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How to dine vegetarian-style in Fort Worth

There's more to Cowtown than beef. Here, two vegetarians share their favorite dining spots in the Fort Worth area

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Think Cowtown restaurants don't offer much for vegetarians?

As a relative newcomer, I've been surprised by the number of Tarrant County restaurants that will gladly accommodate my meatless diet, all while satisfying friends and family members who do eat meat (vegetarians keep company with all sorts, after all).

In fact, I've been documenting such experiences on my *Meatless in Cowtown* blog (www.laurasamuelmeyn.com) for about a year now. I recently caught up with Cindy Hader, a founding member of the Fort Worth Vegetarian Society (www.fwvs.com), to compare notes. Read on for some of the best places in town to dine meatlessly — and for tips on doing so successfully, no matter where you go.

Mexican

Yucatan Taco Stand (909 W. Magnolia Ave., Fort Worth, 817-924-8646 or www.yucantacostand1.com) offers meatless options in every category on the menu — including grilled veggie nachos, tacos, burritos, enchiladas and more — all beautifully presented in a casual yet stylish setting. On the dinner menu, look for the Latin Vegetarian Mix-Mex Grill, which includes fried rice, beans, seasonal vegetables and grilled plantains served with a garlic-herb dipping sauce. Yucatan Taco Stand uses only vegetable stock in both its beans and rice. While the restaurant has a hip vibe and a full bar, it's relatively kid-friendly, too.

Also check out: Hot Damn, Tamales! (713 W. Magnolia Ave., Fort Worth, 817-926-9909 or www.hotdamntamales.com) for lunch in the tiny storefront or for take-home tamales. It prepares six meatless varieties, two of which are vegan, all without the lard found in traditional renditions. Hader likes **Oscar's Mexican Restaurant** (3408 Denton Highway, Haltom City, 817-222-9020) for its spinach, mushroom or squash enchiladas. The beans are vegetarian, too, but skip the rice.

Indian

Bombay Grill (4625 Donnelly Ave., Fort Worth, 817-377-9395 or www.bombaygrillfortworth.com) has all the standard vegetable specialties that you'll find at most Indian restaurants — among them saag paneer, creamed spinach with chunks of homemade cheese; and kofta curry, moist vegetable dumplings cooked in curry sauce. Some of the dishes are also appropriate for vegans, including baigan bhurta, pureed eggplant with onion and tomato. The daily lunch buffet offers four vegetable dishes plus soup, salad, rice, naan and dessert. Lunch buffets are a great way to make a first visit to an Indian restaurant, as diners can sample several dishes in one sitting. The ambiance is a step hipper than most Indian restaurants, making it nice for date night, too.

Also check out: Maharaja Indian Restaurant (6308 Hulen Bend Blvd., Fort Worth, 817-263-7156), which also offers more than a dozen classic vegetable dishes and hosts a daily lunch buffet and full-service dinner nightly.

Thai

Thai Tina's (703 N. Henderson St., Fort Worth, 817-332-0088), with its close to-downtown location, draws a big weekday lunchtime crowd, but the charmingly funky eatery is worth a visit for dinner, too. The menu has several vegetarian choices, including noodle dishes and curries, and they're happy to make substitutions. Some dishes are appropriate for vegans; Tina herself recommends the tofu soup, the mango avocado salad and the tofu spring rolls. Don't miss the tofu-and-broccoli peanut-sauce dish, which gets its creaminess from coconut milk; a steaming mug of fragrant ginger tea goes well with it.

Also check out: Thai Jasmine (3104 Harwood Road, Bedford, 817-283-8228), which hosts a popular vegan

buffet from noon to 2 p.m. the first Sunday of each month, and also has a reputation for accommodating special requests.

Italian

Taverna (450 Throckmorton St., Fort Worth, 817-885-7502 or www.tavernabylombardi.com), with its rich Italian food, is a great place for a dinner date. Paglia e fieno, a pasta dish with chicken, wild mushrooms, truffle oil and cream sauce, can be made with extra mushrooms in place of the chicken, and the spaghetti carbonara can be made without prosciutto. Meatless items already on the menu include fiocchi al gorgonzola e pera, gorgonzola- and pear-filled pasta with walnuts and cream sauce, and gnocchi di zucca, butternut squash gnocchi with cream and crispy sage. The pizzas are also fantastic. Call a day ahead to ask if the risotto, a house specialty, can be prepared with vegetable broth — or to see if any meatless specials, such as spinach ravioli, are available.

Also check out:Nonna Tata (1400 W. Magnolia Ave., Fort Worth, 817-332-0250), a tiny gem of an Italian restaurant where the regularly changing menu is roughly one-third meatless, with such choices as pasta al limone e spinaci, pasta with fresh spinach in a lemony cream sauce. Bring your own wineglasses and wine (no corkage fee), cash or check, and a spirit of camaraderie: The tables are few, close together and coveted.

