

NOT JUST ANOTHER VEGAN COOKBOOK

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General introduction

Turning vegan was the easiest thing I have ever done. People look surprised when I say this but it's true: I read an article that told me I was personally responsible for the suffering of nonhuman animals because I was supporting it – enabling it to exist – through my food and other choices. There was a solution, the article said: turn vegan. So I did, quite literally overnight. I felt happy, light and free.

Going vegan doesn't solve all the world's problems but it's an important, and, I would argue, necessary first step. It has become widely recognised that a plant-based diet apart from saving animals' lives also benefits our physical health, our environment and even our hearts and minds.

I spent the following week researching what products I could and couldn't have: from food to personal care products to shoes and apparel, you name it. A lot of the stuff was totally new. Yeast flakes? Seitan? Yuba? Whaaat? This was over 15 years ago and there weren't nearly as many 'weird' vegan things on the market as there are today. I was so excited when the *Cruelty-free shop* (now known as the *Vegan Grocery Store*, a vegan supermarket that has always been on top of things) started to stock the first vegan cheese! It was a floury thing that one had to mix with water and cook for a little while. It was actually pretty yucky. The good thing about those days and the lack of processed vegan alternatives, however, was (apart from saving money) that one got creative with the available unprocessed stuff like... potatoes... nuts and other things. And if one had never cooked in their entire life before, like in my case, one was encouraged (forced?) by the circumstances to learn, and eventually enjoy it.

Vegans try to avoid animal products and we are generally opposed to any kind of instrumentalisation and use of animals (including human animals). So the first rule of thumb for the new vegan is: learn to read the ingredients. Always. All of them. It may feel a bit odd initially but one gets used to it very quickly. It's also helpful to keep a list of coded food additives, such as the (in)famous 'E's', some of which are animal-derived but it's not spelled out: for instance, poor little cochineals who would normally live their little happy lives on some beautiful cactus in South and Central America are violently crushed and disguised as E120 (carmine, a red dye). Then there's the problem of natural flavours. A natural flavouring can be made of anything and anyone. Nevertheless, it is getting easier with producers increasingly choosing to label the products as suitable for vegans and/or vegetarians, and a lot (perhaps most) of the time one can trust such labelling.

These are some of the easy first steps. Once people become more used to thinking about stuff they are buying and researching the production system they tend to begin to think more broadly as new information becomes available to them: for instance, they may learn about the ethical and environmental costs of palm oil and decide to not purchase products containing it, they may learn that some countries and/or companies use enslaved monkeys for picking coconuts and they avoid those coconut products, and so on. That's why I like to think of the vegan practice as one that evolves with the person practicing it. There are some basic things one does and doesn't do as a vegan but there are also many other aspects that are more complex and/or situational.

We all come from different backgrounds, find ourselves at different stages on our unique life paths, have different worldviews and aspirations. All this will reflect in and influence to various extents the formulation and fine-tuning of our vegan philosophy and practice. Someone may choose to set up a sanctuary for nonhuman animals in need, someone else will open a vegan hair salon or restaurant, some will feel that the only way to live an ethical life is to have minimal impact and live completely self-sustained in a forest cabin, others again will feel they need to be part of the broader society because for them that's the only way to maximise the positive impact by making other people aware and encourage change. All these approaches make sense in their own ways and there really is no right or wrong when we are trying our best to live according to our values and promote positive change.

For me it's a little bit of both worlds. I like the vibrancy of crowded human spaces in small doses but I prefer to spend most of my time in quiet solitude with the nonhuman world. It helps me retain and nurture that internal stillness which then facilitates my engagement in other, more mundane activities. I found myself thinking more about these issues when I lost Charlie, my beloved dog. Coming to terms with impermanence as a positive as well as, of course, unavoidable attribute of life (which includes death) can be challenging at first, but there is something freeing about it – about perceiving oneself as a fragment of the whole. There's something magical about it, too. You are not insignificant even though you are very small and nothing special – a freckle in the continuation of existence, a specific (and mostly accidental) manifestation of being. You are embedded in living like the rest of living, you are equal to other animals and to the rest of existence. You are here now, like they are, no-one's fault, no-one's merit. We just are. We have no right to anything but of course it is nice when life is cosy and beautiful, and since there's so much ugliness in the world, trying to make life nicer and friendlier for everyone is a very good thing to aim for.

About this book

This cookbook started a long time ago, way before veganism went mainstream. The original purpose was to make vegan cooking approachable – doable – regardless of where one is located on this planet. To this end, I tend to use simple and readily available ingredients, which enable, for example, to whip up vegan mayonnaise in 5 minutes from stuff that most people would have in their fridge or pantry, or prepare a convincing meat alternative from a few local unprocessed items. Living between continents has enabled me a better idea of what these ingredients may be, even though occasionally I will use a specialty item – tofu skins being one such example. They too can be made at home but it's not quite the same as the commercial ones.

In recent times the market has been flooded with imitation meats, plant-based cheeses and other veganised 'staples'. Some of these products are better than others in terms of taste and texture. Some are really pretty bad, others impressively good, but that's up to you to decide. In most recipes in this book that call for seitan you can use these commercial alternatives.

If you are trying to avoid processed foods, or if like me, you prefer simpler, more natural alternatives you have a variety of options to replace flesh as well as secretions. This book offers several ideas that you can try. These alternatives are also the main reason I decided to publish this book, thinking people may continue to find them valuable despite the growing number of vegan products on the market. The rest is really just foods that are usually consumed in our household. In many cases, especially in salads and curries, the listed ingredients can easily be substituted with others. If there's a spice or herb that you don't like just skip it or replace it with something else (but please don't blame me if it doesn't work out!). Be careful with flours! My plain flour is not necessarily the same as your plain flour. Bear in mind that different flours will require different amounts of water and consider my quantities as approximations only. Get to know your flour, and as with most things in life, go slowly until you get the hang of it. The good news about desserts in this book is that if I can make them anyone can! They are simple but delicious. The reader may also

notice that I am not very fond of soups but I have included a few that I really like.

Some ideas for your international luncheon or dinner parties:

Japanese-inspired: *miso soup, sushi, agedashi tofu, Tempura vegetables, Japanese-style eggplant/aubergine and pumpkin, Japanese-style salad, steamed rice.*

Indian-inspired: *Tandoori potatoes and/or lentil pates, Indian curries, spicy roasted potatoes, roti or naan bread and boiled rice.*

Thai-inspired: *Thai-style san choy bow, silken tofu with tamarind, tom yum, Thai green curry, BBQ garlic tofu, Thai-style salad, steamed rice.*

Chinese-inspired: *spring rolls, salt and pepper tofu, braised mushrooms, eggplant with bok choy, Wombok salad, steamed rice.*

Italian: *mushroom or "salmon" carpaccio, bruschetta, roasted garlic soup, Portobello mushrooms with green peppercorn sauce, garlic-grilled vegetable plate, grilled polenta.*

French: *onion soup, ratatouille with pepper sauce, French-style stew with pureed potatoes, lentil salad with mustard orange, cheeses.*

Lebanese/Middle Eastern: *falafel roll/plate with dips, parsley salad and pickles, roasted potatoes with coriander and garlic, pita bread.*