

Comment



Manhattan Chef David
Bouley's Summer Squash

Vibhuti Patel, the well-known New York columnist who was with Newsweek for many years, and an avid vegan, writes about a dining lifestyle that she has observed over 40 years in America



Per Se, overlooking Central Park, New York

The Rise of Vegetarianism in America

I first came to America in 1966, at my father's invitation, from England where I was a university student. We checked into Chicago's tony Palmer House Hotel and, as I walked into its grand dining room that morning, it was instant culture shock: I saw people eating huge steaks — large enough to fill a 12-inch dinner plate — for breakfast!



The Chopra Centre for Well-Being, Carlsbad, California

When Alice Waters, who had relished Parisian food as a student, returned home and started to cook, she sought to replicate that palate memory. The secret, she discovered, lay in fresh organic ingredients — vegetables straight from the farm, never frozen, canned, or supermarket bought.



Chef Alice Waters in her kitchen garden

I'd sat through big English breakfasts that included bacon or sausages, even kippers, but a steak first thing in the morning was a Midwestern predilection in America's beef heartland. There was no awareness of vegetarianism in the States in those years. As a lifelong vegetarian, I was restricted to cottage cheese and fruit, or green salad and french fries, or the ubiquitous grilled cheese sandwich—served in cheap coffee shops, with no meatless entrees in the pricey dining rooms of five-star hotels where my industrialist father was a regular. Not that Europe or England were vegetarian-friendly in the '60s, but there, even in snooty super-deluxe restaurants, chefs welcomed the challenge of cooking you a memorable personalized meal. I had savoured gourmet dinners in France, Switzerland, Italy and Greece. But in the States, menus unbendingly declared, "No Substitutions." You could not even order the vegetables listed in a dish without the meat.

Nearly a decade later, I was surprised by another meat-heavy menu at a fancy hotel in Disney World, that mecca of international tourists, where even the lowly tomato soup was afloat with chunks of lamb! Back to lettuce and fries for me, but my toddler could chew neither so I ordered a chicken soup, her first, since meat-mania seemed an ongoing pattern here. We were compelled, in those years, to celebrate special events at Italian restaurants, the only ones that catered ungrudgingly to a vegetarian, until my husband found "Menus From New York's Finest Restaurants," and regularly consulted that book to locate places where I, too, could eat well.

Then, overnight, things changed. As American doctors focused on heart disease, cholesterol phobia took hold of the medical establishment. Dr. Dean Ornish promoted his low-fat vegan diet to combat—



Bouley's Connecticut Corn Soup with baby wild black currants, broccoli sprouts, bronzed dill

even reverse—coronary disease. He established programs at major hospitals to teach patients and their spouses how to cook vegetarian and overcome their society's innate prejudice against meatless meals. Most Americans wanted masses of protein and felt that without meat, their hunger was not psychologically sated. Still, the success of Ornish's research made couples flock to his expensive programs to learn a new lifestyle that included yoga and meditation as part of his medical regimen (Ornish had spent time in India following a Hindu guru). His

positive results led insurance companies to pay for his programs and doctors to recommend meat-free diets for other ailments, too.

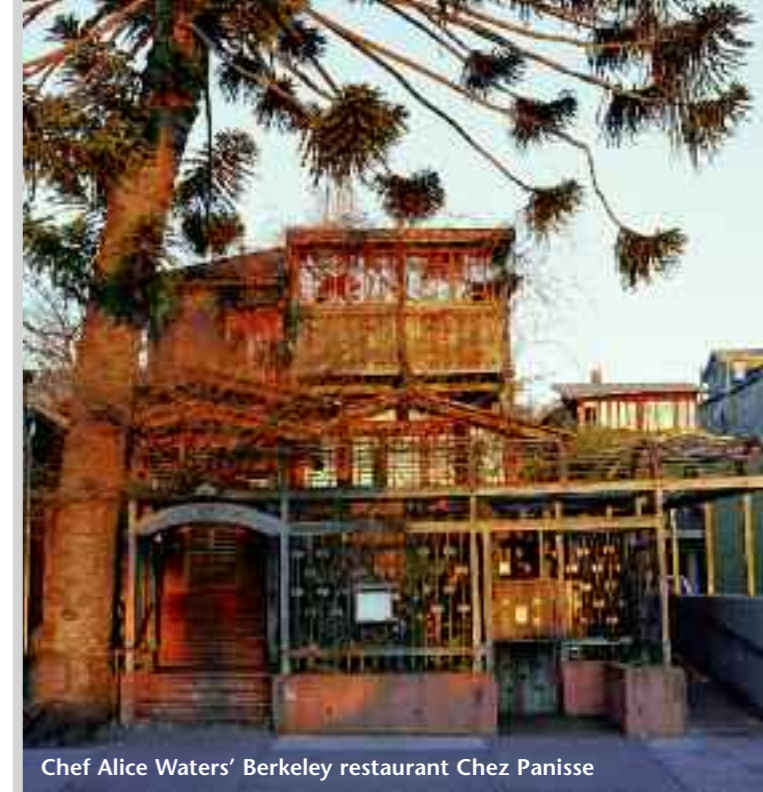
The much adulated celebrity doctors Andrew Weil (a Harvard-trained physician who became an integrative health guru), and Deepak Chopra (who overcame his own addictions to meat, tobacco and alcohol through meditation, then promoted Ayurveda), both championed vegetarianism. It became a respectable mainstream practice, not just an adjunct to the yoga-and-meditation craze, through such

Per Se's Sun Choke Salad



prestigious medical endorsements. Vegetarianism was now considered good for the body. And, the cult of the “body beautiful” has always been the biggest sell in youth-obsessed America: since red meat is unhealthy and fattening, hordes of Americans turned away from it. Among the unlikeliest converts, Bill Clinton, famously addicted to burgers, attributes his improved heart health and big weight loss--requested by Chelsea for her wedding!--to becoming vegan. To cater to this novel health need, no longer a passing fad among the young, the restaurant industry had to wake up and make changes.

