

Vegging Out

Chefs get creative with meatless dishes.

BY DON DOULOFF



Photo: The Yum Yum Factor (Pukka)



Photo: L'Eat Catering



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Iconoclastic movie star Mae West once observed, “the only carrots that interest me are the number you get in a diamond.” If Ms. West had ever experienced meatless menus on par with the creative fare now available to groups, she surely would have changed her anti-vegetable tune.

Indeed, this is a vegetarian Golden Age. Craving variety and healthier options, groups are requesting meat-free dishes, but also expect originality and flair—and chefs are meeting the challenge.

“Vegetarians are tired of being treated as second-class citizens,” says Tawfik Shehata, executive chef at the International Centre, in Mississauga, Ont. He has seen a “great increase” in demand for inventive vegetarian dishes—often from meat eaters who want meat-free options.

Tony Loschiavo, executive chef and owner of Toronto-based L-eat Catering, estimates the company has seen an increase of about 500 per cent in clients’ veggie requests during the last five years.

“Historically, if a customer wanted a vegetarian dish, they were given the same as the clients who ate meat, just minus the protein on the plate,” says Loschiavo. With today’s discerning groups, however, that won’t cut it.

“Most chefs are becoming more in tune with the needs of vegetarians, providing more creative and satisfying choices than the standard pasta with tomato sauce,” says Heidi Wilker, CMP,

principal of Blessed Events. “This is especially important for fundraising dinners where patrons are paying higher ticket prices for the event. Although people realize that the money is primarily being raised for charity, they also don’t want to be served a boring or unsubstantial meal when others around the table are getting an upgraded menu.”

Sandra Wood, CMP, manager of the Canadian Medical Association’s annual meeting and herself a vegetarian, says she’s been served enough boring vegetable dishes “to warrant driving more exciting menus and ensuring that whether you are vegetarian, gluten free or some other restriction, you still get an interesting meal served.”

Creativity takes many forms. L-Eat Catering’s chef Andrew Loft, for instance, offers macaroni and cheese accessorized with cauliflower salad topped with shaved broccoli and cauliflower.

Loft also created, as a main course, a Mexican-themed black bean salad with red cabbage slaw topped with cubes of golden beet and butternut squash. Another Loft-created entrée sees curried chickpea potpie lavished with parsley root puree and sweet-potato gravy.

The International Centre offers, as an hors d’oeuvre, a vegetarian take on pulled pork built from roasted spaghetti squash, caramelized onions, herbs and a house-made barbecue sauce served on a slider bun.



Photo: imps.ca (Culinary Capers Catering)



Photo: The Yum Yum Factor (Pukka)



Photo: Toronto Life (Pukka)



Photo: Executive Chef Margaret Chisholm, Culinary Capers Catering

Grains, increasingly, are finding favour on vegetarian menus, says Shehata, whose kitchen offers a pan-fried Alberta barley cake jazzed with Ontario cheddar and mozzarella and paired with beets, Swiss chard and red-pepper salsa.

Indian cuisine, with its fragrant spicing and sumptuous sauces, lends itself to exotic yet accessible vegetable options.

“Whether you’re a carnivore or not, there’s an awareness of overeating red meat,” says Derek Valteau, co-owner and principal of Pukka, a Toronto restaurant specializing in modern Indian food. Executive chef Kirti Singh brings a lighter touch—no cream or butter; subtle aromatics. “People’s impression of Indian food is greasy, heavy and spicy,” says Valteau.

Thus, Pukka’s Swiss chard with paneer cheese, onion and Singh’s garam masala spice blend; paneer with spinach and mushrooms in pistachio-enriched korma sauce; and pan-sautéed seasonal vegetables with coconut curry. Pukka offers catering for offsite meetings and events.

Nirvana Indian restaurant, in Mississauga, Ont., serves up aloo gobi masala (cauliflower and potatoes in tomato gravy); dal makhni (stewed black lentils) and yogurt-marinated tandoori mushrooms. Nirvana provides meeting and event catering featuring a portable, charcoal-fired tandoor oven.

In Vancouver, at Culinary Capers Catering, CEO Debra Lykemark says about 10 per cent of guests at corporate events request

a vegetarian option. In fact, meatless dishes are so popular that “in the proposal process, we don’t even ask any more and always include a vegetarian entrée option for a plated menu.”

Furthermore, the caterer’s kitchen team, led by executive chef Margaret Chisholm, “sets out to create alternate meals that satisfy and capture a bunch of special diet/allergy criteria—gluten free, vegan, nut free—within vegetarian options. We will create a vegan appetizer and entrée courses that will also be vegetarian and cover off lactose intolerance.”

Additionally, “our chefs are getting more creative with vegetarian/vegan choices because for the most part, our clients are more sophisticated in their culinary knowledge and palates,” says Lykemark. Particularly popular among her corporate event clients are Mediterranean-inspired veggie options highlighting regional ingredients animated with West Coast flair.

Examples include Culinary Capers’ Yukon Gold potato gnocchi served with roasted artichokes, smoked tomato sauce, bell peppers two ways and caramelized onions; saffron-scented vegetables in a crisp chickpea tart with pinenut parsley gremolata, roasted sunchokes and asparagus in smoked tomato sauce; and crostata pastry filled with button, porcini and morel mushrooms served with Yukon Gold potato cake and seasonal vegetables. +

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