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Meatless meals are gaining in popularity

Cookbook author Newgent says more people are making vegetables, grains the stars of dinner, even carnivores



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ou don't have to be a staunch vegetarian to appreciate a meatless meal.

Eating meatless doesn't mean boring dinners, and it doesn't mean going hungry.

Plenty of meat-eaters are avoiding meat once or twice a week for a variety of reasons — to save money, to eliminate fat from their diets, to follow religious food guidelines or to follow a greener diet.

“What we are finding is that flexitarian category or part-time vegetarians, has really taken off. ... More people are definitely eating meatless, at least part of the time,” said Jackie Newgent.

Newgent, a native of Bath Township, is a registered dietitian and culinary nutritionist based in New York. She has written several cookbooks, including her most recent, *The With or Without Meat Cookbook, the Flexible Approach to Flavorful Diabetes Cooking*. (\$18.95, softcover, American Diabetes Association).

Her book offers recipes that can be made with or without meat. While it is aimed at those trying to change their eating habits for diabetes, the flavorful recipes are perfect for trying out for a meatless Monday or Lenten Friday meal.

Newgent said there is a misconception that meatless meals will leave you hungry, when just the opposite is true.

“One of the great parts about going meatless, especially if you make vegetables the star of your plate, is the portion size. You can eat a lot more,” she said.

Newgent encourages cooks to consider meat as a side dish instead of a main dish, if they want to include it in the meal. A small sprinkling of crumbled bacon can add powerful flavor to a dish without it taking center stage in the meal, she said.

She said a stir-fry is the perfect example of meat taking a backseat to the vegetables.

“You can have so much more fun when playing with vegetables and grains and making them the center of your plate,” she said.

Another easy way to go meatless is to pick your favorite non-meat food, such as pasta, and build a meal around it without including meat.

“Use that as the base of the meal and start planning from there,” she said. “Think of a vegetable or a grain and just start planning your meal from there.”

Chicken parmigiana with pasta can become roasted asparagus parmigiana with pasta, instead, she said. “You're serving a lot of vegetables on top, but you still have that comfort food aspect to it,” she said.

For her book, Newgent took traditional dishes and created meatless versions.

Her Sloppy Sauteed Eggplant and Pepper Sandwiches was inspired by a Philly cheesesteak sandwich. It's loaded with peppers and onions, but gets its bulk from soft sauteed eggplant instead of beef. You can add a few strips of lean beef to make it with meat. Or add tomatoes or a small amount of tomato sauce to make it more like a Sloppy Joe sandwich.

“Mushrooms and eggplant give you that heartiness that meat provides and a substantial quantity that you expect. You won't really miss the meat, but you won't feel deprived of something,” she said.

Here's the recipe to try out and several others, too, for meatless eating.

SLOPPY SAUTEED EGGPLANT AND PEPPER SANDWICH

4 whole-wheat or other whole-grain sandwich rolls, split

¼ cup shredded provolone cheese

2 tsp. canola or grapeseed oil

1 large eggplant (about 1¼ lb.) unpeeled, cut into 2-inch by ½-inch batons

2 large green bell peppers or mixture of green and red bell peppers, thinly sliced

1 medium yellow onion, halved, thinly sliced

¾ tsp. freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1 tbsp. white balsamic or white wine vinegar, divided

⅛ tsp. sea salt, or to taste

¼ cup Spicy Sandwich Spread (recipe follows)

Toast the rolls. Immediately sprinkle with the cheese. Set aside.

Heat the oil in a nonstick Dutch oven or large, deep skillet over medium-high heat. Add the eggplant, bell peppers, onion, black pepper, 2 teaspoons vinegar, and the salt. Cover and cook, stirring twice, until the vegetables are slightly softened, about 12 minutes. Uncover and saute until the vegetables are fully softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in the remaining 1 teaspoon vinegar while scraping up the browned bits in the pan for 1 minute. Adjust seasoning. (Makes about 4 cups.)

Smear each bun with the sandwich spread, fill with the vegetables, and enjoy immediately.

Makes four servings.

