

By Jeannie O'Sullivan Staff writer, PhillyBurbs.com

MOORESTOWN — Turkey was on the minds, if not on the plates, of the vegetarians who gathered for a meatless Thanksgiving feast Sunday.

Cuisine, fellowship and animal welfare are always on the menu of the Vegetarian Society of South Jersey's annual potluck, which took place at the Moorestown Community House and drew dozens of guests.

For newcomers, the colorful, savory-smelling buffet of vegetables, grains, legumes and soy dishes debunked the misconception that a vegetarian diet is limited.

"Years ago, when I used to hear the term vegetarian, I thought that they just ate vegetables and salads. Later on I realized there are (many more) food choices," said George Zitzler, an empty-nester who belongs to the society with his wife, Maryellen.

Phasing out meat is easier than the Delran resident had anticipated. "Take portabello mushrooms, for instance — you would swear you were eating a burger," he said.

A huge Hubbard squash filled with vegetable-broth based stuffing served as centerpiece of a spread that included sweet potato casserole with spinach and chick peas; broccoli with coconut milk, curry paste and cilantro; whole wheat rigatoni pasta with tomato sauce; gluten-free peanut butter cookies; and three-pepper potato salad, among other dishes. Guests were asked to bring dishes free of animal byproducts, meaning no flesh, dairy, eggs, gelatin or honey.

The infamous Tofurkey didn't make an appearance on the table, but plenty of other "mock" meats did in the form of soy products such as tofu, and seitan, known as the "wheat meat."

Tasty food was the only purpose of the holiday feast. A gift basket auction served as a fundraiser for the Adopt a Turkey program operated by the Farm Sanctuary, a national farm animal rescue and protection organization based in Watkins Glen, N.Y.

In addition to numerous national charities, the society also has helped Have-a-Heart Guinea Pig Rescue in Florence, the Animal Welfare Association in Voorhees, Camden County, Furrever Friends Rescue & Volunteers in Woodbury, Gloucester County, and the Cow Sanctuary in Bridgeton, Cumberland County, to name a few.

The society formed 25 years ago with the mission to educate the public about the health and humanitarian benefits of a vegetarian diet, which is low in saturated fat and cholesterol and relies on plant-based foods rather than animals for sustenance. Roughly 120 members from South Jersey and Pennsylvania belong.

The message is equal parts health and animal welfare, according to founding member and society president Janet Erickson. The Evesham resident said she first embraced a meat-free lifestyle as a preventative health measure, but had a defining moment during a visit to a dairy farm.

The cows peacefully grazed in the pasture, but each of the calves cooped up in the barn was headed toward one of two very different fates. The females would remain at the farm for their milk. The male babies would become veal.

"So initially it was for health and then it evolved more into a spiritual choice. It's about having compassion for everything, not just people but animals, too. I feel a (bigger) sense of calm within myself," said Erickson, who makes a living as a spiritual healer. She is married to a vegetarian and raised her two adult daughters on the diet.

The society meets regularly throughout the year at churches, eateries and members' homes for events that pair with educational movies and fundraising. The group is a fixture at Whole Foods, where members host monthly business meetings, teach cooking workshops periodically and distribute information at the grocery's farmers market.

The society also spreads its message through its website, [www.vssj.com](http://www.vssj.com), a stronghold of information about the group's activities, meat-free eateries in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and various health and animal welfare topics.

Membership has grown more than tenfold over the past six years, according to society treasurer Steven Fenster. A vegetarian for about a decade, the Pemberton Borough resident offered some advice along with a fitting pun.

"Try gradually giving up red meat, then start looking at giving up chicken or fish. Going cold turkey would be very difficult."

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**Pete Picknally/BCT Staff Photographer**

Lorraine Bal, of Pemberton Borough, serves herself a plate of meatless foods, during a vegetarian Thanksgiving potluck dinner, hosted by the Vegetarian Society of South Jersey, at the Moorestown Community House on East Main Street in Moorestown.



**Pete Picknally/BCT Staff Photographer**

Some of the many meatless dishes available during a vegetarian Thanksgiving potluck dinner, hosted by the Vegetarian Society of South Jersey, at the Moorestown Community House on East Main Street in Moorestown. At bottom is a very colorful potato salad, made with peppers of various shades, celery, onions and fresh garlic.



**Pete Picknally/BCT Staff Photographer**

Kevin Klopfer, front left, age 11, and his mom Su Schindler, both of Pemberton Township, sample some of the meatless foods, during a vegetarian Thanksgiving potluck dinner, hosted by the Vegetarian Society of South Jersey, at the Moorestown Community House on East Main Street in Moorestown.

YouTube Video <http://youtube.com/watch?v=AaTms4LbyTs>