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Are You (and Your Students) Ready to Veg Out?

By Shannon N. Goff

» Understanding the motives and menu needs of vegan and vegetarian students.



It seems that each year, more school nutrition operations are upping their game in responding to increased customer demand for vegetarian—and even vegan—meals. Whether it's through adoption of national initiatives, such as “Meatless Mondays,” or in reaction to direct student (and parent) feedback, K-12 school foodservice operators are experimenting with a wider range of meat-free options than the ubiquitous peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich or a conventional entrée salad.



Are you noting similar trends in your own school community? If so, it's time to brush up on your understanding of these dietary choices. In this article, we'll *explain* the differences between vegan and vegetarian labels, *explore* the ways veggie-laden menu options can improve student health, satisfaction and boost meal program participation and *encourage* you to *expand* your offerings.

WHAT'S THE DIFF? The easiest way to discern between veganism and vegetarianism is to know which one avoids *all* animal-made products. Answer: vegan. Whereas *vegetarians* commonly exclude meat, poultry and seafood but not necessarily dairy, *vegans* are the stricter of the two, as they not only try to avoid all dairy, but also any products made using animals in any way, even honey!

Vegetarians, on the other hand, may be less rigid about their dietary restrictions. This leads to a variety of sub-categories of vegetarianism:

» **Lacto-ovo**—this is how most vegetarians self-identify. This group avoids eating animal and fish protein, but are open to consuming products that come from animals, such as dairy and eggs.

» **Lacto**—this group excludes the eggs (and all meats), but consumes dairy.

» **Ovo**—you probably guessed that this type of vegetarian *does* eat eggs but nixes dairy foods and animal proteins.

» **Pesco**—this sub-category defines pescatarians, who eat fish but no other meat, allowing themselves to consume fish and shellfish.

MEATLESS MOTIVES There are a few motivations that prompt individuals to adopt a vegan or vegetarian diet. (While some youngsters among your customers may make their own independent decisions, many simply follow the practices of their household.) The most common reasons involve nutrition and health preferences, religious restrictions and ethical concerns about harming animals and/or the environment.

Nutrition & Health. Certain health risks can be greatly reduced when consuming *more* plant-based

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meals than dishes featuring animal proteins. Because they cut out red meats (among others), vegetarian diets are lower in saturated fats and cholesterol, leading to a lower risk of cardio-vascular disease, including heart attacks and strokes. In addition, meat can contain certain carcinogens that, once processed and cooked, have been linked to increased cancer risks. Similarly, consuming animal products with high fat content can result in an increase in hormone production, consequently increasing incidences of hormone-related cancers, such as breast and prostate cancer.

Plant-based diets also correspond to the recommendations of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, which promote increased consumptions of fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains, with minimal amounts of meat and dairy. Obesity rates in the United States continue to be extremely high, and a vegetarian—or vegan—diet can help adults *and* children with weight maintenance, increased energy levels and a lower risk of Type II diabetes. In addition, opting for a vegetarian diet helps to pump your body full of antioxidants, fiber and protective phytonutrients that can slow the aging process by strengthening the body's immune system.

Religion. Some faith-based practices—especially religions that originate in India—encourage or even require a vegetarian diet. Hinduism, for example, promotes avoiding beef in accordance with the belief that cows are sacred animals. Many Hindu scriptures link non-violence (or *ahimsa*) and spirituality, and followers interpret these as relating to violence against both humans and animals. It ties into the idea that the slaughter of animals wrongs the animal and also wrongs those who consume them, since unnecessary pain and death produces bad karma (a guiding principle of the religion).

This is similar to both Jainism and Mahayana Buddhism. The former teaches that it is wrong to kill or harm any living being, in accordance with *ahimsa*, *asteya* (respect for other's rights) and *satya* (truth). Buddha strongly denounced the eating of meat and taught vegetarianism as part of his general instruction to be mindful and passionate.

Although they do not explicitly encourage vegetarianism, the Chinese religion of Taoism and even Judaism have ideals that line up with an animal-free diet. Taoism teaches yin and yang as the two fundamental energies of the world, and nature is sacred. Therefore, Taoists prioritize yin, which is the non-violent and non-aggressive approach, and use this to warn against killing and eating animals. Judaism teaches similar ideas by advocating respect for the environment, as well as the sacredness of human life.

Ethics & the Environment. Some people simply reject the human practice of killing and consuming animals. Many find the treatment of animals in the commercial production of food to be unnecessarily inhumane and choose vegetarianism on moral grounds.

