

Plant Forward March

Getting in Step with the Purchasing, Pricing and Promotion of Vegan and Vegetarian Menu Items

In this article, we explore how to make vegan items work with your menu, even if your concept doesn't yet have veggie street cred.

By Lindsey Danis

More than half of diners are hungry for more plant-based options on restaurant menus, according to The Hartman Group's research. If you think vegan items won't be a fit for your concept, Datassential's recent findings on veganism might make you think twice. Among their findings (more to come later) are that veganism is higher in barbecue's regional home base, the South, and that more men (two percent) observe a vegan diet than women (one percent).

What's more, omnivorous consumers – those who enjoy both plant-based and meat fare – not only want to eat more veggies, they believe it's the healthier choice. Given how relatively few diners embrace strict veganism or vegetarianism, a large percentage of omnivores are clamoring for more plant-based menu picks.

A Personal Angle

David Zamudio is executive chef of Alma Cocina Latina, a Venezuelan restaurant in Baltimore, Maryland which opened in 2016 and moved to a new location last year. While Venezuelan food isn't typically known for having a lot of vegan or vegetarian offerings, Zamudio has had several vegan items on the menu since day one. "We've always had people with dietary issues, and we try to have options for everybody. The vegan community has been growing for all these years and it's extremely important to have plant-based items on any menu," Zamudio says.

Zamudio's embrace of plant-based fare has a personal angle, too. The chef tries to eat meat every two or three days instead of daily, adhering to a flexitarian diet. His brother is vegan and, Zamudio says, "has traveled all his life to be able to have a good diet just by using vegan ingredients."

Rice and beans play a central role in many Latin cuisines. But "in Venezuela, we do not have [many] vegan dishes, only a couple which are not very well-known," Zamudio says, adding that in Venezuela there is an added challenge of getting vegan ingredients.

While Venezuelan cuisine might not be known for vegan items, Alma Cocina Latina serves several vegan and vegetarian items. Currently, there are yucas bravas, a riff on the tapas classic patatas bravas; squash soup with truffle oil and parmesan; burrata and plantain salad; Middle Eastern len-

til arepas; and coconut flan. Zamudio changes the menu on a monthly basis, swapping out the lowest-selling item for something different, whether the unpopular item is vegan or meat-based. This allows him to experiment with and find dishes that get higher customer responses.

Zamudio says that customers request menu modifications to remove dairy or make something vegan on a daily basis. As a result of these frequent requests, "I try not to add the dairy inside the dish, like in a marinade. I try to put the dairy at the end, so in case we get vegans" the dish can be modified, he explains.

New York City restaurant operator Nick Accardi opened his first Italian restaurant in 1998. He currently operates five restaurants in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood, four of which have vegan options. Accardi's concepts focus on regional southern Italian cuisine, with an emphasis on Sicilian, Puglia, Calabrian and Neapolitan dishes.

Accardi feels like restaurants are putting vegan items on the menu to meet the demand of diners, but "it's more like an afterthought where this one thing is what we have. For us, it's part of our repertoire." Southern Italian food tends to be "vegan centric by nature" with lots of vegetables and olive oil, he explains. As a result, diners looking for something plant-based have a lot of choices.

While dishes like pasta with tomato-basil sauce are easily made vegan, Accardi credits the new rise in vegan products, particularly the development of his favorite vegan cheese, which is Pleese, with allowing chefs like him to create vegan food that tastes good. "Out of all the vegan cheese I've tried, I like this one by far the best. It has a more creamy, richer flavor profile," he says of Pleese.

The vegan cheese company's founder, Kobi Regev, came into Vito's Slices and Ices, a pizza shop Accardi co-owns with his brother, John Accardi. Regev loved pizza but couldn't eat dairy. He wanted to make a plant-based cheese that was suitable for those with dairy issues, would melt like pizza cheese, and didn't contain allergens.

The majority of plant-based cheeses rely on nuts, seeds or soy, all of which are allergenic to some diners. Regev turned to bean and potato proteins to create a cheese that is gluten-free, allergen-free, and melts like dairy cheese. After hearing about Pleese from his brother, Accardi started using it in his restaurants, too.

WHO'S ON BOARD?

Your Image of the Typical Vegan or Vegetarian Customer Might Be Wrong

Datassential's recent survey of 3,500 people and their eating habits shows that plant-based diets are spread fairly evenly across several distinct groups.

They found that vegans are equally spread between urban and suburban environments, at three percent. Rates of veganism were higher among Hispanic (three percent), Asian-American (three percent), and Black diners (two percent) than white diners, only one percent of whom identified as vegan. Generationally, divides were clear. Nine percent of Millennials embraced a vegan or vegetarian label. No Boomers who participated in Datassential's survey identified as vegan.

