

ALL IS WELL



At the buzzing Café Basilico in Mumbai it's all about a vegan menu for globetrotting, health-conscious foodies. So, if you're a devoted fan of Italian cuisine, you might opt for the eggless pasta topped with a generous sprinkling of vegan cheese. Alternatively, how about trying the hummus-filled sandwich or the black bean burger. Or, you could even sup on the roasted tomato soup made using organic ripe tomatoes.

Café Basilico's vegan menu is the brainchild of actress Ayesha Takia who plays a key role at the restaurant along with her restaurateur husband Farhan Azmi. Under her influence, about 30 per cent of the offerings on Café Basilico menu are vegan. Says Takia: "I was a hard-core meat lover but I turned vegan seven years ago after reading about animal cruelty. Ever since, it's been a lifestyle choice and our restaurant menu too is a reflection of such healthy practices."

Cut to Calcutta where, if you've got a craving for healthy eats, you can hop across to the newly opened Bodega Cantina Y-Bar on Park Street set up by Urvika Kanoi and Akash Jaiswal. On offer here is an elaborate vegan world cuisine spread that you can pick from. Says Kanoi: "It offers unconventional global and local cuisines to the foodies of the city." About 20 per cent of the menu is made up of vegan-friendly dishes. These include items like the Bodega



Photo: Sanjit Kundu

Mezze Board consisting of quinoa falafel and hummus, wok-tossed pot stickers consisting of Asian greens, shiitake and house-fermented soy chunks and quinoa salad with cherry tomatoes and mushrooms.

Vegan food's a

Actress Ayesha Takia and her restaurateur husband Farhan Azmi have specially curated a vegan menu at their bistro Café Basilico in Mumbai where you can tuck into a healthy (inset) quinoa, organic avocado and papaya salad

Vegan food is becoming unexpectedly popular and innovative chefs are reworking their menus to whip up dishes that are both healthy and high on taste, says **Sushmita Biswas**

niche trend, with a strong celebrity following, that's gaining ground much faster than might have been expected. And, with going vegan being the hot new mantra, it's no surprise that existing restaurants are reworking their menus to attract a niche clientele. Says executive chef Ashvini Kumar of Four Points By Sheraton Navi Mumbai, Vashi: "Wellness and vegan food is not just another health fad but growing to be a way of life."

Kumar, along with fitness expert Mickey Mehta, recently curated a Heal- ThySelf food festival in the hotel based on the six tastes of Ayurveda and clean eating without meat. The menu had everything from radish salad in a roasted papad bowl to *poha* cooked with carrots, broccoli and peanuts. The hotel's Asian Kitchen and the all-day restaurant Wrapped currently offer 'on request' options for vegan guests staying at the hotel. "By tweaking a few ingredients, it's simple to adapt a dish and turn it into a vegan one," says Kumar.

The principles of veganism are well known. It's all about vegetable and plant-based foods, but meat and animal-derived foods like milk, ghee and cheese are a strict no-no. Also off the menu are processed and canned foods. Says Azmi of Café Basilico: "Veganism includes mindful eating having high

Photos: Gajanan Dudhalkar



Vegan Bites, started by Samir Pasad and raw food chef Hemali Gala, offers (inset) a vegan lunch spread comprising of a bean sprout salad, stir-fried beans, herbal tea, basil rice and vegetable Thai curry

nutritional needs. The trick is to combine the right ingredients like no dairy, less oil and no refined sugar so that it becomes interesting and not dull."

The reasons for veganism gaining ground are also well-known. For Takia, it was all about animal suffering. But a growing awareness about the environment, too, is turning young urban Indians to veganism. Besides that, there are many who are turning vegan for health reasons as it's believed by many that a vegan diet can help to reverse diabetes and heart problems.

It's no surprise then that veganism is catching on in the health-food

Sumit Gambhir (left) and Pankil Shah of The Pantry are offering everything from (below) salted caramel chocolate shake to oven-roasted chimichurri tofu, fresh cucumber water and breakfast bulgur *upma* with raisins and almonds to its niche clientele



friendly Bangalore. Take, for instance, the all-vegan restaurant Carrots located in the Koramangala area set up by IT professional

Krishna Shastry in 2013. His partner Susmitha Subbaraju has now taken over the day-to-day operations. Diners here can tuck into the restaurant's signature vegan dishes including barbecued starters, Indian curries with brown rice, burgers and wraps, and chocolate brownies and Tiramisu. Says Subbaraju: "True to our vegan commitment, our cream and paneer are all dairy-free and are nut-based. Our desserts and pizzas too are gluten-free. People who come here realise that a vegan diet is not a restricted diet. The options are limitless."

Meanwhile, in Mumbai, businessman Samir Pasad's craving for healthier fare spawned a business idea: a vegan meal delivery service in central Mumbai called Vegan Bites. Says Pasad: "I attended a seminar on veganism organised by Dr Nandita Shah, a homeopath, that changed my life. It motivated me to turn vegan."