SPICY SANDWICH SPREAD

2 tbsp. plain fat-free Greek yogurt

1½ tsp. mayonnaise

1 small Serrano pepper, without seeds, minced

1 large garlic clove, minced

1 tsp. white balsamic or white wine vinegar

⅛ tsp. sea salt, to taste

Stir together the yogurt, mayonnaise, Serrano pepper, garlic, vinegar, and salt in a small bowl until well combined.

Makes ¼ cup, four servings of 1 tablespoon each.

— The With or Without Meat Cookbook, Jackie Newgent

CREAMY MEXICAN

CARROT SOUP

2 tbsp. vegetable oil

2 cups finely chopped red onions

¼ plus ⅛ tsp. ground cumin

¼ plus ⅛ tsp. ancho chili powder

8 cups coarsely chopped carrots

7 cups reduced-sodium vegetable broth

½ cup sour cream

¼ cup plus 3 tbsp. fresh-squeezed, strained lime juice

¼ cup plus 1 tbsp. honey

¼ cup plus 1 tbsp. fresh, whole cilantro leaves

1 tbsp. liquid from a can of chipotle chiles en adobo

2½ tsp. coarse salt

Heat the oven to 400 degrees. Heat the oil in a large, heavy Dutch oven over medium-high heat. When hot, add the onions, the cumin, the chili powder and saute until softened, about 6 minutes. Add the carrots and saute, stirring occasionally with a wooden spoon, for another 5 minutes. Add the broth and bring to a boil over high heat. Cook until the carrots are very tender when pierced with a sharp knife, 30 to 35 minutes. Turn off the heat.

Use an immersion blender to carefully puree until no chunks remain, about 3 minutes (be vigilant to make sure all of the chunks are gone). If you don't have an immersion or stick blender, puree in batches in a blender, not filling the blender jar more than halfway and holding down the lid with a kitchen towel.

Add the sour cream, lime juice, honey, the whole cilantro leaves, chipotle liquid, and salt; puree with the immersion blender to mix well.

Makes about 13 cups of soup.

— Adapted from *Meatless All Day, Recipes for Inspired Vegetarian Meals*, Dina Cheney

POLENTA CASSEROLE

For the polenta:

4 cups water

½ tsp. salt

2 tbsp. olive oil or butter

½ tsp. dried oregano

⅛ to ¼ tsp. red pepper flakes (optional)

1½ cups cornmeal

½ cup shredded Parmesan cheese

For the vegetables:

2 tbsp. olive oil

2 cups chopped onions

2 garlic cloves, minced or pressed

1 tsp. salt

½ tsp. dried oregano

¼ tsp. ground black pepper

2 cups stemmed and chopped kale or spinach

3 cups sliced mushrooms, white or cremini (12 oz. whole)

For the casserole:

2 cups shredded mozzarella or mild provolone cheese, or a mixture

1 cup diced fresh tomatoes

⅓ cup chopped fresh basil

½ cup shredded Parmesan cheese

Put the water, salt, olive oil or butter, oregano and red pepper flakes, if using, in a heavy-bottomed saucepan and bring to a boil. Whisk in the cornmeal as you pour it into the boiling water in a steady stream. Bring back to a boil, reduce the heat to a very low simmer, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the texture is smooth and creamy, 15 to 20 minutes. Remove from the heat and stir in the Parmesan cheese.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Oil a 13-by-9-by-2-inch baking pan. Spread the polenta evenly in the pan and set it aside while you prepare the vegetables.

In a large soup pot or skillet on medium heat, warm the oil. Add the onion, garlic, salt, oregano, and black pepper, cover and cook for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in the mushrooms and cook, covered, until the vegetables are tender. If you're using spinach, stir it in when the mushrooms are juicy, and cook just until it has wilted. Remove from the heat and set aside.

To assemble the casserole: Sprinkle 1 cup of the mozzarella over the polenta. Spread the cooked vegetables evenly on top. In a small bowl, mix together the tomatoes and basil and then spread the mixture on top of the cooked vegetables. Finally, sprinkle the remaining cup of mozzarella and the Parmesan evenly over the tomato-basil layer.

Cover the casserole dish and bake for 10 minutes. Uncover and bake until the cheese is golden brown and the casserole is thoroughly hot, about 10 minutes. Let the casserole sit for 10 minutes before serving.

Makes six to eight servings.

— Moosewood Restaurant Favorites, the Moosewood Collective

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