

Veggie Wonders

October 1 is celebrated as World Vegetarian Day and we look at the food that is healthy, sustainable and is rapidly growing in popularity. Being a vegetarian by birth and choice, I am often questioned about my food preferences. However, I have always maintained that the best food is vegetarian. And, luckily, there are many people and restaurants who think similarly, which is reflected in the large number of exclusive vegetarian eateries that are mushrooming across the country.

Words BINDU GOPAL RAO

Lifestyle Matters

Today, being a vegetarian is a lifestyle choice and not restricted to religion or culture. In a fast-paced world, people are constantly on the lookout for food that is fast, yet nutritious and satisfying. "People are now more appreciative of the nutritional value and health quotients of vegetarian food. Moreover, working professionals prefer food items that are light and easy to digest, yet flavourful. The emerging trend of raw food has gained much acclaim over recent years as these ingredients show quicker results in weight loss and in fighting chronic diseases," says Neeraj Rawoot, Executive Chef, Sofitel Mumbai BKC.

The Indian vegetarian diet traditionally consisted of a restricted number of items. "However, with the introduction of Indianised international food, the vegetarian palate of the country has expanded. Since most global cuisines and delicacies include meat, restaurants are seen adopting a vegetarian course to cater to Indian taste buds. In fact, vegetarian Chinese food preparations can be found at every nook and corner in India," says Animesh Damani, Managing Director, Platinum Hotels, Ahmedabad.

Starry Affair

Top-end fine dining restaurants have started introducing dishes that have a global influence in the menu, along with their classics. Indians have been globetrotters for many years but it is only now that they have finally opened up to global foods. Guests look for international food in *desi* flavours and are happy to try unique creations by creative chefs. Interestingly, vegetarian food has moved into the fine dining space and even five-star hotels do not hesitate in setting up exclusive vegetarian restaurants. ITC Hotels, for instance, moved in quickly to fill this niche demand. "We saw the need for an exclusive vegetarian restaurant and the Royal Vega initiative has been well worth it. Featuring a fine collection of signature vegetarian dishes from across India, Royal Vega at ITC Grand Chola showcases the classical grandeur of the subcontinent and beyond. This luxury restaurant is based on the concept of seasons and presents a delightful offering of delectable vegetarian food from the royal kitchens of India and is pan-Indian in nature," says Ajit Bangera, Senior Executive Chef, ITC Grand Chola.

Plant Protein

Plant Protein (PlantPro) is a rising phenomenon and a significant development in the food industry. Plant-based

proteins like shroom balls, pea pro, bean pro, tofu, amaranth, hemp's root and sweet potato aspire to be replacements of the nutrients and textures we usually get from meat with vegetarian sources. Nitin Dixit, co-founder of Greenr Café in Gurugram, says, "A plant-based kitchen uses ingredients that are sourced entirely from plants. Hence, even ingredients like milk/dairy products which are present in vegetarian kitchens are absent or need to be declared on a menu in a plant-based restaurant. At Greenr Cafe, we have created over half a dozen unique plant proteins, which are complex food components around which our dishes are built."

Health Notes

Thanks to an abundance of scientific research that demonstrates the health and environmental benefits of a plant-based diet, dieticians recommend that we derive our calories from grain products, vegetables and fruits. The trend towards clean eating and fresh produce makes vegetarianism a sustainable option. With more and more people becoming aware of what they are eating and where their food is sourced, vegetarianism is on the rise.

"Meat, dairy and other products have limited shelf life and are known to cause several health issues. Vegetarianism is the most sustainable, guilt-free and clean form that can easily be sourced locally and replaced quickly without hassle. Also, India is known for its wide variety of vegetarian cuisine. You have so many options to choose from. There is hardly any need to go the other way if you are conscious about your health and eating habits," says Praneta Mehta, co-owner, Kettlery – Tea Bar & Kitchen, a Mumbai-based restaurant.

Twist of Taste

Modern taste palates have evolved largely due to the easy access to global cuisine. Today, fusion of several vegetarian cuisines to create unique and innovative dishes is on the rise. The availability of several variations of grains, pulses, fruits and vegetables has also made it easy to innovate and curate really exciting and delicious vegetarian food. "The beetroot shikampuri kebab in our menu is an adaptation from the famous Hyderabadi kebabs (usually non-vegetarian) with a vegetarian twist. The taste and look of the dish is very similar to the original shikampuri kebabs but it is made with all-veg ingredients. Also, we are moving back to Ayurvedic-style eating so Vedic methods or '*Satvik*' foods are also in trend. For example, the black rice *khichdi* in our menu is an adaptation of the famous *yogic* meal with a twist," says Mehta.



