

VEGETARIAN UPDATE for FSD
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Veggie for Small Groups

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Vegetarian menu selections are becoming more and more popular. Some customers are becoming more concerned about health and see eating vegetarian as a way to decrease disease and improve their health. Other customers are environmentally aware and see selecting vegetarian menus as a way to help save the environment. Still others are looking for new menu items, something exciting and different.

Of course, there are still many people who are not eating vegetarian. It's not unusual to have a wedding banquet, a business luncheon, a company picnic or a children's party where the customer orders a non-vegetarian menu, with "five or six vegetarian" meals.

This is where it can get hard for the food service operator. It's easy to prepare two hundred all-vegetarian entrees or fifty non-vegetarian desserts. It gets more difficult when you're trying to please a mixed audience. It makes it even harder when there's been no notification that there are two or three "special" meals needed.

There are many techniques for handling the "just a few vegetarian" issue. If it is a catered event or a large party where reservations are required, it's easy. Be sure your catering sales person, contact person or reservationist have been instructed to ask about any special requests. Supply your people with information that is easily understandable to the customer. For example, you might explain that all vegetarian requests are prepared as vegan meals or that all your vegetarian meals are prepared without dairy products, egg or meat. If this is an off-site catered event, you need to make customers understand that you won't be able to accommodate special requests without twenty-four hours notice. After all, if you're dishing up a 100-person wedding in the park, you can't pull a special meal out of the back of your catering truck. Good communication keeps the customer satisfied and allows you to do a good job.

If you don't have pre-registered customers, try to keep a history of vegetarian requests. If you serve holiday meals, you might want to keep a diary of how many vegetarian requests you got last St. Patrick's Day (oh no, all the cabbage and potatoes were cooked with the corned beef!!), Mother's Day, Easter or Thanksgiving. This can give you a base for planning. The same thing goes for Sunday brunches and catered parties. After a few events, you'll find you've got quite a good list of vegetarian alternatives for holiday fare.

Okay, those were easy situations.. Now let's say you haven't been given any kind of heads-up and you need a vegetarian meal in a minute. You've got some options, depending on the type of food service you're running.

Vegetarian entrees are easily prepared from the ingredients you already have in your walk-ins and storeroom. Pasta, rice, barley, couscous, beans and legumes and potatoes can all form the base of vegetarian entrees. There are nontraditional ingredients available, such as tofu or seitan; you decide if you have the time to train your staff and educate your customers about them. The key is to design a menu that as many people as possible will accept. If you need to prepare separate items, you need to plan for foods that are quick and easy to make and serve.

You can decide on the amount of time and money you have for your vegetarian effort. The easiest way (but probably the most costly) is to use convenience products. Veggie burgers are available frozen in a variety of flavors and are easy to prepare. Just substitute a veggie burger for a hamburger patty in patty melts or hamburger platters. Pile high the raw vegetables (sliced tomato, lettuce, onion, bell pepper, shredded carrot, etc) and you have a quick entrée. A veggie burger can be substituted for a slice of meatloaf, salisbury steak, Swiss steak or country-fried steak. Frozen “poultry” products, such as Tofurky, can be quickly heated and sauced for a fast entrée. The good news about having frozen vegetarian products on hand is their convenience and quick preparation. The bad news is they can be expensive and may have short shelf lives.

Pasta is an easy way to go for fast vegetarian entrees. To make a pasta dish acceptable to both omnivores and vegans, choose pasta made without eggs. Prepare a marinara sauce (tomato sauce with vegetables), add sautéed or steamed mushrooms, minced garlic and extra tomatoes and serve over cooked pasta for a fast entrée. Or toss pasta with sauce, place in steam table pan, top with chopped tomatoes, bell peppers and onions, cover and bake until hot for a quick vegetarian casserole. Additions to the tomato sauce can include chopped seasonal vegetables (such as summer squash, carrots and different varieties of mushrooms), cooked lentils or white beans, roasted garlic and fresh chopped herbs (try basil or oregano). For a color and flavor difference, use pesto sauce (basil or spinach pureed with pine nuts, olive oil and garlic). If people gotta eat meat, you can add the cooked meat right before serving.

