

Food & Drink

Viva Vegetarian!

A Guide to Delicious Hudson Valley Dining

by [Karin Ursula Edmondson](#) and photographs by [Jennifer May](#), February 25, 2011



Baby lettuces with sauteed oyster mushrooms, wontons, and a carrot sesame ume-ginger dressing at Luna 61 in Tivoli.

A vegetarian in her purest form is a person who does not eat meat, fish, or fowl. More rigorously, a vegan does not ingest any food derived from animals, fish, fowl, or insect, including dairy, eggs, and honey. Both vegetarians and vegans receive their sustenance from plants—vegetables, fruits, herbs, nuts, and grains. For several decades, a vegetarian diet was viewed as “Spartan, a rebuke and brimming with self-righteousness,” says Jay Blotcher, who works in the media relations department at the Culinary Institute of America. Blotcher has been a vegetarian for 32 years, vegan for the last 10 months.

Modern vegetarian cuisine is anything but Spartan—inventive, creative and full of flavor, a sort of introductory primer on global food traditions that employ vegetables and other plant offerings as their nutritional mainstay. Globalization has familiarized products in most American supermarkets that 30 years ago were nearly impossible to locate: coconut milk, fresh lemongrass, shitake mushrooms, poblano peppers, ginger root, rice vinegar, and sesame oil. The CIA now introduces students to vegetarian and vegan culinary principles as part of its degree programs. In May 2012 the CIA will publish Chef Instructor Katherine Polenz’s *Vegetarian Cooking at Home*, a multicultural collection of savory vegetarian recipes.

Some of the best purely vegetarian/vegan restaurants in the Hudson Valley apply multicultural food traditions; dining at one of these eateries often feels nuanced and sophisticated. Peter Maisel, chef/owner with his wife, Debra, of Tivoli’s Luna 61, interned (surmounting language barriers) at the legendary macrobiotic restaurant Souen in Manhattan. This is evidenced in the profusion of

Asian-inspired embellishments Luna 61 offers—ginger scallion sauce, ume plum paste, sweet chili sauce, soy chili sauce, Thai barbecue sauce, Szechuan sesame peanut sauce, sesame balsamic dressing, spicy coconut broth.

Food inspirations might be exotic, but food philosophies at most vegetarian places are predominantly local and organic. In the summer season, vegetables, fruits, and herbs are sourced directly from local Hudson Valley farms or farm markets. “Local is better,” says Debra Maisel. Local produce has the bonus of incomparable flavor, just-picked ripeness, and a taste of terroir. In the winter, Pam Brown at the Garden Café on the Green in Woodstock sources local polenta, whole wheat bread flour, maple syrup, cashew ice cream, potatoes, and apples for her winter menu, so that the dining experience is still redolent with local flavors. The myriad reasons people opt for a plant-based lifestyle: health, ecology, animal rights, nonviolence, religious beliefs, or any combination of these reasons might have formerly smacked of the sanctimonious, but in light of today’s global health and environmental crises, a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle might just be a flavorful, curative option available to everyone.



Sauteed wild and brown rice with roasted butternut squash and cashew cream drizzle; pan-seared tempeh with grape mustard relish; fennel and portabella mushroom salad; and a side of kale.

Garden Café on the Green, Woodstock

The Garden Café on the Green in Woodstock is vegan, but quietly so. The restaurant's shabby-chic décor is at once elegant and cozy. Chef/owner Pam Brown, a vegetarian since 1967, has inventive dishes on her menu, excellent preparation, and creative use of world spice that combine to deliver delicious vegan testaments to a cuisine and a lifestyle that can be as tasty as it is nutritious and compassionate toward animals. Jenny Brown, founder and co-director of the Woodstock Farm Animal Sanctuary and a self-proclaimed “not a big dessert person,” always makes room for Pam's “to-die-for strawberry shortcake” in the summer when fresh organic strawberries are available. “The vegan whip cream not only tastes like the real thing—it's better!”

