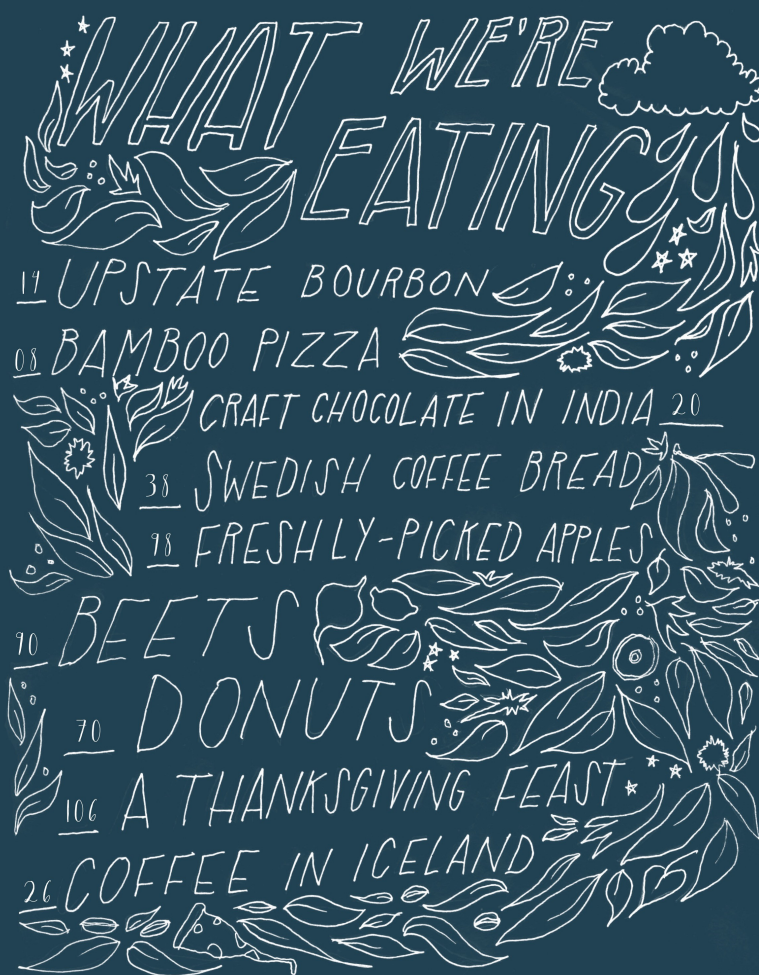
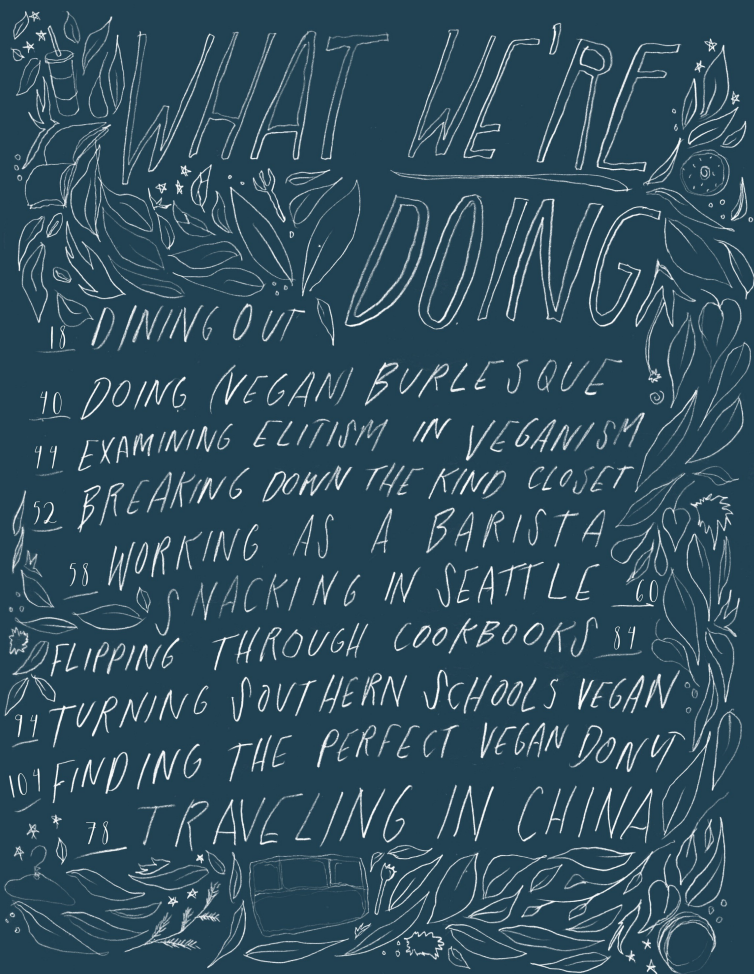


