

Let's veg out

Many people say that plant-based diets are the future of food, and hotels are now expected to provide inclusive menus for guests seeking vegetarian and vegan delights, writes Rosanna Spence

Skeptics have been well and truly silenced as the boom of plant-powered food continues to grow around the UK, with more people now following vegan and vegetarian diets than ever before.

This new wave of enthusiasm that limits or eliminates animal products from all food and drink is paired with a heightened awareness of the ingredients people consume – either to avoid irritating an intolerance or as safety precautions to combat an allergy.

THE TIMES THEY ARE A'CHANGING

"In the last ten years, there's been a 360% increase in the number of UK vegans," states Tarryn Gore, co-founder of Kafoodle. "Some studies indicate that 53% of those aged between 18-34 expect to change their eating habits to a healthier diet this year, compared to 19% of those aged over 55."

This increase in uptake is coupled with the amount of people affected by an allergy or food intolerance. A big driver of the free-from movement is gluten avoidance, with reasons for people seeking gluten-free options ranging from severe health reactions to a mild preference for alternatives.

"Coeliac UK estimates that there are now over 1.3m Britons or 3% of British adults following a gluten-free diet and over 90% of those on a gluten-free diet eat out at least once a month," explains Gordon Lauder, managing director of Central Foods. "In addition, 8.58

million, or 13%, are avoiding gluten in their diet."

People are making different choices for a number of reasons and expect gluten-free options throughout the day on menus, with special products to choose from.

"Mintel's 'Free-From Foods' report (November 2014) shows gluten-free and wheat-free sales have grown by 15%; and with the changing perception that free-from food is no longer simply for allergy sufferers and that it can be enjoyed by consumers looking to improve their overall diet and wellbeing, offering a menu which comprises of free-from choices is becoming more widely expected," adds Matt Cutts, product director at Mars Food Europe.

Hotels can't ignore the nation's desire to lead a healthier lifestyle – and its obsession with clean eating – so menus across any establishment need to provide quality food away from home while keeping dietary preferences at the forefront of every dish's design for hotel's growing base of conscious consumers.

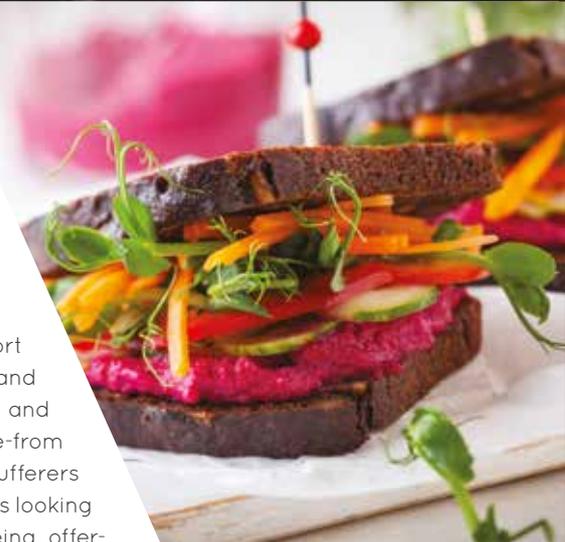
"Feedback from our events shows clearly that the biggest reason people are going vegan is because of the growth of availability of vegan products," states Tim Barford, manager of VegfestUK Trade. "The change is largely health-driven, but there's increasing concern for both animals, environment and sustainable global food production."

ARMED AND READY

Hotel kitchens are facing more queries about the different types of food that can be ordered by people following what were once 'alternative' diets, but are now very much the norm. Even big industry changes like the allergen legislation that threatened to rattle professional kitchens back in 2014 is now just part of the daily routine.

"Providing free-from food brings with it a completely different set of challenges for hotels, not only in the main restaurant but especially conferencing and events where there may be a multitude of special dietary requirements," explains

"Coconut is the new dairy"



VEGETABLE VISIONS

Whether it's the fully vegan afternoon tea served in RAW at London's LA Suite West or a special plant-based dining experience (and first ever vegan menu) served for a limited time at Berners Tavern in The London EDITION to celebrate the RHS Chelsea Flower Show - hotels around the country are truly embracing the nation's evolving tastes.