The menu is dynamic, “really inventive and fun,” states Blotcher, and offers variations on Thai, Indian, Afghani, Italian, and American Southwest cooking. The menu changes seasonally and specials are offered daily, so choosing just one dish becomes particularly difficult. During my initial visit in the winter of 2008, I managed (somehow) to narrow down the menu to six dishes that I coveted. That day, the winner was the Afghan Lentil and Vegetable Boulanee (Roll-Up) with Lemon Sour Cream Cumin Drizzle—a wonderful mélange of sautéed vegetables tossed with spiced lentils, potatoes, and Afghan spices, rolled in warm whole wheat tortilla. Other dishes of note: Grilled Mediterranean Chickpea Wrap, Moroccan Carrot Salad with Pistachios and Dates, Butternut Squash Risotto Cakes with Sage and Pine Nut Sauce, Curried Red Lentil Spread with Toasted Pita, and the Avocado and Vegan Cheddar on Whole Grain Bread. Brown's favorite dish is the Indian Vegetable & Chickpea Enchiladas with Bombay Sauce served with Curried Apple Coconut Salad and Sautéed Greens. Winter menus “stick with grains, root veggies, kale, and collards, apples, pears, dried fruits, and apple cider.” Coffee and chocolate always figure into the menu because, according to Brown, “What would life be without them?” Tomatoes may be absent from the current winter menu at the Garden Café but dishes like Warm Walnut Mushroom Paté with Horseradish Cream Sauce served with Warm Focaccia, Seitan with Caramelized Onions in Red Wine Sauce with Smokey Garlic Potato Croquette with Scallion Puree, and Roasted Cauliflower with Gremolata Bread Crumbs and Sautéed Greens make one admit that tomatoes are best left in summer anyhow.

6 Old Forge Road, Woodstock. www.woodstockgardencafe.com.

Gomen Kudasai

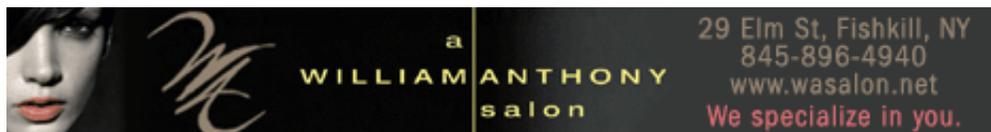
The first page of the menu at Japanese restaurant Gomen Kudasai states: “MSG free, vegan friendly, organic when possible, and locally produced when available,” then lists 23 local purveyors including vegetable farms, an orchard, and a winery. Youko Yamamoto claims she offers the “biggest menu for vegetarian options north of Manhattan.” Lagusta of Lagusta's Luscious organic, vegan, and fair trade chocolates raves about the “stunningly perfect home-style authentic Japanese vegetable dishes.” Symbols next to menu entries—V for Vegetarian, S for Specify regular or vegetarian, and O for Organic—allow room for vegetarians to order a wide variety of dishes. The dishes with the symbols are not the only vegetarian options. “We have 25 vegetarian/vegan appetizers, 28 vegan noodle dishes, 12 vegetarian/vegan rice dishes, five vegan desserts, seven vegan sushi rolls, and a few egg noodle dishes. All together we have more than 80 dishes of vegetarian choice,” says Yamamoto. Desserts have two symbols of their own—DF for dairy free and GF for gluten free. The Mango Passion Fruit Sorbet is a winner with V, O, DF, and GF. Gomen Kudasai offers vegan Japanese noodle soups with either udon noodles (“delicious,” says Lagusta) or soba noodles, and both are rarities. “One of the most important ingredients for noodle soup is bonito flakes—fish flavor. It is difficult to achieve the authentic noodle soup taste without using bonito flakes,” explains Yamamoto. The kimchi—legendary Korean spiced cabbage—is “pickled in our kitchen by our Korean friend” and, lacking the fish sauce, is vegan as well. Blotcher recommends Gomen Kudasai because of “authenticity. They take really good care with the food preparation. This is traditional Japanese food, not tarted-up Americanized food.” Some of the popular vegetarian dishes are Vegan Kitsune Udon, Sansai Soba, Tempura Soba, Yakiudon Tofu, Madofu, Spring Roll, Stir-fried Vegetable for Two and Steamed Baby Bok Choy. The bean curd is handmade about 50 miles away and is organic. “I love their Yaki Udon—stir-fried with vegetables,” says Lagusta.