TOP VEGETARIAN RESTAURANTS IN INDIA

Royal Vega at ITC Grand Chola, Chennai

Must try Ksratumbi Kofteh, Gucchi Chilgoza, Makhane Chuara Kheer
Reservations (044) 4906 5272, (044) 4906 5271

Rasovara, Lavelle Road, Bengaluru
Must try Mandvi ka Dabeli, Bikaneri Mutter Pack, Rajasthani Kadhi
Reservations (080) 4173 8968, +91 98860 60965

Burma Burma, Mumbai, Gurugram and Bengaluru
Must try Samosa Soup, Khow Suey, Avocado Ice Cream
Reservations Mumbai (022) 4003 6600/01/16; Gurugram (0124) 4372 997/98/99, Bengaluru (080) 4300 8120

Carrots, Bengaluru
Must try Muscle Relaxer Juice, Crunchy Waldorf Salad, Fully Filled Mashed Potato Pie
Reservations (080) 4117 2812

Kettley – Tea Bar & Kitchen, Mumbai
Must try Silver Needle Tea, Fried Dokhla Chat, Black Rice Khichdi
Reservations (022) 3375 6405

Tuskers, Sofitel Mumbai BKC
Must try Ratalo ki Tikki, Jodhpuri Gate, Malpua
Reservations +91 91673 91130

The Terrassen Café, Hyderabad
Must try Vegan Keema Noodles, Kathi Falafel Roll, Terrassen Ragi Cake
Reservations +91 93982 73467, +91 83097 37962

The Real Green Café, Pune
Must try Stir-fried veggies with quinoa, Desi Aloo Garlic Sandwich, Peanut Butter Banana Milkshake
Reservations +91 88062 70327

Hamsa, Chennai
Must try Kacche Kele Aur Anar Ki Tikki, Kofteh Brindavan, Anjeer Aur Adrak ka Halwa
Reservations (044) 3085 3831

The Holy Tree, Ludhiana
Must try Broccoli Saag Exotica, Quinoa Biryani and Salan, Phirni
Reservations +91 98725 78300, (0161) 4601 301



Chefs at restaurants across the country are choosing to go completely vegetarian or vegan with their ingredients and serving interesting preparations like Rajwadi Khichadi (*facing page*) and Dal Baati Churma (*above, left*), served at Khandani Rajdhani, and Khao Suey (*above, right*) at Burma Burma

“Currently we can see that a vegetarian version of all cuisines, whether Indian or international, is being made. Restaurants have started exploring regional cuisines for good,” says Aji Nair, COO, F&B division, Mirah Hospitality.

Ingredient Intensive

There has also been a visible return by restaurants to use of traditional grains. “*Timur*; quinoa, *ashwagandha*, *jimbu*, edamame, *safed haldi*, tamarind leaves, *zakhia*, artichokes, white asparagus and a variety of fresh edible flowers are in vogue today. At Royal Vega, the finest ingredients are sourced from all over the country,” says Bangera.

The resurgence of millets, *jowar*, *bajra* as traditional superfoods can hardly be undermined. Moringa, quinoa, chia and flax seeds are also finding space in vegetarian kitchens and pairing of vegetarian food and healthy beverages and cold pressed juices is becoming popular. Ankit Gupta, co-owner of Burma Burma, says, “We are trying to create flavours which have not been used before. For instance, we have an indigenous product called *tohu*, which is made with roasted gram flour (*besan*) and I can assure that no one can figure out the ingredient in that preparation.”

Vegan Vows

A key driver of the vegetarian movement is being fuelled by people going vegan (abstaining from use of dairy products that come from animals). Susmitha Subbaraju, co-owner, Carrots, India’s first vegan restaurant in Bengaluru says, “The intention was to let people know that there is no need to use animals for food as you can cook a variety of food with plant-based ingredients.” The menu here is huge, and the team ensures that there is something for everyone’s palate. The fusion menu has winners like the Carrots Healthy Platter and Aubergine Mushroom Platter that use vegetables and grains in an interesting manner. Subbaraju, who has been vegan since 2003, says that vegans have more choices than one can imagine. “When I turned vegan, I thought I was giving up dairy. But by avoiding one kind of curd or milk, I actually got so many more kinds at my disposal and a lot of these are very easy to make.” In fact, you can use almond milk, brown rice milk, soya milk, oat milk, millet milk, coconut coffee and curds from peanuts that has a nice thick, creamy texture. Remember the old adage, ‘You are what you eat.’ Vegetarian food is not just the right way to stay healthy but is also ecologically sustainable. Now that’s a win-win for sure. ♦