In their report *Health & Wellness: Reimagining Well-being Amid COVID-19*, The Hartman Group reports that only four percent of consumers typically eat a vegan diet. Six percent eat vegetarian (eggs and dairy, but no meat) while 10 percent claim a flexitarian label (mostly plant-based but meat now and then). The vast majority of consumers are omnivores who enjoy meat and plant-based fare. Among this latter group, interest is growing in eating more vegetables for a variety of reasons. For those with food intolerances and allergies, plant-based alternatives let diners indulge in a food they may otherwise eschew to avoid unpleasant symptoms or allergic flare-ups. Others see plant-based menu items as healthier, while some diners like the extra variety.

The take-home message from this data is not to think about plant-based items as specialty menu items developed to satisfy a handful of picky eaters on restrictive diets. Don't think about them as lighter, healthier fare limited to specific concepts and not appropriate to yours. Vegan items appeal to a majority of diners, and they work across a broad range of concepts. With interest rising, it can be a smart move to broaden your plant-based offerings. By developing exciting and unusual vegan options, you cater to both vegan eaters who wouldn't otherwise choose your establishment and omnivores interested in something different.

Prior to meeting Regev, Accardi says he tried other vegan cheeses but wasn't happy with the results. Pleese is the first cheese to have the consistency and mouth-feel diners expect in pizza cheese. "There is a considerable difference," he says, mentioning that he once made a pizza with half Pleese cheese and half another vegan cheese to see the difference. The cheese looked visibly different, with Pleese so closely mimicking the real deal that you'd have to look twice. "The flavor profile is where it's at," he says, expressing appreciation for the ingredients in Pleese.

Accardi uses Pleese mozzarella cheese in the pizzas he makes at Tavola, his main restaurant which offers wood-burning oven Neapolitan pizzas. Diners can order any pizza on the menu made with Pleese for a \$2.50 upcharge. For a gluten-free crust, there's another upcharge. Accardi complains about the standard-issue gluten-free pizza crust which "tastes like cardboard." He makes his own gluten-free crust using a blend of alternative flours, including rice and corn. The resulting crust is "light, fluffy, crisp and delicious," he says.

In addition to vegan pizza, Accardi makes vegan versions of other popular Italian comfort dishes, including an eggplant parmesan where the eggplant is baked in olive oil instead of fried, and a gluten-free vegan lasagna featuring a Bolognese with meat analogs. "You need to have a Bolognese sauce to make a true lasagna," and plant-based meat alternatives like Impossible do the trick.

"People are loving it," he says. "It's nice to have vegan and gluten-free food that actually tastes good as opposed to" being an afterthought, a point he makes several times in the interview.

In an informal poll, vegans and omnivores agree: they're tired of being served the same old options, like veggie burgers and mushroom pasta. They want naturally plant-based proteins rather than what they see as fake meat. They crave variety and will reward restaurants that meet or exceed their expectations with repeat business.

Vegan diners get similar consideration in the dessert course. Sicilian desserts like granita are naturally dairy-free. At Vito's Slice Shop, Accardi tells me, they make granitas with fresh fruit rather than concentrates or syrups.

Purchasing

Accardi hasn't had much difficulty sourcing vegan items, in part because he largely relies on produce and olive oil, which are readily available. While Pleese is a relatively new product, thus not widely available yet, he recommends Teitel Brothers in the Bronx for operators interested in trying meltable vegan mozzarella.



While he hasn't experienced purchasing difficulties, Accardi does note the added time it takes to test and perfect vegan menu items. A signature recipe like his gluten-free pizza dough is often time-consuming. He recalls how they blended different flours and made countless test batches before getting the crust recipe just the way he wanted it. "There's a lot of craftsmanship and work with that," he says. He has to charge more for it, but he knows his customers see and taste the difference when compared with the pre-prepared crust that tastes like cardboard.

"It takes time and research to find vegan ingredients to play with," Zamudio echoes. Even something that seems like it should be vegan, like chocolate, might be made in a factory that also processes animal fats, so "you have to read all the ingredients and look for the certifications." Products are certified as vegan or vegetarian by organizations such as the American Vegetarian Association.

While these labels can be a shortcut, be prepared to read food labels more closely than you otherwise would when purchasing pre-prepared items. If you're truly committed to keeping things vegan, you'll also have to avoid many kitchen staples, including sweeteners like honey (which die-hard vegans see as animal labor), white sugar (bone char is used

to filter it), and wines that are filtered with animal byproducts, like gelatin and egg albumen.

For Zamudio, the current-day supply chain environment adds unpredictability to the purchasing process. For the last month, the chef has been struggling to find the vegan chocolate he relies on for a signature dessert. He ended up taking the chocolate vegan dessert off the menu because he couldn't find a substitute. Even when he is able to find a vegan alternative, he says "they're way more expensive than the regular thing," which puts operators like him in a tough spot. When vegan items aren't selling as well as he might like, it is a financial commitment to keep them on the menu.