If your menu offers dishes prepared with beans or legumes, cook the beans without animal products so you may use them for everyone. If you don’t prepare beans, keep cans of several varieties on hand. You can toss together a hearty a four bean soup (try kidney, navy, garbanzo and black-eye peas), pair it with a baked potato (topped with chopped veggies and margarine), steamed rice or pasta salad and you have a fast vegetarian entrée. Or season red or black beans with onion, cumin and pepper and serve on a steaming bed of white or brown rice. Cooked beans can be pureed and seasoned and used as a protein-rich sauce to top pasta, rice or other cooked grains. Toss cooked beans into a rice pilaf for another fast entrée. These types of menu items work well with everyone, child, adult, health care, restaurant.

If you have baked potatoes on the menu, cook them without butter or meat stock, so everyone can enjoy them and so you’re not cooking two batches. Baked potatoes can be topped with chopped fresh and cooked vegetables, cooked beans, salsa and margarine, paired with a veggie bean stew (use some of the beans we just mentioned) or hot dinner rolls. Or pair a stuffed baked potato with steamed red and green cabbage with caraway and a grilled mushroom for a fast vegetarian dinner. If you have the space, create a baked potato bar and let your customers and employees create their own hot potato specialties. The same can be done with a pasta bar. Have several types of unsauced

cooked pasta, several sauces (all without meat and at least one without dairy) and chopped fresh and cooked vegetables. Vegetarian or not, customers can easily make their own entrees.

Veggie “steaks” of flavored seitan, tempeh, or portobellos are good to have on hand. Pair a grilled “steak” with the above-mentioned baked potatoes, a bean dish, a variety of steamed or grilled seasonal vegetables or a tossed green or pasta salad. .

Examples of labor-saving vegan menu items for everyone would be crudities with hummus or bean dip or vegetable tempura (use rice flour and water for the coating, no egg) for appetizers. Many side dishes are inherently vegan, as in roasted potatoes (drizzle with herbed oil or margarine), baked potatoes (offer salsa and margarine as toppings), vegetables steamed with fresh or dried herbs, sautéed mushrooms, green beans amandine, glazed carrots (use maple syrup or orange juice concentrate to keep it vegan), fresh fruit salad or fruit compote, pasta with tomato sauce, steamed barley, couscous or rice served with chopped nuts or sautéed veggies and grilled vegetable brochettes (skewer cherry tomatoes, mushrooms and bell peppers).

Depending on customer preference, you don’t need to make a “vegetarian” dessert. Many commercial sorbets and fruit ices are vegan (read the labels) and can be used in place of ice cream for sundaes or other ice cream creations. If you have extra fruit, such as strawberries or melon, you can puree it and freeze it to create your own sorbet. Everyone will enjoy a frozen strawberry sundae; it’s not mandatory for the frozen portion to be dairy-based.

If you need to serve just a few vegetarian desserts and have time to plan, prepare the fresh fruit sorbet or baked apples or pears as described above. If you don’t have time or space to prepare separate desserts, always keep two or three sorbets in the freezer. Scoop three small portions of sorbet onto a dinner plate, garnish with fresh berries, fresh citrus sections or fresh mint and serve it as a “trio of sorbet.” If melon is in season, serve two small scoops of sorbet atop a wedge of fresh casaba, honey dew or cantaloupe. If it’s between seasons, serve sorbet atop fresh and frozen (thawed) fruit salad. You can microwave-bake an apple in three or four minutes. Serve in a brandy snifter with a swirl of maple syrup and a sprinkle of ground cinnamon and ginger. In less formal settings, serve a sorbet “ice cream” cone or a sorbet sundae, topped with chopped nuts, dried fruit and shredded coconut.

Side Bar: Dress Up That Green Salad

Green salads are cool, crisp and receptive to change! Build a basic salad with head and leaf lettuce, baby greens, endive, radicchio and cabbage and then go beyond to create fast, vegetarian entrees or side dishes

As An Entrée, Add:

Cold black, white, kidney, lentil and red beans

Smoked, barbecued or grilled tofu

Sliced fake deli meats

Grilled Eggplant

Bean and salsa combinations

Humus and olive combinations

Grilled or marinated mushrooms

Cold vegetarian ravioli, tortellini and gnocchi

Chopped walnuts, pistachios, pinenuts and cashews

Cold lentils tossed with mushrooms and tomatoes

Baked or grilled tofu

As Side Dish:

Green and wax beans

Cut corn

Chopped onions, radishes, tomatoes, garlic, olives

Shredded carrots, beets, zucchini, crookneck squash

Chopped pickled vegetables

Sliced marinated or fresh mushrooms

Chopped nuts, such as walnuts, peanuts, cashews, pumpkin and sesame seeds