Beyond animal cruelty, many are troubled by other damaging effects of commercial animal agriculture. USDA has confirmed that meat production is inefficient and more harmful to the environment than plant production. For example, pound for pound, the life cycle of an animal requires more grain (for feed), pesticides, water and fossil fuels than the production of an equivalent amount of beans or grains. Farmed animals produce an estimated 130 times more waste than the U.S. human population, polluting water, topsoil and air. One estimate calculates that seven football fields' worth of land is bulldozed *every minute* to create more room to raise these animals for human

consumption. By reducing the demand for meat and other animal byproducts, vegans and vegetarians hope to decrease the harmful impact this form of agriculture has on our planet.

BENEFITS FOR YOUR OPERATION So how do veggie-based meals help *your* operation? For one thing, they allow you to offer a greater array of menu choices while being more inclusive to the varying needs of your diverse student base. Plant-based menus allow you and your student customers to explore a greater level of cultural diversity in cuisine options.

Also, consider that every demographic includes children who qualify for free and reduced-price meals. You want to give a youngster from a food-insecure household who has been raised a vegetarian a sufficient number of options to ensure he or she is eating nutritious meals at school and not going hungry because there's only one choice day after day.

Not only that, but you can appeal to cultural diversity and the hot trend for customization through initiatives such as a Make-Your-Own Pad Thai bar, featuring whole-grain noodles and crispy tofu as the base, with choices of stir-fry vegetables like soybeans, baby corn, red peppers and broccoli.

Perhaps your local vegetarians and vegans prefer more conventional options, such as a Potato Boat: a russet or sweet potato paired with the choice of beans, lettuce, tomatoes or salsa as toppings. Many veggie-based ideas will appeal to vegetarian and carnivore students alike, helping you to increase participation, as well as student and parent satisfaction.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH Introducing plant-based menu options provides a valuable opportunity to cultivate new relationships. If you haven't already, reach out to local farmers to make a



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“Are You (and Your Students) Ready to Veg Out?”

Completion of this test, with a passing score, will count as 1 Continuing Education Unit (CEU) in Key Area 1, Nutrition, Code 1160.

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wider array of produce options available to your customers. Organize “Harvest of the Month” promotions, which can provide the attraction of eating seasonally, when items are at their peak flavor.

Solicit support from parents and PTA members. It may be likely that families who are committed vegetarians or vegans *presume* that there are no options available to them in the school cafeteria. You just may need to find ways to attract their attention—and engage their help and support.

IF OTHER DISTRICTS CAN DO IT... It can be daunting to add vegan or even vegetarian options to your menus. Not only is there the challenge of ensuring these meals meet federal nutrition standards, you also need to balance the needs of serving a niche customer segment with the overall food and labor costs of your operation.

The key is to follow the example of districts who have found ways to incorporate creative vegan and vegetarian dishes as regular menu offerings and promote these to all students. One place SNA members can start is visiting *SchoolNutrition.org* and logging in to access the Presentations Library, featuring handouts and slides from sessions at past Annual National Conferences.

Finally, ask the students! Survey your customers—how many are committed vegetarians/vegans? Which menu items do they select when they go out to restaurants with meat-loving friends or family members? Would they truly be willing to try Lentil Sloppy Joes—or are they content with salads and wraps? The key is to engage and be sure these customers know that you value them as highly as you do *every* student. **SN**

Shannon Goff is a freelance writer based in Cleveland, N.C., and a former member of the SN editorial team.

1. Vegans exclude all animals and animal products, such as milk and eggs, from their diet.

True False

2. ___ is a sub-category of vegetarianism.

Pesco
 Lacto-Ovo
 Lacto
 All of the above

3. A pescatarian is someone who eats ___, but no other meat.

poultry
 rabbit
 fish
 none of the above

4. A desire for ___ is one reason some choose a vegan or vegetarian diet.

longer hair
 better breath
 reduced health risks
 All of the above

5. Eliminating meat from your diet may lower your risk for heart disease.

True False

6. People from the ___ faith tend to follow a vegetarian diet as a tenet of their spiritual beliefs.

Buddhist
 Christian
 Universalist
 All of the above

7. The Chinese religion called Jainism focuses on the principles of yin and yang.

True False

8. Farmed animals produce ___ times more waste than the U.S. human population.

2 13
 130 200

9. ___ is an ideal item for a Make-Your-Own Pad Thai bar.

baby corn
 crispy tofu
 red peppers
 All of the above

10. A “Harvest of the Month” promotion can capitalize on the benefits of eating seasonally.

True False

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