

## Making Plant-Based Work at Any Restaurant

Eating out at a restaurant may seem like a daunting task for a new plant-based eater, but it need not be. A little planning ahead of time can make the entire experience easy and enjoyable. Follow these simple steps and with a little practice, the process will become second nature to you.

Try to eat home-cooked meals as much as possible, at least at the very beginning. It provides you with the most control over what you eat and how it is prepared. However, whether out of necessity or desire, you do go to a restaurant, it is usually possible to find meals that are in line with your new lifestyle. Here are some strategies for eating out:

- If you are picking the restaurant or weighing in on where to go, consider patronizing a plant-based restaurant or a restaurant that offers plant-based meals that are clearly identified on their menus. If you are located in Pittsburgh, go to [www.VeganPittsburgh.org](http://www.VeganPittsburgh.org) for a comprehensive list of possible locations. If you are not in Pittsburgh or are on vacation, I highly recommend [www.HappyCow.net](http://www.HappyCow.net) or <http://www.VeganEatingOut.com/restaurants/>. If you find a restaurant that is not on VeganPittsburgh.org, please email them so that it can be added. If you find a restaurant not listed on HappyCow.net, they encourage you to add it so that their listings are as comprehensive as possible.

Just keep in mind that vegan does not always equate to healthy. Added vegetable oils and meat analogs may be vegan, but they do not promote optimal health.

- If you are going to a restaurant that doesn't serve just plant-based food, then take a look at their menu posted on their web site ahead of time.
  1. Look for entrees that are free of animal products and minimal in added oil.
  2. If there aren't any, look for entrees that look tasty and ask if the meat and/or dairy products could be left out and possibly replaced with something else, and that can be prepared with minimal added oil.
  3. If there don't appear to be any entrees that would work, take a look at the appetizers, side dishes, or the sides that accompany the meat-based entrées. Appetizers can often be prepared as entrées and there will often be some sort of potato, rice, pasta, bean, or winter squash sides and a variety of vegetables. Select an assortment that looks appetizing.
  4. If you still don't see anything that appeals to you, contact the restaurant a few days ahead of time, during non-peak hours, and ask if there is a plant-based meal with no/minimal oil that could be made for you. Most chefs welcome the chance to be creative and make something out of the ordinary, and they appreciate the extra time so that they can procure the right ingredients. Even if you don't have the ability to call ahead, the restaurant will almost assuredly be able to make something for you. Don't be afraid to ask your server. Some of my best meals have been complete surprises.

Ethnic restaurants are often good choices for eating out.

Italian restaurants have pasta dishes with vegetables and marinara sauce. Make sure that their pasta isn't made with eggs. If it is, most restaurants will keep eggless pasta in the kitchen to accommodate those that cannot eat eggs. Order bread and ask for roasted garlic or a side of marinara sauce for dipping instead of butter or olive oil.

Mexican restaurants will often have bean burritos. Ask if it can be made with whole beans. If that isn't possible, make sure that their refried beans do not contain lard. They may, however, contain added oil. Opt for corn tortillas instead of flour tortillas, which are made with oil. Better yet, you can create a delicious meal by asking for brown rice, beans, grilled vegetables, and guacamole on a bed of romaine lettuce. Ask for warm corn tortillas to dip in salsa in place of fried chips. [Mad Mex](#) can make any of their menu items with tofu or portabella mushrooms instead of meat and offers vegan substitutes for cheese, sour cream, and ranch salad dressing, although consider adding them to your meal sparingly or only occasionally as these vegan alternatives are not low in fat.

Chinese restaurants have steamed mixed vegetables over brown rice and plenty of noodle dishes. Just remember to ask them to omit the fried egg and go light on or omit the oil.

Japanese restaurants have miso soup, vegetarian sushi (Futo Maki, Horenso, Kappa Maki, Oshinko Roll, and Kamp), udon vegetable soup (ask for it to be made without any animal products), cucumber salad, sunomono salad, and edamame (soybeans). If you want to order a seaweed salad, make sure their salad does not contain jellyfish.

Thai restaurants often offer green papaya salad, noodles, and steamed rice. Just be mindful of the dishes that contain coconut and/or coconut milk as they tend to be higher in fat.

Indian restaurants always have dishes that include potatoes, lentils, split peas, garbanzo beans, and cauliflower. Just be careful that the dish you order does not contain cheese, a dairy-based sauce, or a lot of oil. Choose aloo gobi (potatoes and cauliflower), chana pindi (garbanzo beans), or pulao rice. Hold the naan as it is fried bread made from white flour. Opt instead for two other Indian breads: tandoori roti and onion kulcha. Ask them to hold the ghee and opt for mango chutney instead.

If you go to a traditional American restaurant, you might find success in ordering a selection of side dishes if there aren't any entrees that meet your needs. Some restaurants now have veggie burgers that can be coupled with a baked potato and side salad. To avoid the refined carbohydrates such as bread, buns, and wraps usually offered in restaurants, try asking for the sandwich or wrap contents on a bed of greens instead. Ask for sauces and salad dressings on the side and then use sparingly. Some pizza parlors now offer whole wheat crusts that can be topped with extra tomato sauce and plenty of vegetables. In many restaurants, you can order fresh fruit or sorbet for dessert. Don't forget to ask for water with lemon or lime wedges instead of pop.

Approach every situation like an adventure, keep an open mind, and I think you will be pleasantly surprised! Bon appétit!