Pricing

"People expect to have a vegan dish for way cheaper than a meat dish, and it doesn't work like that," says Zamudio. Plant-based alternatives "like almond milk or almond cream" cost as much as, if not more, than milk or cream. Nuts are the foundation of many vegan dishes, and they're pricey, too.

"Based on the cost of ingredients alone, a vegan dish made with good vegetables shouldn't be all that much cheaper than a chicken-based dish," notes J. Kenji López-

ONE POTATO, TWO POTATO...

It may be easier than you imagine to add vegan items to your menu. One popular approach is to come up with plant-based protein swaps for things your concept already executes well. If you do burgers, there might be a meat analog product, such as one produced by Impossible Foods or another non-meat substitute for the protein – such as a portobello burger. That said, while meat analog products have the flavor and texture of meat, there are true vegans who don't want menu items that mimic foods they no longer eat. On the dessert menu, replace a dairy-based ice cream with one made from coconut or oat milk.

Look to your customers, who are probably already telling you what kind of menu items they want to see by how they modify orders. If your customers are asking for menu items without dairy or meat, use that as a starting point to create a vegan version of that dish.

All in the book "Serious Eats", illustrating with an example from Massachusetts chef Tony Maws. The food cost for a roast chicken for two at Maws's restaurant The Kirkland Tap & Trotter, now permanently closed, broke down to \$5 per person. A vegan vegetable stew entree containing heirloom carrots, beets, green rice, and cipollini onions had a food cost of \$3.75 per person. The vegetable stew would cost less made with commodity carrots, but then it wouldn't fit the upscale New American concept.

Pre-prepared items like Impossible Foods meat analogs are done-for-you. They don't require much in the way of prep time. But made-from-scratch items, be they Maws' vegan stew or your own veggie burger recipe, do require more hands-on time than meat counterparts.

Vegetables simply take more time to peel, clean and cut than meat or fish. While an in-house meat burger might require grinding beef, adding seasoning, and portioning patties; that veggie patty takes more time. A prep cook might need to prepare grains and beans and sauté vegetables before mashing the beans, blending the ingredients together, seasoning the mixture, and shaping patties. Factor in all that work and the veggie burger might easily take twice as long to prepare. Meanwhile, diners will balk at paying a higher price tag for it. These same price differentials play out when you consider more expensive cuts of meat and vegetables, such as wild mushrooms.

Dollar for dollar, plant-based items cost close to if not more than meat-based counterparts. Accardi says "the vegan mozzarella costs twice as much per pound as the regular mozzarella." Impossible meat is likewise "very expensive" compared to ground beef. For the gluten-free crust, he spends four to five times as much on wheat-free flours. "We always have to charge a bit more, you just do," he says.

This puts operators like Zamudio and Accardi in a bind. They understand that customers expect vegan items to cost less since they contain no meat, and that customers probably aren't aware of the added prime costs on their end. But in the end, they have to make a choice. Do they price vegan items a couple dollars lower than meat items to meet customer expectations and absorb the cost? Do they price them the same and manage negative feedback? "I try to make them a little cheaper so I don't get a complaint, but at the end of the day it depends on my food costs," says Zamudio.

And Promotion

"There's not a huge vegan community" in Baltimore, Zamudio says. He thinks that local vegans tend to visit vegan establishments in the city, rather than go to concepts like his that feature a handful of vegan items on an omnivorous menu. Still, he wants to keep creating inventive vegan dishes and putting them out there. He believes interest is growing, even if Baltimoreans aren't as progressive as diners in other cities. The question remains: once you've invested in their creation, how to best promote vegan items?

One simple tip is to make it easy for diners to identify these items on the menu through a leaf symbol or letters, like V for vegan, VG for vegetarian, or PB for plant-based. When a guest doesn't have to ask a server what type of stock the soup is made with, for example, it creates a better customer experience.

When you use symbols to designate plant-based items, you can integrate them into the regular menu rather than in a separate section. Impossible Foods says this helps all diners discover these items. The plant-based meat company also recommends using images and words like classic, delicious, or favorite to convey to guests how delicious the items are. Rather than call something meat-free, which suggests lack, use language that conveys a positive quality of the plant-based item, such as flavor, health, or provenance if you're using local, heirloom products.

While customers are interested in eating plant-based food and perceive it to have health benefits, many carry negative associations with labels like vegan or vegetarian. Some associate those terms with bland food that lacks flavor. For the same reason, avoid using health-conscious language that carries a stigma, like low-fat. Prioritize taste and flavor when writing menu descriptions, use icons to help plant-based eaters verify a dish meets their needs without alienating omnivores, and show how these menu items are both similar to what your concept already does well.

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