"We cater for dietary needs/requirements on an individual basis, and where possible would create a separate menu," explains Scott Cameron, head chef at the two AA Rosette The Four Seasons Hotel in St Fillans, Scotland. "This gives the customer far more choice and flexibility, where they don't feel restricted to certain choices from the menu."

Many hotels utilise their local resources to create innovative and seasonal dishes for people avoiding certain foods.

"We're very lucky to have such an abundance of fresh vegetables and fruit on our doorstep, as well as huge areas of countryside where we source much of the ingredients through foraging," says Chris Harrod, chef owner at The Whitebrook Restaurant with Rooms. "It's one of the things we've become well known for so we don't always rely on meat and fish and some of our most popular dishes are vegetarian anyway, so whilst we do have a dedicated vegetarian menu, many of those dishes will be woven into the a la carte or tasting menu too and vegetarian diners will be eating the same as non-vegetarian diners."

At Theo Randall's restaurant in InterContinental London, an extensive vegan set menu highlights the poorer origins of 'cucina Italiana' that brought about the creation of dishes based on vegetables, extra virgin olive oil and flour.

"We offer freshly made gluten-free pasta which is extremely popular," adds the restaurant's manager Ivan Di Nasta. "We are receiving fantastic feedback on our vegan menu options where many customers comment that the authenticity of flavour has not been compromised and we are very proud of this. The most popular dishes are insalata di pomodoro - sliced merinda and datterini tomatoes with radicchio salad, aged balsamic and pangrattato; and risotto di zucchini e pomodoro - risotto with courgettes, San Marzano tomatoes and basil."

Most hotel restaurants prefer for any allergies or dietary requirements to be declared at the time of booking, so that the kitchens can be properly prepared, but teams should also have systems in place for customers who turn up requiring particular dietary options at the table, in their room or during an event.



FREE-FROM HEROES

There are, of course, some absolute wonders of the food world enabling chefs to create diverse menu creations that don't encroach onto the dietary decisions of hotel guests.

"Rice is one of the foods least likely to cause allergies, making it first choice for those who suffer from a gluten intolerance or coeliac disease," states Craig Dillon, head of foodservice at Tilda UK. "The versatility of rice also means chefs can cater for gluten-free consumers throughout the whole menu."

There are some handy substitutes as well, which also tap into recent food trends and flavours as well as being void of animal products or common allergens.

"Coconut is the new dairy," states Tim Barford, manager of VegfestUK Trade. "Try coconut yoghurts, coconut ice cream, even coconut cheese these days. Coconut is a stable fat and as such lends itself well to a bit of processing, without damaging the nutrients."

Certain types of cuisines lend themselves nicely to the vegetarian, vegan and free-from sections of menus too.

"Some Asian cuisines like Vietnamese, Thai and Korean tend to be a lot healthier, whilst newer healthy cuisines like Peruvian and South American are really starting to make their mark on the global food market," explains Chef turned consultant John Wood, co-founder of Kitchen CUT. "All of these have broad vegetarian and vegan possibilities, which typically are low gluten."

Some menu staples, like burgers, initially appear the complete opposite of everything veggie and free-from – yet they are completely adaptable depending on the guest's requirements.

"Gluten-free is expected to see the fastest growth in popularity on restaurant menus out of all food groups over the next two-to-three years and burgers continue to grow on menus creating a great opportunity for gluten free burgers," explains Samantha Winsor, assistant brand manager at Lantmännen Unibake UK.

"Hotel caterers can expand their burger menu by offering an option to those following gluten-free diets," adds Aine Melichar, brand manager for Kerrymaid. "This can be done by creating a naked burger – a burger without the bun on a bed of salad – or offer in a gluten-free bun."

