

Eating Vegan at Ethnic Restaurants

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What's a vegan to do? You want to eat out, but you're not sure what to order. What kind of animal products are lurking in the items on the menu? It's hard enough to find good meals without meat, fish or poultry, and even more challenging without dairy, eggs, and honey.

Some of the best vegan meals can be found at ethnic restaurants. While American meals tend to concentrate on the animal protein with various "side" dishes, other countries rely on vegetables, legumes, and grains to create flavorful and nutritious dishes.

Always ask if the food is made with dairy, eggs, or honey, if a soup has beef or chicken broth or fish stock (still pervasive although vegetable stock is increasing in popularity). Ask if a dish or sauce uses any meat ingredient or garnish. If you think there may be a language barrier, you can make a card with pictures of a cow, pig, sheep, fish, chicken, egg, milk, honey (bee) to show the server. Point to all the pictures while shaking your head "no". You can get the pictures from a children's book or a grocery ad. Or, use *The Vegan Passport*.*

Indian food can be spicy or mild, and there are lots of wonderful choices. *Samosas* are vegetable filled triangles, and *Pakor*s are batter-dipped appetizers. Watch out for *paneer*—homemade cheese, and yogurt. Also, many dishes are made with *ghee*—clarified butter. *Dal* dishes are made with lentils or other beans or peas, and there is usually a

wide variety of vegan selections. Vegetable dishes are made with eggplant, cauliflower, spinach, okra, and chickpeas. Mango desserts and beverages are available. Curry spices include cumin, coriander, ginger, mustard seed, turmeric, asafetida, garlic, chili, fennel, fenugreek, anise, and cardamom. Make sure to tell the server whether you want your meal hot and spicy, or mild.

Middle Eastern restaurants have a wide variety of delicacies. *Dolmades* are grape leaves stuffed with rice. *Tabouleh* is bulgar wheat with parsley, lemon juice, tomatoes, and cucumber. *Falafel* are spicy chick pea balls, and they are served with a *tahini* (sesame seed paste) dressing. *Hummus* combines chick peas with tahini, and *Baba Ghanouj* has eggplant with tahini. Scoop it all up with pita bread. Be cautious about the desserts—they're usually made with honey as the sweetener. Seasonings often include lemon, garlic, cumin, cardamom, turmeric, sumac, cinnamon, and aniseed.

Japanese food can be tricky, but there are wonderful choices available. Try the *miso* soup with kombu or mushroom stock, but note common use of fish stock/ingredients. Seaweed salad is a nice appetizer, and you may be able to order *Vegetable Gyoza*—dumplings—either fried or steamed. *Vegetable Tempura* is deep-fried with an egg-free batter. *Vegetable Teriyaki* is prepared in a *shoyu* soy sauce. Ask for vegetable rolls—sushi-style good-



ies made with avocado, cucumber, radish, or other vegetables, and served with pickled ginger and *wasabi* (very hot, green horseradish).

Chinese food offers a large selection, and many restaurants now offer “mock” meats. If you’re lucky, you can find *General Tzo’s “Chicken”*—a sweetly spicy dish. Some places offer vegetarian spring rolls and vegetarian hot & sour soup, but make sure you ask if it’s made with egg. There’s usually egg in the vegetable fried rice, but you might be able to get it without. If you order the long green beans, make sure they don’t add tiny shrimp or pieces of pork—some restaurants add this without noting it on the menu. *Chinese Pizza* is actually crisp-fried onion pancake served with soy dipping sauce. Vegetable dumplings may be fried or steamed. Chinese spices include garlic, ginger, soy, sesame oil, *mirin* (rice wine/vinegar), scallions, and five spice powder (cinnamon, star anise, cloves, fennel seed, and szechuan peppercorns). You can ask for hot pepper oil on the side and spice up your meal to your taste.

Mexican food usually includes cheese and sour cream, but you can request your meal without these. Try *Portabello* and *Pepper Fajitas*, with freshly made tortillas. *Guacamole* is made with avocado, lemon juice, garlic, and tomatoes. Taco chips and re-fried beans are usually vegan, but to be safe, ask if they’re made with lard (traditional). Mexican food usually includes some form of tomatoes, corn, beans, rice, and chilis. Your meal can be spiced up with hot chilis, and many restaurants provide salsa (chopped tomatoes and/or tomatillo, garlic, lemon juice, onions, and canned or raw chili peppers) with various degrees of heat.

Thai restaurants offer a nice variety. Many will substitute tofu for the meat, and omit the prevalent fish

sauce, if asked. Watch out for egg in the *Pad Thai*. Coconut milk is used in place of dairy and the flavor is marvelous. Curry may be red or green and you can choose spicy or mild. Herbs and spices include basil, cilantro, cumin, galanga, ginger, lime, lemon grass, and chilies. Most dishes use a variety of vegetables, and are served with rice or noodles. Peanuts are popular in dishes and sauces.

Caribbean food is usually colorful, with a variety of vegetables and grains. Yams, okra, peanuts, beans, and rice are combined in various dishes. Tropical fruit dishes may include mangos, bananas, and coconut. Spices may include ginger, cinnamon, vanilla, chili, cayenne, oregano, nutmeg, and allspice.

Korean food is traditionally made with meat or fish, and it may be difficult to find a vegan meal, but if you’re lucky you can enjoy some wonderful flavors. Try *Kimchi*, pickled cabbage with red pepper and garlic, but make sure it’s not made with shrimp or fish sauce. *Bee bim bop* can be made with tofu instead of meat, and usually includes rice, shredded carrots, greens, bean sprouts, mushrooms, and other vegetables, topped with soy or chili sauce. Korean seasonings include soy, sesame oil, ginger, garlic, hot pepper paste, hot pepper flakes, dried peppers, and soy bean paste.

If you’ve been afraid to eat out because you don’t want to risk animal products in your meal, take a chance on these wonderful and exotic cuisines. Ask the right questions before you order, and then dig in. You’ll never be satisfied with salt, pepper, and ketchup again!

*Useful travel companion, pocket-sized **VEGAN PASSPORT**: Each language page (56 languages) lists what a vegan cannot and can eat. 2005, 80pp 4¼x5¾” \$8.00.