Those changes came from the top and the West. It is the rich who create trends in America and new ideas invariably originate in California before the rest of the country adopts them. In this case, too, California—the garden of America—set the standard. When Alice Waters, who had relished Parisian food as a student, returned home and started to cook, she sought to replicate that palate memory. The secret, she discovered, lay in fresh organic ingredients—vegetables straight from the farm, never frozen, canned, or supermarket bought. She shopped at green markets and later, for her Berkeley restaurant Chez Panisse, she signed up local farmers to deliver their produce the morning it's harvested. Freshness became her mantra. The mantle of the iconic Julia Child, America's greatest advocate of rich, French, meat-based cooking, fell on the young Waters who became the grand dame of California's light nouvelle cuisine, with its emphasis on fresh vegetables. Beautifully served at her restaurant with minimal seasoning and no rich sauces, their freshness makes the veggies delicious in themselves. Self-assuredly, Chez Panisse offers no a la carte choices: its sole fixed menu's nightly variations are



Chef Alice Waters' Berkeley restaurant Chez Panisse

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The French Laundry in Napa, California



Per Se's Banoffee with chocolate



Bouley's Mushrooms - three kinds

In 1992, when America's top-rated restaurants started serving French-style "tasting menus" (small portions, numerous courses), a handful created their meatless variations. That's when my teenage daughters treated me to an 11-course birthday degustation at Manhattan's Bouley restaurant. It was a dream to die for — intense flavors that I had never known, in bite-size portions



Cafe Asparagus

dictated only by the market's best offerings of that day. Thus, the cult of freshness and of the supremacy of vegetables was born. Alice's restaurant is not vegetarian, but vegetables and grains are emphasised and there is always a vegetarian option—not just one dish, but a twin alternative menu with its own five courses (US\$ 95 before tax, tip, or drinks). I ate there with carnivorous friends, unapologetically, without feeling discriminated. Chez Panisse consistently holds its ranking as America's best restaurant; it is so popular that, usually, there's a three-month wait for reservations.

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restaurant Brushstroke specialises in the refined kaiseki cooking of imperial Kyoto, using fresh, natural ingredients. Its spare space is inspired by Shinto shrines, its tasting menus—hot food, not sushi—include a seven-course vegetarian. In California's Napa Valley, The French Laundry, boasts three highly coveted Michelin stars and, like its New York offshoot Per Se, offers expensive multicourse vegetarian tastings. Both are hard to get into. I dined at Per Se for US\$150 in 2005 when it opened and had to pull rank (as a food writer) to get a reservation. Today, that menu costs US\$295. With demand, the price has doubled.

Since America's wealthy have made it fashionable to eat vegetarian, the hoi polloi are following. At the lowest end, McDonald's sells veggie burgers and New Yorkers frequent cheap South Indian restaurants which never serve meat. Lines wind around the no-frills Saravanas chain every evening despite dosas that are uncompromisingly spicy for American tastes. Chinese restaurants, those ultimate redoubts of non-veg delicacies, have joined the bandwagon: eateries like the renowned Zen Palate exclude all animal products while

offering items like 'Vegetarian Peking Duck,' and 'Vegetarian Bird's Nest Soup.' Soy, tofu and tempeh rule the roost.

India's cuisine—whether humble or high-flying—is every vegetarian's ultimate fail-safe fallback. It thrives in all price categories in New York, second only to London in the variety of South Asian restaurants outside the subcontinent. But that was not always so. In 1985, when Craig Claiborne, the magisterial food critic of *The New York Times* expressed curiosity about vegetarian delights, he learned there was no reputable restaurant specialising in India's rich meatless repertoire. Hearing of me, a good home cook (though no chef), he invited me to cook for him. Accompanied by two friends as sous chefs, armed with a festive Gujarati menu and all requisite ingredients, I headed for his beach house in the Hamptons. It was my first time cooking in a vast professional kitchen with food processors, pressure cookers, weighing scales—all equipment—in triplicate. Claiborne explained his only rule: everything had to be measured and weighed before being tossed into the pot.

We cooked all day, he interviewed me and took notes on his IBM Selectric on the kitchen's huge central island. Then, he produced a little saucer on which he accepted a teaspoonful of every item for his tasting. I was told to pack up the food for the Times photographer's shoot in my Manhattan apartment since Claiborne's posh villa did not have Indian tableware or linen. Cheated out of dining with the legendary critic, we ate pizza on the three-hour ride back. The following day, the food photographer shot pictures all morning, then ate heartily and took the leftovers home, saying, 'We love Indian food.' Claiborne's article, headlined 'Exotic Vegetarian Discovery: The Cuisine of an Indian State,' started on the front page of The Living Section with a huge top-to-bottom, four-column-wide photograph of us, the three cooks, one behind the other, holding out our dishes on outstretched hands in a mockup of a three-headed, six-armed goddess! A full page of recipes ran inside. Gujarati cuisine had its 15 minutes of fame as New Yorkers read about *shrikhand*, *poori*, *kathi* and *undhiya*.