

No-meat eats - Vegetarian restaurants here go beyond salad-and-pasta routine

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There was a time – and it wasn't all that long ago – when those who eschewed meat were limited to two choices when they dined out: salads or pasta with red sauce. Booring!

I lived in these parts when that was the harsh reality and always wondered why my vegetarian friends even bothered to go out.

But gradually things changed. First, vegetarians got their due as chefs discovered that a slab of protein in the center of the plate wasn't mandatory to make a profit. Even carnivores like to take a break from meat now and again. Next, those who are gluten intolerant began to find specially marked items on the menu that suited their diets.

And now, as more people are deciding to skip the animal products – meat, dairy, honey – more restaurants are attempting to provide interesting dishes for this small but discriminating group of diners. The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel are among the regions working to embrace this trend as a number of restaurants have sprung up to meet the demand. Most aren't wholly vegan but do offer animal-free options that range beyond the old salad-and-pasta routine.

Vegan Ashleigh McCombs of Atlanta recently visited her parents in Fort Myers and was pleasantly surprised by the variety she found on this trip.

"I've been to Fort Myers before and had trouble finding much to eat, but this time there was a lot more variety," she said. "Someone told me about Chef Brooke's and I had a great lunch there. And we also went to Nice Guys and I actually got to have pizza! It was awesome."

Yes indeed. Vegan pizza has come to the region and is available on both sides of the Caloosahatchee River. Following are some places that cater to those who prefer their animals on the hoof rather than the plate. Also, keep in mind that Asian restaurants – Indian, Chinese, Thai and Japanese – offer options that will work for vegans and carnivores alike.

For vegans who crave a big juicy burger, local restaurants are happy to help. The Impossible Burger -- the burger that's zero percent cow and 100 percent plant-based but looks and bleeds like meat, is being served at a growing number of area restaurants, including Artisan Eatery (Daniels Parkway, Fort Myers), Ford's Garage (downtown Fort Myers, Cape Coral and Miromar Outlets, Estero), and the Saloon (Coconut Point, Estero).

FORT MYERS

*Ada's Natural Market, 7070 College Parkway, Fort Myers; 239-939-9600; adasmarket.com. This natural supermarket, something like a Whole Foods but an independent local version, has an organic juice bar and the Green Leaf Café, where vegans can enjoy black bean burgers, wraps, vegetable stir fries, falafel wraps and almost anything else that's on the menu. The staff is happy to alter menu items to accommodate your palate (that goes for gluten-free diets as well).

*Chef Brooke's Natural Café, 150 Boy Scout Drive, Fort Myers; 239-332-2433; chefbrookeonline.com. Chef/owner Brooke Wagenheim's all-natural cafe isn't all vegan but if it's vegan you want, it's vegan you'll get or dairy-, gluten- or meat-free. The chef caters to whatever dietary requirements you specify and, for ease of ordering, her menu clearly labels all vegan items. There are always soups, stews, wraps and sandwiches as well as hot entrees available, with proteins such as tofu, seitan and tempeh incorporated into stir-fries and other dishes. And don't forget the raw juices, crafted for both taste and to soothe what ails you. Finish your meal with a fragrant herbal tea and vegan dessert of whatever the chef was inspired to bake that day.

*Fibrre, 1949 Colonial Blvd., Fort Myers; 239-895-8751; fibrre.com. It's a small place with a modest menu but the food is all fresh, mostly vegan and vegetarian with hefty burgers you can customize with things like falafel, beet protein, veggie bacon, collard, kale, carrots, cukes, vegan dressings, pineapple and a whole lot more. Also available are wraps, limeade, tea, smoothies and vegan brownies.

Green Cup Café, 1412 Dean St., Fort Myers; 239-200-8679; on Facebook. Artisanal loose-leaf teas, bubble teas, freshly pressed raw juices, smoothies, made-to-order salads and wraps, acai bowls, homemade raw vegan desserts and vegan ice cream are what's on the menu. Most ingredients are locally sourced and sustainable. Vegan, gluten-free and paleo – indoor and outdoor seating.

*Living Vine Organic Café, 1400 Colonial Blvd., Fort Myers; 239-936-2510; livingvineorganiccafe.com. Vegans and vegetarians will find plenty to choose from at this little organic shop tucked into a former yogurt joint near Publix. Raw juices, smoothies made with almond or coconut milk, acai bowls, wraps, sandwiches and soups as well as hummus, baba ghanoush and tapenade are all fresh and organic. What's not to love?

*Pizza Fusion, Bridge Plaza, 12901 McGregor Blvd., Fort Myers; 239-332-2929. This green-minded pizza joint features organic wines, craft beers and pizzas made from vegan dough topped with two types of vegan cheese. And for dessert: gluten-free vegan brownies.

CAPE CORAL

*Café YOU, 1423 SE 10th St., Cape Coral; 239-600-0966; cafeyou.com. This little out-of-the-way spot describes itself as an Australian-style café serving simple, natural food, including vegan and gluten-free fare. I don't know about the Australian aspect, but the latter description is accurate. A smiling staff serves robust coffee roasted in Cape Coral and dishes like avocado smash with tahini, feta, extra virgin olive oil and lemon juice with cherry tomatoes and chili flakes (they will happily leave the feta off); spicy tomato stew with chickpeas and Spanish olives over toast; house-made granola; quinoa and spinach salad, falafel wrap; black bean burgers and other well-executed fare. Dietary restrictions are just fine with them because, as they remind customers, it's all about YOU.

*Loving Hut, 1918 Del Prado Blvd., Cape Coral; 239-424-8433; lovinghut.us. This international chain of vegan restaurants offers dishes that you'll swear contain meat and, in some cases, shrimp, but rest assured it's all texturized vegetable protein. Even the carnivores in the group will enjoy their well-seasoned stir fries, curries, spring rolls, noodle dishes and other Asian-accented fare.

*Nice Guys Pizza and Beer, 1334 Cape Coral Parkway, Cape Coral; 239-549-7542; niceguyspizza.com. Vegan pizza? Oh yes! This quirky spot in the Cape offers not just one kind but four specialty pies, plus the luxury of crafting your own combo using red sauce, vegan cheese and any of 11 regular toppings and

four bougie toppings – black garlic, broccoli, arugula and balsamic reduction. Add some enticing starters – hummus, fries, sweet fries or tater tots, baba ghanoush, garlic knots or marinated olives – and you can even finish with a dessert of Euro trash doughnuts (I don't know what they are but they're on the vegan menu, so they are fair game.) Did I mention it's open until 1:30 a.m. every day but Mondays?

SANIBEL

*Sanibel Fresh, 1020 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel; 239-472-0922; on Facebook. Vegans will rejoice at this newcomer to Sanibel, which replaced Bennett's Fresh Roast on Periwinkle. Consider an acai bowl, an avocado-based pudding with granola, locally sourced produce and oats from The SoulFull Project, which supplies one bag to the Harry Chapin Food Bank for every one chef/owner Amy Schmicker uses. If possible, order something that requires an application of Schmicker's homemade blackberry jam.

ESTERO

*Bahia Bowls, 20321 Grande Oak Shoppes Blvd., Estero; 239-249-6968, bahiabowls.com. These bowls start with healthy acai or pitaya (a fancy name for dragon fruit) then add oatmeal, mango, coconut, almond or coconut milk, and any other fruit or greens or seeds you can think of. There's no dairy, no sugar, no trans fats in anything here, just healthy goodness.