How To Cook Vegan

By Curt Hagedorn

Many of us, at one time of life or another, have flirted with the idea of a vegetarian diet. It usually goes something like this: "I'm a vegetarian." "Oh, really, do you still eat eggs?" "Yes, and of course fish…and occasionally chicken, but only the white meat, and of course butter and milk.. I couldn't give up my ice cream." Where in some circles, you still might get by with calling yourself "vegetarian" with such limited restrictions; some people have upped the dietary ante with a new term, "vegan," which basically means all vegetables, all the time.   No meat, no dairy, no fish. In fact, vegan is often summed up as consuming "nothing with a face." Of course, if you see bright smiles on every little daisy and nasturtium when you wake up on a spring morning you might want to invent another term for your diet.

One caveat: for some vegans, even the term "cooking" needs some explanation (and probably should be changed to "Preparing Vegan Meals.") The new wrinkle on vegan-ism is what is known as the "raw foods" movement. In other words, in addition to consuming nothing with a face, foods are prepared and consumed as much as possible without the intervention of heat, which can reduce or alters the nutritive value of plant foods. Whether or not you take your diet to this extreme is up to you (and of course your doctor.) It should be stressed that you should never undertake any radical change in diet and/or exercise without first consulting your doctor.

How difficult is it to prepare vegan meals? Not terribly difficult at all, though it does take some imagination in the kitchen as well as access to high quality ingredients. Fortunately, there seems to be a Whole Foods, a farmers market or other source of organic produce around every corner. Even regular chain grocery stores, places where once it was unusual to find fresh mushrooms -- are adding larger numbers of different types of organic and regular produce every day. And there is now a whole culture of cookbooks and magazines and other resources for those attempting to live a vegan lifestyle. But just to get you started, here are five keys:

1)   Don't concentrate on what you can't have, concentrate on what you can. There are literally thousands and thousands of choices of not only vegetables but whole grains and fruits and oils and extracts and herbs and spices all of which come directly from the earth and all of which are packed with all sorts of flavors and nutrients you probably aren't getting now with your diet of take out and Lean Cuisine.

2)   Hit the spice and condiment aisles. Americans love condiments from salsa to mustard to hot sauce and on and on. There are, again, thousands of choices of things to shake, dollop or pour over your ingredients to make them more flavorful. Remember, use in moderation as you experiment and always keep a selection of your favorites on hand.

3)   One word, beans. From soy milk to tofu to "replacements" for hot dogs and burgers, human ingenuity appears to be able to recreate anything in the "meat" category out of beans. Again, literally thousands of beans. The first step in any vegan cook's repertoire is learning how to take a bag of dried legumes and a bag of rice and turn it into a flavorful, nutritious meal.

4)   Accept substitutes. You're human, after the first few weeks of "nothing with a face" you're going to be seeing Golden Arches in your dreams. So buy the tofu cheese and the soy burgers, get the "soy-sage" and the tofu-scramble, and indulge in some chocolate soy milk. Some of these items are surprisingly good and while purists may look upon it as at least ideological cheating, it's perfectly within the "no face" rule.

5)   Moderation in all things. The point is, you're trying to be healthy here, so if you slip up and have a piece of fish once a month, or even a Big Mac, though you won't be a vegan, you'll still be doing your body and mind a favor, and eventually, those "bad food" cravings will go away and you'll be dreaming of tofu-dogs slathered in brown mustard on a whole sprouted grain bun.