# CRACK PEA

Season 4 Quarterly  
Fall 2015









words & photos by Cristin Nelson

Kendra Schaefer and her husband Kyle, both vegetarians, have learned two things about restaurants in China after a decade or so living in Beijing. First: navigating a menu can be a serious challenge for vegetarians without Chinese language skills (or a translator), and second: special requests are not always welcomed. "I've definitely been kicked out of restaurants for asking for something without meat," Kendra said, mentioning a time when she tried to order mapo tofu, a famous Sichuan dish of bean curd swimming in a spicy chili- and bean-based sauce, without its usual minced pork or beef. The bewildered server relayed this request to the chef, who stomped out of the kitchen to demand that Kendra take her business elsewhere.

Options for a vegetarian traveling in China can require some sleuthing. Food is of central importance to Chinese culture, and meat takes a starring role, given its presence in many traditional and iconic dishes. Because of its relative cost and scarcity during much of history, meat has been elevated into a symbol of wealth and high status — like the famous Chinese dish Peking duck, which for centuries was served only to emperors. "Only the wealthy or high economic status population could afford meat in their diet... this continues in today's world," wrote Moly Feng, who lived in Beijing for six years, in an email. "When people are treating others, if the table doesn't include meat, it is considered as a disrespectful act."

Vegetarianism isn't widely adopted in China, which Feng attributes to the fact that vegetarianism is more associated with religious beliefs than with personal reasons—Buddhist cuisine is traditionally meatless, owing to its principle of non-violence.

American Stephen Belter kept a vegan diet when he lived in Beijing for a year in the mid-2000s. At that

time, he writes over Facebook, "there was barely a concept of vegetarianism there even though many people's diets were largely vegetarian when their families were poorer. One older Chinese colleague said he grew up not being able to eat meat." Belter believes he met only one Chinese person who was vegetarian by choice.

Although meat is important in Chinese cuisine, plenty of vegetarian options do exist. Tofu, noodle & rice dishes, and vegetable stir-fries are plentiful, as well as some unfamiliar choices. I can recall standing awkwardly in Beijing's bustling Wangfujing Snack Street, blocking the stream of people, holding in one hand a "Chinese burrito" called *jinsiquanbing*: bean sprouts, shredded carrot, and green onion, wrapped in a thin, crispy pancake and served with sauce. I blew on it, waiting for it to cool, before slathering it with a hoisin-type sauce and slurping the bean sprouts out like noodles.

The Snack Street is a short alley in the Wangfujing shopping district, the oldest shopping area in Beijing. I watched a toddler pause under a string of colorful paper lanterns; in one pudgy fist she gripped a stick of candied hawthorn fruit, a traditional Chinese snack, upon which she gnawed with obvious delight. I bought one too; the hawthorn looked like a crabapple, and tasted like a fusion of tart apple and strawberry.

I stopped at many of the booths lining the alleyway to gobble snacks like "stinky tofu"—deep fried cubes of salty, fermented bean curd. It's a ball of umami, crispy on the outside, salty and fermented, served with a choice of sauces: sweet bean sauce, or vinegar and chili. As far as stinky goes, my guide informed me, this is nothing: travel south to Shanghai, and I'd find tofu with a stinkiness level that's off the charts.



Stinky tofu exemplifies one of the complications for vegetarian eaters in China. Because Chinese cooks have used vegetarian staples like tofu and wheat gluten for hundreds of years, these foods are not viewed as meat substitutes, and are often used in tandem with animal products. Many dishes are considered incomplete without some meat, and dishes that appear to be vegetarian might make use of minced meat or stock for flavor. In the case of stinky tofu, recipes vary from vendor to vendor, and might use a marinade that includes animal products.

