vegetarian dishes, according to the November 2014-compiled *Vegetarian MenuTrends Report* by Datassential Research in Chicago, IL.

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