

NEW YORK RESTAURANTS

Vegetables Are the New Meat

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At serious restaurants all over town, carrots, peas, and the like are no longer just the supporting cast—they're the stars. Move over locavores, here come the vegivores.

By Robin Raisfeld & Rob Patronite



(Photo: Danny Kim)

Only 26 percent of Americans eat at least three servings of vegetables a day, according to a recent Centers for Disease Control study, and last Monday night they were all at Dovetail.

Well, maybe not all of them. But ever since chef John Fraser launched his Monday-night vegetable menu in March, the elegant Upper West Side joint has been fairly jumping on what is traditionally the deadest day of the week, all on account of such proven crowd-pleasers as turnips, parsnips, and salsify. This, in the Age of the Pig and the Decade of the Burger, you say? Absolutely. Summer and its particular Greenmarket bounty may be long gone, but unrestrained vegetable eating has never been more eagerly pursued. Sunchokes are everywhere, black kale is all the rage, and even plain old broccoli—never mind boutique brassicas like spigarello and Romanesco—is hot. Vegetables, you see, are newly and increasingly fashionable, at least among a certain segment of fine-dining, CSA-belonging, Michael Pollan-reading, rooftop-garden-crazed New Yorkers.

This new breed of plant lover isn't motivated entirely by ethical, environmental, or even health concerns (though those reasons come into play), but by culinary ones. Simply put, the once-

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meat-obsessed populace is realizing that vegetables actually taste good. Especially when fresh, in season, and carefully prepared—often, it must be said, with an unfettered reliance on butter, cheese, crispy bread crumbs, and the deep-fryer. That’s the message that has been telegraphed recently by such luminaries as Mario Batali, who joined the Meatless Monday campaign, a national public-health initiative, and installed a dedicated “vegetable butcher” at his new megamarket, Eataly; bi-coastal Spanish chef José Andrés, who used his *60 Minutes* platform to call vegetables and fruits “unbelievably sexy” and meat “slightly boring”; and Jamie Oliver, who took to the airwaves to publicize his campaign to teach American toddlers how to I.D. an eggplant. The summer before last, playing cannily against type, pork whisperer David Chang cooked a vegetarian dinner at the James Beard House. This August, Dirt Candy chef-owner Amanda Cohen took on Masaharu Morimoto in “Battle Broccoli,” *Iron Chef’s* first vegetarian bout. And Jean-Georges Vongerichten’s new, vegetable-centric ABC Kitchen—located within spitting distance of the Union Square Greenmarket—might be his most successful opening in years.

These chefs and their devoted clientele are less vegetarians than vegivores, a term that connotes fervid vegetable love rather than ardent meat hate. It’s a subtle but important distinction. For the vegivore, a vegetable can occupy the center of the plate, with meat adding flavor or functioning as a condiment. Think of the blast of anchovy in Saltie’s romaine-lettuce sandwich (yes—a lettuce sandwich), or the bacon in Momofuku’s roasted Brussels sprouts with kimchee purée (a dish that’s no doubt converted legions of sprouts haters). At Dovetail, Fraser has divided the Monday menu into two categories: one strictly vegetarian and the other comprising dishes where meat’s relegated to supporting-player status. Fraser, an off-duty vegetarian since this past New Year’s, calls the latter section “vegetable-focused,” and says that half his customers order exclusively from this side of the menu. “I think this is the best way for most people to eat,” he says, expanding upon the concept. “A little bacon fat on top of a piece of bread tastes just as good as a piece of bacon—you still get the flavor, but the end result is much more nuanced and healthier, and it doesn’t hit you over the head like a side of pork belly.” Of course, other cultures, particularly the French and Italians, have always known the secret that has seemed to elude nutrition-obsessed Americans: A balanced approach to meat and vegetables can make healthy food taste better, and tasty food healthier.

It’s hard to say precisely when vegetables became devotional objects, but there’s no denying they have: In September, Sotheby’s first heirloom-vegetable auction brought in a whopping \$100,000. The ever-expanding Greenmarket is largely responsible, of course, its farmers, prompted by seed catalogues and chefs’ whims, unleashing more obscure varieties each season. Stokes Farm’s Ron Binaghi Jr. attributes the trend to his New York customers’ hunger for culinary novelty. That curiosity has bumped up business, and not just for him. “Sales are up 15 to 20 percent,” says Mountain Sweet Berry Farm’s Rick Bishop, whose spigarello broccoli and spring-ushering ramps have cult followings at Union Square. “You see lines at the market now for vegetables. People used to only line up for eggs and fish.”

It would be impossible, in fact, to overstate the role that farmers’ markets have played in the evolution of vegetables in New York, and around the country for that matter. In the 34 years since Greenmarket launched, locally grown food has steadily encroached on supermarket-shelf

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territory, illustrating the vast difference between a tomato cultivated for travel and one grown for flavor, and picked at peak ripeness. It wasn't too long ago that lettuce meant iceberg, potatoes were either Idaho or sweet, and peas mostly came out of cans, not pods. Farmers' markets changed all that, inspiring the next wave of vegetable worship: rooftop farming and restaurant-owned farms.

In his influential *In Defense of Food*, Pollan told his readers to eat a mostly plant-based diet, and it seems they've been listening. But if this is a vegetable-centric moment, it's not the first. Almost a decade ago, triple-Michelin-starred French chef Alain Passard stunned *le tout Paris* by stripping his menu of meat in favor of vegetables, and later opening an organic farm to supply it. ("That was sort of revolutionary," says David Chang, who traces the current vegetable mania back to Passard and his compatriot Michel Bras, whose signature vegetable extravaganza "gargouillou" has been copied almost as much as his molten chocolate cake.) And here in New York, vegetarians have always had their health-food havens, like Angelica Kitchen, and legions of ethnic restaurants (dosa huts, falafel joints) that specialize in meatless cuisine. Locavore chefs like Peter Hoffman and Bill Telepan have long given farm-fresh produce its due, and City Bakery's Ilene Rosen has pushed the boundaries of vegetable-central cooking in her inimitable salad bar. But the emergence of the vegivore has elevated vegetables' status, putting them on par with sustainably raised, assiduously sourced meat. Even as vegans and vegetarians tentatively cross the line into meat-eating, lured by artisanal bacons and locally raised grass-fed rib eyes, the vegivore has pursued the humble carrot and the odoriferous cauliflower into the rarefied realms of Per Se, where the Tasting of Vegetables costs the same \$275 as the regular prix fixe. (Despite the emphasis on plant matter, no one's going to argue that the vegivore lifestyle comes cheap. Even at more modest spots, vegetable-focused dishes can approach or equal their meatier counterparts in price; also, top-of-the-line Greenmarket mesclun fetches \$48 a pound.)

Is vegivorism the newest version of culinary enlightenment or just another fad? Fraser concedes that the success of Dovetail's Monday menu could be seen as "an equal and opposite reaction" to recent carnivorous excesses, but he's got faith in the movement's staying power. "The Japanese have been doing it for centuries," says Chang, who's a huge fan of the Kyoto-style Shojin-temple cuisine served at Kajitsu in the East Village. Then again, this is New York. Things change. "In two or three years," says Chang, only partly facetiously, "it's going to be back to, I don't know, turkey or chicken." Until then, see how some of New York's best vegetable-centric chefs, newly converted or not, are changing the proportion of the plate.