Moly Feng says that restaurant menus in China usually do not specify all of the ingredients used in each dish. "Even if the dish is 'vegetable' there is a high chance that the oil used or some other components are not vegetable-based," she writes.

Finding vegetarian options was much easier in northern cities like Beijing and Xi'an than in central and southern China, says Jane Mountain, a vegan from Canada who traveled in China for four months in 2014, keeping a vegetarian diet while traveling. In a restaurant in central China, Mountain thought she had ordered a vegetarian dish, only to discover that regional language differences had reduced her meat-free request into a pork-free request—an observance found among China's Muslim population.

"If we were having trouble finding a place to eat, we would look for a noodle stall where they were pulling fresh noodles," Mountain said. "Those places are often run by Muslims, and they understand that people have different food requirements. People in southern China don't understand why you wouldn't want to eat meat if it was there."

These are the waters that a vegetarian traveler must navigate, and a language barrier can add an extra layer of complexity. Mountain found success at restaurants and food stalls where ingredients were laid out and she could point to what she wanted. She memorized the phrase for "we do not eat meat" (*bu chi rou*) and carried a card with a phrase like "We eat

Buddhist food" written in Chinese characters.

After a few miscommunications involving animal products, Mountain created a list of pictures on her tablet to visually demonstrate the foods she wanted to avoid, which she said eliminated the confusion. "From our experience, the communication barrier was by far the largest barrier to being vegetarian in China," she said. "If we managed to communicate, people were very understanding."

Restaurants serving only vegetarian food can be found in some parts of the country, particularly in large cities, and often around Buddhist monasteries. Many of these can be found through an online search.

One evening in Beijing, I ate dinner at Pure Lotus, where the walls are draped in swaths of purple fabric and men in traditional robes led the way to the entrance, swinging lanterns on long poles. The enormous menu is in both English and Mandarin, though the English version is nearly inscrutable; dishes have names like "Golden Bridge Realization One Heart Heading Toward the Dao Noodles" (which turns out to be a dish of handmade noodles in a bean sauce) and "Love at first sight, set to happen before we meet" (a bowl of jujube soup). Morsels of food arrive at your table in dramatic fashion—over an open flame, or, in the case of the chunks of juicy honey melon offered for dessert, in a carved wooden bowl set over dry ice, its fog wafting over the side of the table.

Pure Lotus serves more than meat-free food — it illustrates the potential of the stunningly diverse meatless side of Chinese cuisine. It embraces creativity and innovation to offer, both literally and figuratively, something more than the typical vegetable stir fry. This is a restaurant that raises our expectations about what meatless dining can be. And maybe, just maybe, it will encourage diners to think about equalizing the role of meatless dining in Chinese cuisine. △









# CONTRIBUTORS

## ADINDA DE BOER

[adindadeboer.com](http://adindadeboer.com)

Adinda De Boer is a freelance photographer and prop stylist. Originally from Holland, now in Hong Kong after living in Kuwait and Taiwan. Even though she has always loved food and travel, it was only a couple of years ago that she started working for a food company in the Middle East as an art director and stylist, where she truly fell in love with styling and photography.

## AMANDA ALDINGER

Amanda's appetite for most things is voracious, including her love for guacamole, television crime dramas, Malbec, and all things consumable in bowls. A writer, she lives in Brooklyn and spends all her free time cooking and planning what to eat next.

## AILEEN & KEARA MCGRAW

[keanamcgrawcreative.com](http://keanamcgrawcreative.com)

Aileen and Keara McGraw are 22-year-old Chicago-based twin sisters. Aileen writes, Keara illustrates, and both love the work that compassionate ideas unlock. They share a passion for nut butter, proven by matching peanut plant tattoos.

## DARIA JULIMA

[cukiernia-marzen.blogspot.com](http://cukiernia-marzen.blogspot.com)

I am 27 years old flight attendant, most of my free times spending in the kitchen. I am obsessed with vegan baking.

## BECKY WADDELL

[becleanshop.com](http://becleanshop.com)

Becky is a vegan business owner, wife and mom to a sweet old miniature dachshund named Scooby. A DC transplant lusting after a few good West Coast vibes, you can find her one of two places working in her shop studio or eating food at any number of local, plant-friendly joints.