The decision to turn vegan happened overnight and he subsequently started Vegan Bites in 2011, which delivers around 250 tiffins across the city daily. His forte is crafting special meals for diabetic and heart patients who constitute 20 per cent of his clientele. Says Pasad: "The vegan market is exploding in the US with the emphasis more on raw food. In India, it's still niche. But the key is to experiment with alternative ingredients other than



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(Left) Chef Ashvini Kumar of Four Points By Sheraton Navi Mumbai, Vashi along with fitness expert Mickey Mehta recently organised a Heal-ThySelf food festival at the hotel where on the menu were vegan dishes like (above) a radish salad in a papad bowl

dairy, herbs and spices.”

His vegan menu excludes white sugar and oil, and hot sellers include *dabelis* (made from lentil), jowar rotis and cabbage wraps and masala *chaas* (made from yoghurt out of rice and peanut milk). Vegan Bites has two meal plans (only lunches) — a 10-meal plan priced at Rs 3,150 and a full-month plan for Rs 5,400.

On a different level, all-day breakfast and grab-and-go snacks are the forte of Mumbai-based The Pantry, a charming café located in the Kalaghoda area and set up by Pankil Shah and Sumit Gambhir in 2012. Says Shah: “Our aim was to change people’s mindset about the quality and freshness of Indian ingredients. The fundamental idea was to use fresher ingredients over processed food.” He adds: “Today, people with dietary restrictions like lactose-intolerance and gluten-intolerance are realising the importance of nutritious and vegan food. We saw more people asking for vegan options and so moved in that direction. Today, 40 per cent to

50 per cent of our menu is vegan.” Their vegan hot sellers include a salted caramel chocolate shake, oven-roasted chimichurri tofu, fresh cucumber water and breakfast bulgur *upma* with raisins and almonds.

Alternatively, diners can satisfy their sweet tooth with non-dairy vegan desserts. Yes, cakes and desserts without milk. Take for instance, Mumbai-based home-baker Rithika Ramesh, who turned vegan and began baking vegan cupcakes and cakes under her brand Green Stove. She says: “Everything’s made without any dairy products and eggs. It’s safe for people who are lactose intolerant.” Rithika prepares her milk in her home kitchen from almonds and coconut. She uses soy and coconut-based whipped cream for her cakes priced at Rs 800 for half a kilo and Rs 1,200 for 1kg.

Vegans are spoilt for choice with everything from pizzas to lemon tarts at these restaurants that are creatively combining taste with health

In fact, many desserts can be made vegan using vegan butter, soy milk and coconut cream in place of milk and eggs. Carrots in Bangalore, for instance, organises dairy-alternative workshops twice a month. Pasad’s Vegan Bites too makes vegan ice creams.

Till some years ago, veganism was an oddity in India, which has a rich milk-heavy food culture. But that’s changing as dairy alternatives are easily available. So Shah and Gambhir of The Pantry make in-house almond milk and get their supply of silken-tofu (smoother soy tofu) options from a local dairy. And Azmi’s Café Basilico imports rice and cashew milk. Carrots in Bangalore too offers Indian varieties like curd rice (made using fermented soy milk) and *malai* kofta made from soy milk. For pastas and pizzas, flavourful cheese is made in-house out of tofu and cashew.

These vegan cheerleaders are all aimed squarely at Indians who’ve become conscious about nutritious eating. So, they stress that they don’t use sugar and pick dairy alternatives and light olive and sesame oil in salad

Tuck into vegan desserts like this (far left) Mango Pie-Scream at Bangalore’s all-vegan restaurant Carrots run by Susmitha Subbaraju



dressings. For instance, Bodega’s hot sellers include Kottu roti (a Sri Lankan staple) served with coconut curry and fresh vegetables. There’s also the quinoa salad and the beetroot and apple salad with light olive oil dressing.

Raw food is another emerging category within veganism. Says Subbaraju: “Indian meals are grain heavy with small amounts of fruits and vegetables. We’re consciously trying to introduce lots of raw foods with an emphasis on salads.”

Uncooked, fresh and unprocessed is also the mantra for Samir Pasad’s Vegan Bites comprising of nuts, sprouts and vegetables tossed up by his raw food chef Hemali Gala. She says: “We have raw and frozen cheesecakes, raw pizzas, noodles, wraps and sushis made from vegetables and not grains.” And The Pantry’s Marguerites Mix consists of dried figs and roasted almonds and kale chips.

Most restaurants source their

Photos: Rashbehari Das

At the newly-opened Bodega Cantina Y Bar in Park Street, launched by Urvika Kanoi and Aakash Jaiswal, guests have the option of picking vegan dishes like (inset) quinoa salad with cherry tomatoes and mushrooms

ingredients from local suppliers and organic farmers. Some, like Bodega Y Cantina and Café Basilico, import ingredients like whole-wheat flour.

But vegan food involves circum-



venting many challenges. Says Azmi: “Some fresh dips and sauces made daily can go waste if there are no takers.” And non-dairy alternatives like cashews and almonds push up costs. For instance, a 300ml bottle of almond milk costs Rs 200.

Many of these vegan cheerleaders are keen to expand. So, Azmi wants to have vegan items as 10 per cent of his menu at his Indian restaurants Koyla in Mumbai and his café Chai-Coffi. Similarly, Shah wants to offer more non-dairy alternatives by incorporating items like cashew milk and soy milk. On the other hand, Carrots wants to introduce soy and wheat-gluten-based mock meats.

As the vegan food market grows and diners crave for more, top chefs are working overtime to offer new and exciting options. ◆

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