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FOOD

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The occasional vegetarian

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Here we go again. A brand new year, time to sing one last round of “Auld Lang Syne,” then put down that champagne glass, grab a yummy green algae smoothie and head to the gym!

Or not. Let’s be honest. Most of us want to be more fit and healthy but don’t want to give anything up. Mention dieting and most brains automatically switch into Charlie Brown Teacher mode, wherein every well intentioned bit of advice is interpreted as, “Wha Wha Wha Whaaa?” The thought of never eating another chocolate chip cookie is enough to make me break out in hives.

As far as resolutions go, (which usually isn’t very far) this newest new year seems to be starting out like every other, with a bevy of good dietary intentions. But, as the Facebook relationship option reads, it’s complicated, and it can be every bit as angst driven, too. Peer pressure and personal obsession with what we are eating has reached an all time high: Is it non-GMO? Was it locally sourced? Is it gluten-free, dairy free, sugar free and organic? AM I A CRIMINAL FOR EATING THIS BLT? Somehow, what we eat has become a mark of how evolved we are.

Most of us recognize that cutting fat, calories and even increasing the amount of organics in our diet is probably a good idea, but putting that into practice can prove more difficult than solving the mystery of the Sphinx. What’s more, diet resolutions often fail because we have unrealistic expectations, or choose a plan that’s so complicated that before long we break, binge, and give up altogether. This year, in my own battle to eat more wholesomely, I have opted to set a goal I never thought I would. That is, cooking one or two meatless suppers a week.

That Crazy Vegetarian Relative

To be honest, the whole idea happened somewhat unintentionally. Humoring our son during a trip to Louisville a few months back, we stopped in at a health food eatery called Earth Friends. I ordered a grilled hummus and vegetable filled wrap, and braced myself for what I expected to be a bland, Euell Gibbons style meal that would leave my taste buds unsatisfied and me still hungry.

Much to my surprise, it was really, really good. With that, Hubby Chuck and I had stumbled upon the first “vegetarian” meal that we actually liked. Please keep this under your hat and, whatever you do, please don’t tell.

Most of us have at least one. For me, my sister, Gina, was my first vegetarian relative and the pickiest child in our family. When you share the same bedroom, and sometimes even the same bed, well, you get to know one another very well. It’s even possible that I was just the tiniest bit annoying to her. However, when it came to food, Gina definitely took the Oscar for best actress in a drama. Sitting at the dinner table with her was an exercise in self-control for the whole family. Even getting her to eat spaghetti was a major undertaking.

So it was no surprise when, as a young adult, Gina decided to become a vegetarian. She basically was already, unofficially. Peering into her fridge was like a vegetarian version of Andrew Zimmern’s Bizarre Foods. There were all sorts of sprouty, vinegary, green things in there. Since then, several family members have joined in her quest.

Visiting the home of a vegetarian is one thing, but a bigger problem for us omnivores



Laura Hunt Angel photo

Stuffed with mushrooms and ricotta cheese, you won’t miss this meat in this company worthy baked spaghetti squash.



Laura Hunt Angel photo

Hearty lentil soup is an easy, anytime meal that even the kids will like.

is, how do you feed somebody like that at your house? Fortunately, my sister generally brings most of her own food, and even cooks it. Sometimes I partake, as long as it isn’t tofu, or curry, or anything too runny. I know, I know, who is the picky eater, now?

Still, I’ve wanted to be able to fix her and my other vegetable eating loved ones something that they would really enjoy - without them having to always buy and make it themselves. And after our unexpectedly positive encounter at Earth Friends, I just knew that there had to be more flavorful, unscary vegetarian meals out there.

Did You Say Quorn?

Poorly prepared vegetarian cuisine can be not only flavorless but downright weird. Reading through the obscure ingredient list in some vegetarian recipes may require a whole new vocabulary, and for anyone other than a die-hard vegetarian, things like seitan (wheat gluten), tempeh or European brand name meat substitute, Quorn, (made from edible fungi) might not be very appetizing or even all that healthy. Sticking to common, easily recognizable foods and avoiding “substitute”

meat is the best way for an omnivore to prepare a vegetarian meal that everyone will enjoy.

Once I began cooking the occasional vegetable meal, I found that the best vegetarian dishes include a good amount of nonmeat protein, so that hunger pangs don’t strike again an hour later. But most importantly, it has to taste really, really good. Good enough that meat lovers won’t miss the meat, and made with familiar ingredients so that everyone has an idea of what they’re in for. If you think about it, you can probably come up with a few simple meatless dishes that you already know how to make but don’t think of as vegetarian, per se. (Think grilled cheese and tomato soup.)

