

Practical tips for eating plant-based in a meaty world

It's a familiar experience for most vegans. You open the menu at a restaurant selected by your dining partner, hoping there will be something you can eat. Edible would suffice; filling and tasty are probably out of reach. Just please, not another salad....

It's not just restaurants; finding a healthy bite to eat while running errands, at work, or at social events can be equally daunting. But these days things have never been better for those who follow a plant-based diet. Overall vegan literacy amongst restaurants -- and the general public -- has improved dramatically over the past five years.

Ottawa Veg Fest is the perfect place to up your plant-based game -- whether that's learning about great local restaurants that cater to your lifestyle, finding new on-the-go products, or attending a speaker presentation.

For example, Registered Dietitian Susan Macfarlane will arm you with the nutritional know-how to speak confidently about your choice, and vegan lifestyle expert Pamela Tourigny will offer evidence-based tips and information about effective advocacy. One of her top tips? Just say no to salad.

For more tips on navigating the often inhospitable waters of non-vegan dining, read on.

Don't settle

People are increasingly tolerant of accommodating allergies and dietary restrictions, some more frivolous than not eating animals. Even if you're dining in someone's home, don't be afraid to (politely) assert your needs; it's less awkward for your host to know ahead of time and have a chance to accommodate, than to find out as dinner is being served.

When eating out, be proactive in suggesting vegan or vegan-friendly dining options. Most people don't mind trying something new. Challenge your friends and family to eat outside their comfort zone, and don't be afraid to suggest a place to go that you know is good.

Don't be afraid to ask

Even when things seem bleak, many restaurants are able -- and willing -- to create a vegan option that's off-menu; you just need to ask.

Other restaurants may not be so vegan savvy, but could end up surprising you. They may simply need help. Don't expect every server to know what vegan is, let alone how to apply the definition to the menu. Calling ahead can also give you a big leg up on ensuring your needs are met, and avoiding having these conversations in front of friends or colleagues.

International cuisine is your friend

Indian restaurants and Ethiopian restaurants are almost guaranteed to leave you with a satisfied belly. Asian restaurants can be hit and miss (always ask about fish sauce and meat stock!), but many have a "vegetarian" menu that's at least a starting point. Italian restaurants usually have something, as do Lebanese and Greek eateries.

Do carry food with you

Sometimes when you're on the go there isn't time for a sit down meal, but you still need something to curb your hunger. Avoid being tempted by junk at the check out aisle by always carrying a simple snack with you. There are several kinds of plant-based energy bars that make perfect "purse food," or you can carry snack bags of nuts or dried fruits. These items are also great for your workplace snack drawer!

Back to Basics

Even if you leave home empty-handed, it's not complicated to piece together nourishment on the fly...even gas stations sell packets of nuts or sunflower seeds. Most grocery stores now offer to-go meals that are suitable for vegans, and all of them sell fresh produce. It's about managing our expectations, and remembering it's just short term.

Perhaps rather than seeing veganism as limiting, we can instead embrace having fewer options because they make us more appreciative of what we do have. Ottawa Veg Fest is a celebration of some of those fantastic alternatives – come and enjoy!

Ottawa Veg Fest - June 4-5, 10 am – 4 pm

The RA Centre

2451 Riverside Drive, Ottawa

www.vegfest.ca