215 Main Street, New Paltz. (845) 255-8811

Karma Road

Karma Road and its chef/owners Jennifer Branitz and Seth Davis wear their culinary heart on their sleeve. Their shingle reads: “Food for an Inspired Planet” and the take-out menu states: “Healthy Delicious Food for Everyone.” Karma Road has its fans. Blotcher recommends Karma Road “for a quick preparation that is consistently good and unfussy. No unpleasant surprises. They tell you everything that is in each dish.” And they do—listing all the ingredients either on the blackboard or on staked signs in each prepared dish in the display case. Jenny Brown's favorite Karma Road meal? “A no-brainer,” she says: the Young Coconut Shake, a dreamy concoction of young coconut meat, water, agave, and vanilla, coupled with the Karma Reuben sandwich of roasted tempeh, sauerkraut, and homemade Russian dressing and the “addictive” Kalecado salad—raw kale with creamy avocado mash, onions, extravirgin olive oil, carrots, lemon juice, raisins, and cashews. Another standout: the Baked Falafel Wrap with carrots, tomatoes, lettuce, tahini, and added hummus. It tasted “clean, crisp, and fresh” to Olivebridge organic farmer Thom Greaney, who recognizes a fresh vegetable when he tastes one. The accompanying Sprouted Raw Red Lentil Salad (ingredients were listed as: celery, red pepper, red onion, parsley, canola oil, lemon juice, Bragg's Aminos, garlic, black pepper, sea salt, seasoning—celery salt—and love) was refreshing. Dessert: a just-out-of-the-oven chocolate blueberry muffin baked from spelt and brown rice flour and sweetened with agave, maple

syrup, and cane sugar. Vegetarian cookbook author Nava Atlas describes the food at Karma Road as “hearty fare with a lot of heart” and the menu is expansive—with numerous deli-case offerings, sandwiches, soups, wraps, breakfast items, juices, smoothies, and desserts. Ninety-eight percent of everything at Karma Road is organic, even the sodas. Atlas’s favorite Karma Road meal: “a green juice, the soup of the day, and a sweet potato biscuit. I leave the place feeling like I’ve been injected with a huge dose of vitamins.” 11 Main Street, New Paltz. www.karmaroad.net.



House favorite scallion pancake at Luna 61.

Luna 61

Tivoli’s Luna 61, the matriarch of the Hudson Valley vegetarian restaurants after 16 years of operation, is technically a vegetarian restaurant with eggs and cheese on the menu—including a riotous slice of dairy dessert decadence called the Banana Cream Pie—but according to Jenny Brown, “pretty much anything can be made vegan, many of the items already are, so vegans never feel limited.”

Case in point: the vegan Chocolate Cake is a layered, frosted (dark Dutch cocoa and coconut milk) slice of adult dessert heaven—gently sweet, moist, and airy (baking soda and apple cider vinegar combo). Satisfaction is sweet. The Pan Friend Wontons Filled with Seasoned Tofu and Scallions with a Ginger Garlic Dipping Sauce forever altered my conception of wonton. Peter Maisel makes the wonton wrappers himself, rolls them thin, fills them with a soft tofu and scallion mixture, fries them up crisp and brown, and dusts them with panko breadcrumbs. “Best wontons I’ve ever had,” declared my dining companion, Leah. The ginger scallion dipping sauce had a hint of heat but the zesty peanut dipping sauce for the Vietnamese Salad Roll burst with flavor, spice, sweet, and sour—a wondrous thing. “We have customers who drink it,” says Debra Maisel. “During the holidays we bottle it for our customers.” Luna 61 is a complete fine dining experience—“organic beer and wine list, fresh baked goods, and mouthwatering multiethnic food with a healthy twist,” says Brown, who enjoys sitting outside in the summer and people watching on Tivoli’s Main Street. Sixty percent of Luna 61’s customers are carnivores that come for that eclectic dining experience. “You don’t have to be Japanese to go to a Japanese restaurant,” says Debra Maisel. Also noted: The kitchen uses stainless steel and cast-iron cookware, so there’s “no toxic anything” in the kitchen. “We also hide the healthy stuff in some of our dishes, like tumeric in our potatoes.” Portions are large. The subtly flavored stir-fry of broccoli, bok choy, carrots, kale, and tofu in a ginger-garlic sauce over jasmine rice (with a requested extra side of zesty peanut sauce) made a lovely lunch the following day. Other recommended dishes: Seitan Satay skewers, Seitan Picatta, and Laksa Noodlepot. The Crispy Jerk Seitan Chimichanga is “beloved” by various members of the Atlas family, especially Nava’s younger son. Open for brunch with “a mean Breakfast Burrito and fabulous scones.”
55 Broadway, Tivoli. www.luna61.com.