## AUSTIN J BAY

[teandstories.com](http://teandstories.com)

Austin lives with his partner in Boston where he likes to read obscure magical realism, eat dinner in the park under the stars, and watch anime until his heart's content. He has been making a mess in the kitchen as long as he can remember and loves to use healthy, plant-based ingredients.

## ISABEL PUTINJA

[isabelwrites.wordpress.com](http://isabelwrites.wordpress.com)

Isabel Putinja is a wordsmith who like words and enjoys playing with them in a variety of ways: as a writer, blogger and translator.

## NELLE CLARK

[nelleclark.com](http://nelleclark.com)

Nelle Clark is a Seattle-based food and lifestyle photographer. She is inspired by Sunday brunches, lemon slices, and the colors of the Pacific Northwest.

## DAKOTA KIM

[twitter.com/dakotakim1](https://twitter.com/dakotakim1)

Dakota Kim is a food-obsessed writer working on a burlesque cookbook called Bombshell Bakers. She divides her time roasting CSA kohlrabe in her tiny Brooklyn kitchen, hunting reishi mushrooms with the New York Mycological Society, and foraging for black raspberries on her best friend's farm upstate.

## CRISTIN NELSON

[cristinnelson.contently.com](http://cristinnelson.contently.com)

Cristin Nelson is a freelance food and travel writer whose words, recipes, and photos have appeared in publications including The Boston Globe, Vegetarian Times, and Edible Boston. She lives in Boston with her husband and her enthusiastic appetite.

## ALI METZGER

[eatveganfood.com](http://eatveganfood.com)

Ali Metzger is classically trained in french cuisine, earned her Bachelor's degree in Restaurant Management, and is a 2nd-level certified sommelier through the international wine guild. In the past five years, Ali created her website, a vegan catering business, and Arizona's first vegan food truck. Ali spends her spare time practicing yoga, hiking mountains, and advocating to end animal cruelty.

## ERIN EBERLE

[nourishpdx.squarepace.com](http://nourishpdx.squarepace.com)

Erin Eberle is a creator of food and words. She is obsessed with cooking, wine, farming and the ocean. Erin happily resides with her wife and companion animals in Portland, OR.

## STEPHANIE MCLEAN VILLANO

[mykindcloset.com](http://mykindcloset.com)

Stephanie resides with her husband in Newport, RI. She enjoys traveling, writing, gardening, and exploring emerging eco-friendly and vegan fashion designers. On her blog, My Kind Closet, Stephanie shares with her readers alternatives to animal-based fashion products and hopes to inspire others to expand their understanding of "ethical consumerism" to encompass both humans and animals alike.

## KARLEN CHASE

[instagram.com/thisiskarlen](https://instagram.com/thisiskarlen)

Karlen is a Southern transplant who landed in Buffalo, N.Y., in 2006. She is a writer and former librarian who enjoys reading, camping and experimenting with whole foods vegan cooking.

## CALVIN EATON

[theglutenfreechefblog.com](http://theglutenfreechefblog.com)

Calvin Eaton is an author, teacher, baker, mostly vegan foodie and curator of the gluten free chef blog which features recipes, weekly meal plans, product reviews, and other articles and resources tailored to those with celiac disease, food allergies, and other foodies who believe in clean living and clean eating.

## ALEX BACHERT

Alex Bacher is a 26-year-old vegan with a passion for food and fun. She currently resides in Brooklyn and can be found sipping on iced coffee, making lists in her notebook, and experimenting with new recipes.

## OLGA ZHUKOV

[instagram.com/olgaolgaex](https://instagram.com/olgaolgaex)

Olga is a seeker of all things beautiful. In her 25 years of journeying she has found a lot to love, including rabbits, Sigur Ros, and vegan crepes.



# CMK

FALL 2015  
ISSUE 17

design & content  
*Cara Livermore*  
[sewindie.com](http://sewindie.com)

sales & shipping  
*Bob Lawton*  
[boobah.tumblr.com](http://boobah.tumblr.com)

production assistant  
*Chloé du Plessis*  
[andrewandchloe.org](http://andrewandchloe.org)

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