Middle Eastern

At **Chadra Mezza & Grill** (1622 Park Place Ave., Fort Worth, 817-924-2372 or www.chadramezza.com), the menu includes Lebanese and Italian food; for vegetarians, that means there's a lot to choose from. The restaurant hosts a vegetarian buffet-style lunch 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Wednesdays; the stylish ambiance and full bar make Chadra a great destination for dinnertime, too. All vegetarian items, such as the falafel salad or penne a la vodka, are marked with a leaf on the menu. There are also vegan options, such as the vegetable shawarma or the Mezza burger. The most tempting menu items might be the meatless appetizers, also known as mezza, including hummus, baba ghannouj and manakish, a flatbread topped with mixed herbs. Chadra also accommodates special requests, such as making vegan pizzas with finely diced veggies in place of cheese.

Also check out:King Tut (1512 W. Magnolia Ave., Fort Worth, 817-335-3051), an Egyptian restaurant with more than half a dozen vegetarian entrees. The Maza Plate allows customers to combine several of their favorite appetizers, such as eggplant dip, hummus, stuffed grape leaves and falafel.

American

Spiral Diner & Bakery (1314 W. Magnolia Ave., Fort Worth, 817-332-8834 or www.spiraldiner.com) is a funky, 100-percent vegan (and mostly organic), retro-style eatery with a tongue-in-cheek menu featuring such items as Sketti & Meatballs and Chik'n-Less Salad San'ich. Even omnivores with a sense of adventure will be satisfied with the meaty-tasting, if totally vegan, choices. If you've been vegetarian or vegan for any length of time, you can imagine how thrilling it is to walk into a restaurant and be able to order anything on the menu. This place is Cowtown's sure thing — and there's a Dallas location, too. It's also a bakery, offering from-scratch vegan cookies, pies, cupcakes and more; call ahead for custom orders.

Also check out:Dutch's (3009 S. University Drive, Fort Worth, 817-927-5522 or www.dutchshamburgers.com) when you're craving a burger. Dutch's can substitute a veggie patty for the meat in any of its burgers, like the Texana, with avocado, ranch, lettuce and tomato. Try the savory portobello mushroom burger, too.

Chain choices

Several chain restaurants do a great job of providing and pointing out vegetarian options on their menus. A few favorites:

Chipotle (www.chipotle.com) has vegetarian versions of everything on the menu. Meals are made-to-order right in front of you, so it's easy to customize.

Costa Vida (www.costavida.net) is a favorite of Fort Worth Vegetarian Society member Cindy Hader, who loves the vegetarian salad: With a tortilla base plus romaine, beans, rice, salsa, guacamole and your choice of dressings, it's substantial stuff.

The Melting Pot (www.meltingpot.com) is well suited to special occasions. It has a vegetarian entree with fresh vegetables, tofu and ravioli for cooking in a variety of broths, plus salads, cheese fondues and chocolate fondues for dessert.

Jason's Deli (www.jasonsdeli.com) has a fruit, soup and salad bar; uses lots of organic ingredients; and has several vegetarian options marked on the menu, including sandwiches and wraps — and free soft-serve ice cream cones, too.

Pei Wei (www.peiwei.com) has clearly marked vegetarian options and a willingness to customize orders, and offers brown rice as well as white rice with its meals.

Restaurant tip sheet for vegetarians

Here's how to get the most from a night out.

Communicate: Use laymen's terms to describe your diet. "I can do eggs and cheese, but no fish or chicken," means more than "lacto-ovo" to most people. Consider calling ahead, too: Some better restaurants can make extra accommodations given at least a day's notice.

Make friends: Getting the server on your side is helpful for deciphering meatless possibilities not on the menu. We vegetarians can come across as fussy, so a dash of extra friendliness and respect goes a long way.

Read between the lines: Look at the side dishes that come with meat entrees for possibilities that can be pulled into a combination plate. Pair an appetizer with a salad to make a satisfying meal, or ask how an existing entree can be altered.

Know when to fold: Forget special requests in those dine-in movie theaters (during a movie is not a good time to explain that a turkey burger is not a veggie burger). Ditto for restaurants where there's a clear language barrier.

Be open: Steakhouses excel at sides that can be pulled together for a meal. Consider creamed spinach or corn, sauteed mushrooms, vegetable gratins, baked or mashed potatoes, steamed asparagus or sugar snap peas, sliced tomatoes, and even macaroni and cheese.

Spread the word: If you have a good vegetarian experience at a restaurant, thank the owners and tell your meatless friends. Menus change regularly; if the demand is there, you can bet more vegetarian dishes will start showing up.