Pure City

Pure City in Pine Bush serves dishes prepared like Chinese food, only soy protein takes the place of the animal protein. Owned by Ben and Lisa Chen, who believe in “pure food, pure mind, pure behavior, and pure speaking,” the menu offers a full array of dishes normally found at Chinese restaurants from steamed vegetable dumplings, spring rolls and wonton soup to lo mein and brown sauces and bean sauces. Blotcher proclaims Pure City a “good place for starting out as a vegetarian or weaning yourself from eating meat, getting vegetarian training wheels by eating dishes that resemble or pay homage to meat.” The standout dish according to Nava Atlas is the Mixed Diced Vegetable in Taro, featuring finely diced zucchini, veggie ham, veggie protein, mushroom, and red pepper, sautéed in a special, light brown sauce, topped with cashew nuts, and served in a taro bowl. The entire dish is edible since the bowl is made of taro, a root vegetable. “Pretty much all vegan,” says Atlas. “Pure City does a lot of mock meat dishes, but not in a way that will be a turn-off to vegetarians. Everything is amazing, unique, and beautifully presented.” The menu is large and varied, and even the dessert menu has vegan offerings of mango pudding, homemade tofu cheesecake, and tofu ice cream.
100 Main Street, Pine Bush. www.purecityny.com.

Yanni Restaurant and Café

Yanni’s, a Greek diner with traditional shades of blue and white, is diminutive in size but big on vegetarian options, including an entire special menu filled with vegetable dishes. Yanni’s plethora of vegetarian options caters to his customers, 45 percent of whom are vegetarians. Open in the same location on Main Street in New Paltz since July 1998, Yanni’s was honored in Chronogram’s Best of the Mid-Hudson Valley in 1999, garnered four stars from the Poughkeepsie Journal and was named twice, in 2008 and 2009, in Hudson Valley Magazine’s Best of the Hudson Valley. “I love the Imam Baldi, a lovely dish of Greek stewed eggplant that comes with great pita bread to sop up the delicious juices,” says Lagusta. The dish is mild and comforting, the flavors stewed and well blended, buttery despite the large slices of eggplant and Roma tomato halves.

Blotcher recommends the “silky” Babaganoush that is indeed creamy, potent with garlic, a hint of lemon tang, and bits of fresh parsley. While Yanni’s offers a vegetarian menu with familiar Mediterranean fare like a Falafel Wrap, a Grecian Salad Pita, a Dip Platter, or a Veggie Wrap, the vegetable-inspired menu is comprised of actual dishes built around vegetables, such as: Fresh Spinach Mixed with Greek-style Rice, Onions Topped with Fresh Greek Dill, or Fresh Green Beans with Tomatoes, Onion and Garlic that is first sautéed and then baked in the oven. Similarly, the Giant Beans are first soaked in water for two days before baked with fresh tomatoes, tomato paste, onions, and garlic. When asked if there might be chicken or beef stock in the vegetarian dishes, Yanni smiles and says, “The dishes on the special menu have been cooked for hundreds of years in Greece without chicken or beef stock.” Truly a family-owned and -operated restaurant, Yanni “does everything,” including the cooking, although he is assisted by his wife, Dimitra, who makes the Spanikopita and all of the desserts.
51 Main Street, New Paltz. (845) 256-0988.

Honorable Mentions

Beacon Falls Café Beacon Falafel Platter
Café Mio, Gardiner Sriracha Glazed Tofu Wings
Mercato, Red Hook Raw Kale Salad with Scallions, Pine Nuts, Parmesan, and Currants
New World Home Cooking, Saugerties Blue Corn Crusted Seitan Steak
Northern Spy Café, High Falls Free Range Tofu Wings

Suruchi, New Paltz Mysore Masala Dosa
Thai Spice, Poughkeepsie Pad See Ew (specify no egg)
Zorona's Poughkeepsie: Spinach Pie and Fava Beans

1

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