For omnivores who are looking for something slightly more stylish to try for themselves or for vegetarian guests, a great place to start is with Mediterranean cuisine. Other cuisines may specialize in exclusively vegetarian dishes, but Italian, Greek and even a few Moroccan recipes use ingredients that are more familiar to the average American, vegetarian or not.

The Recipes

Far from mere rabbit food,

these Mediterranean inspired dishes are filling, flavorful and made with familiar ingredients. Two out of the three are also gluten free.

Baked Spaghetti Squash With Mushrooms and Cheese

Perfect for a chilly winter evening, easy enough for a weeknight supper and dressy enough for company, you’ll want to make these delectable squash a part of your veggie repertoire. A good choice for gluten-free dining.

2 whole, small spaghetti squash
3 tablespoons olive oil
4 cloves garlic, peeled and thinly sliced
16 ounces sliced baby portabella mushrooms
1 teaspoon dried basil
½ teaspoon dried oregano
Coarse salt and pepper, to taste
Juice of 1 lemon
2 cups marinara sauce
1 cup part skim ricotta cheese
1 cup shredded Italian blend cheese

Preheat oven to 375 degrees F. Rinse the squash, pat dry, and puncture them through to the center in two or three places. Place in a 9x13 baking pan and bake for about 30 minutes, or until tender. Remove from the oven (keep the oven on) and allow to cool until they can be handled.

Meantime, heat 3 tablespoons of olive oil in a skillet on medium-high



Laura Hunt Angel

Serve up a colorful lunch or casual weeknight meal with a giant grilled veggie-hummus wrap.

heat; add the garlic, mushrooms, basil, oregano and salt and pepper to taste. Saute about 12 minutes, or until the most of the liquid has evaporated and the mushrooms are browned. Remove from heat and stir in the ricotta cheese.

Slice each squash in half and carefully scoop out the seeds. Use two forks to gently separate the spaghetti like strands of squash, leaving the shell intact; place the squash back in the baking pan, cut side up. Divide the mushroom-ricotta mixture evenly between the squash, then top with the marinara. Liberally sprinkle each squash with a layer of the Italian cheese blend, then return them to the oven for 15 minutes, or until they are hot and the cheese is beginning to brown. To serve, place one squash half on a plate. Serves 4.

Hearty Lentil Soup

You may not be willing to trade your birthright for it, but you won’t miss the meat with this rich, satisfying soup, which is lower calorie, gluten free and can be prepared in a slow cooker. Red lentils lend a nice color to this dish, but either variety will do.

1 onion, chopped fine
3 large carrots, sliced
3 stalks celery, sliced
4 cloves garlic, minced
2 teaspoons basil
2 teaspoons oregano
1 28-oz can crushed tomatoes
1 pound lentils
4 cups water
4 cups vegetable stock
½ cup baby spinach
Salt and pepper, to taste

Blend all of the ingredients except the spinach and balsamic in a slow cooker or large kettle. If slow cooking, this recipe will take about 8 hours on low or 4 hours on high. If cooking on the stove, it will take about 1½-2 hours on low and will need stirring occasionally to prevent scorching. Just before serving, stir in the spinach and balsamic. Top each bowlful with Parmesan cheese, if desired. About 8 servings.

Grilled Hummus-Veggie Wraps

When it comes to vegetarian cooking, hummus is about as adventurous as I get. The classic blend of chickpeas, garlic, lemon and olive oil provides a filling, savory base for these big sandwiches. Choose gluten free wraps, if you like, and change up the veggies to suit your taste.

4 large (10-inch) spinach wraps
1 10-ounce tub hummus, your choice of flavors
2 cups packed fresh spinach
2 Roma tomatoes, sliced
4 paper thin slices of onion
4 slices Swiss cheese

Spray a skillet with nonstick spray and heat it to medium high. Lay each wrap out on a flat surface; divide the hummus between the wraps, spreading it in a layer down the center of the wrap and leaving 1-2 inches space at the bottom. Layer the spinach and tomato slices on the hummus. Separate the onion slices and spread them on top the tomatoes. Cut or tear the Swiss cheese in half and lay them in a line along the fillings. For each wrap, fold up the bottom, then fold one side and then the other to make a log shape. Lay the wraps, two at a time, in the skillet seam side down, and heat until the wrap is browned and the cheese is melted and beginning to crisp. Carefully flip the wraps and brown the other side. Makes 4 wraps.