Vegetarian burger options are seemingly endless, with various vegetable patties, beetroot, soy meat replacements and seitan offering burgers that can both resemble meat and stray far from the original recipe.

Marie-Emmanuelle Chessé, international development project manager at Tipiak. "There are a number of things hotels need to consider, such as managing the expectation of the guest and meeting their requirements, as well as planning a free-from menu that still enables dishes to go out to guests at the same time, even if they have special dietary needs."

Communication between management, kitchen team members, front-of-house staff and guests is imperative to limit confusion and risky mistakes.

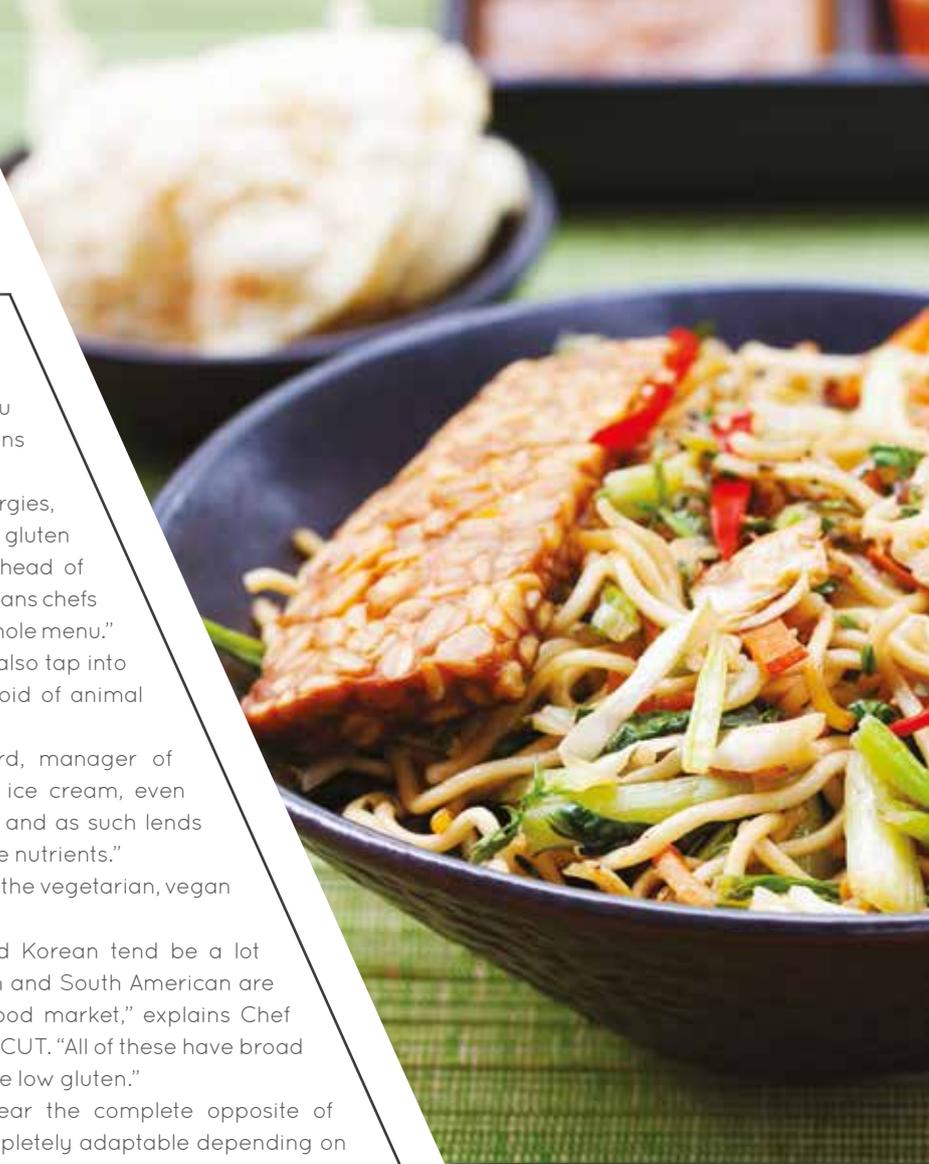
"It is imperative that both the kitchen and service teams are 100% confident and compliant in following the restaurant protocol," states John Wood, a Michelin star and four-AA-rose chef who co-founded Kitchen CUT. "The effect of getting it wrong can be extremely

serious for both the customer and restaurant. I believe that using a robust kitchen management system is the only way to be fully confident in this area."

Preparation areas, utensils and other equipment should be distinctly different for meat, vegetables and free-from products – as well as strict hygiene standards to avoid cross-contamination at all costs. Staff training and awareness is paramount, and the people who answer specific questions from guests should be able to relay this information about best practice to boost confidence in the hotel's ability to cater for everyone – whether from fresh or prepared products.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

We're used to seeing multiple indicators on menus these days, highlighting vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free and allergen-containing dishes. But the separate vegetarian and vegan menus provided to guests at their request, the dizzying allergen tables for each item sold and menu markers can culminate in information overload. There are ways in which hotels can reinforce their free-from credentials to guests, giving them further confidence in kitchen processes





"Free-from food is no longer simply for allergy sufferers"

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CLASSICS RECREATED

“Hotel operators looking to extend their vegan options are opening potential market up to not only half a million vegans in Britain, but also to a million more vegetarians, the huge number of meat and dairy reducers, the lactose intolerant, and others who simply enjoy vegan food from time to time,” says Dominika Piasecka, a spokesperson for The Vegan Society. Here, she shares some tips for hotels looking to adapt their menus:

- Dairy-free pizza bases can be topped with vegetables, with or without a mozzarella-style cheese alternative.
- Veganising a curry can be as easy as swapping meat, fish or paneer for chickpeas or lentils.
- Cashew nuts can be used to add protein and flavour to stir-fried vegetables and rice noodles.
- Dairy-free spread and soya milk can be used to make mashed potatoes creamy.
- Vegetable soup can be served with a swirl of soya cream, or you can create one using coconut milk.
- Garlic bread can be created using dairy-free spread or olive oil.
- Dairy-free spread and other vegetable fats can be used in baking, and there are many foods that can replace eggs, including banana, jam, apple sauce and tofu.
- Coconut milk can be used to create an indulgent rice pudding.
- A lot of ready-made rollout pastry is accidentally vegan and can be glazed using soya milk.

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and menu efforts.

“Coeliac UK offers a Gluten-free Catering Accreditation, which 84% of coeliac sufferers said ‘automatically tells them it’s safe to eat at that establishment’,” explains Emily Sudell, marketing executive at Bells of Lazonby. “Selling products that carry accreditations such as Coeliac UK and Vegan Society can also be helpful to include on menus – as customers who are drawn to buying and consuming these products will be very receptive to the symbols and will actively seek these out.”

Creating a solid menu containing vegetarian, vegan and free-from options isn’t always easy, especially if it’s not an area of cuisine that some hotel chefs specialise in.

“Restaurants tend to find it easier to stay on-trend for other cuisines, but it seems many resort to tired clichés when it comes to vegetarian options,” says Jonathan Smith, the Vegetarian Society Cookery School manager. “The Vegetarian Society Cookery School’s professional diploma helps chefs rethink their approach to veggie food. The intensive week-long series of practical workshops cover a wide range of skills for the professional chef, including cooking techniques, achieving sumptuous umami flavours with veggie ingredients, spicing and seasoning – all with a focus on nutrition and latest culinary trends.”

Vegetarian, vegan and free-from food isn’t just being enjoyed by people who are already devoutly following these diets – people are generally venturing outside their comfort zone when it comes to food, and are tending to graze through the day. This sparks more occasions for hotels to get really inventive with their menus and distance their dishes from bog standard meat and two veg; there’s a whole universe of plant-based cuisine waiting to be explored.

