



No Meat, No Dairy? No Problem!

That's what Chef Tal Ronnen tells **DR NANDITA SHAH** and **MADELINE NEAL BAKEWELL**. The Hollywood chef gives French classics a healthful twist through veganism

These days veganism is spreading like wildfire; blooming in cities, racing through the country and crossing national lines. Veganism owes its growing popularity to its health benefits as well as its connection to growing environmental and ethical concerns. Even former US President Bill Clinton recently changed to the diet in order to reverse his heart disease, thus establishing that veganism is no longer a fringe movement, but has shifted into the mainstream.

This fresh, plant-based diet excludes all meat and animal products such as

milk, cheese, and eggs. These restrictions may sound daunting to some, but gourmet chef Tal Ronnen is working to show meat eaters and foodies alike that vegan food is not only good for you, but also exciting to the palate, satiating, and nutritious. "I live to think veganism means you eat everything except meat and dairy," he says.

In 2009, Ronnen became widely known as the chef who catered popular American host, Oprah Winfrey's twenty-one day vegan cleanse. He also provided the dishes for the vegan wedding of America's Funny Woman, Ellen DeGeneres and Portia De Rossi, and orchestrated the menu for the US Senate's first vegan dinner. His hearty meals, such as *Peppercorn Encrusted Portobello Fillets with Yellow Tomato Bearnaise* or *Artichoke Ricotta Tortellini with Saffron Cream Sauce*, delight even the most devout of carnivores. These dishes are now taking him around the world as a frequent guest on cooking shows, a celebrity caterer, and as a master class instructor at *Le Cordon Bleu*.

However, Ronnen does not do this work only for the glamorous lifestyle. He sees his vocation as using food to promote good health and transforming healthy cuisine. After growing up in America as a vegetarian adolescent, he became fed up with the paucity of filling vegetarian options. In restaurants, he would inevitably be served starchy side-dishes thrust nonsensically together; a phenomenon well-known to any vegetarian who has travelled in the US. So, Ronnen decided to do something about it. He says, "Improving vegetarian cuisine was my mission."

His passion brought him to the *Natural Gourmet Institute*, where he completed his training in organic and seasonal French cuisine; whilst in the back of his mind, visions of vegan were simmering. The next several years were spent manifesting these fantasies onto the plate.

"Creating healthier versions of the French five mother sauces, and things you could never imagine eating as a vegan, like a *Hollandaise* or *Bearnaise* sauce. Those were my challenges," he says. "So I spent many years trying to



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Ingredients:

sea salt
2 tbsp olive oil
1 carrot, peeled and finely diced
1 onion, finely diced
1 banana pepper, seeded and finely diced
1 garlic clove, minced
1 tsp ground cumin
½ tsp red pepper flakes
½ tsp ground cayenne, or more to taste
freshly ground black pepper
1 cup soaked and boiled chickpeas
1 white potato, peeled and finely diced
5 whole oil-packed, sun-dried tomatoes, coarsely chopped
4 pieces vegan <i>naan</i> bread or <i>tortillas</i> , heated or toasted

Method:

Place a large sauté pan over medium heat. Sprinkle the bottom with a pinch of salt and heat for 1 minute. Add the oil and heat for 1 minute, being careful not to let it smoke. This will create a non-stick effect.

Add the carrot, onion, banana pepper, and garlic to the pan and sauté, stirring frequently, for 5 to 7 minutes, until the vegetables are just beginning to soften.

Add the cumin, red pepper, cayenne, and black pepper to taste and sauté for 1 minute.

Add the chickpeas and 1½ cup water. Bring to a boil. Add the potato and sun-dried tomatoes and simmer for 20 minutes, or until the potatoes are soft. Serve wrapped in the *naan* bread or *tortillas*.



develop that.”

His approach involves applying classical French cooking techniques to vegan foods. As celebrities and cookbook owners the world over can attest, he has hit his mark, thereby establishing himself in the culinary cannon of innovative chefs.

Of course, Ronnen is not the only vegan chef in the culinary kingdom. Vegan giants such as Chad Sarno in London, and Dave Anderson in Los Angeles deserve their due, and both are featured as guest chefs in Ronnen’s cookbook. However, no other vegan chef has devoted so much effort into winning over meat and dairy eaters. The result of this assiduous attention to taste is that many people can eat Ronnen’s food and never know that the meat is faux and that the cream is cashew.



GREEN BEAN AND BABY POTATO SALAD WITH MISO DRESSING

Ingredients:

2 tbsp yellow <i>miso</i> paste
3 tbsp rice vinegar
1 tbsp light Agave nectar
¼ tsp sea salt
¼ tsp freshly ground black pepper
½ shallot, minced
1 garlic clove, minced
1 tbsp <i>Dijon</i> mustard
juice of ½ lemon
½ cup safflower oil
1 tbsp fresh chives, minced
1 ½ cup baby Arugula
225 gm baby potatoes, boiled for

15 minutes, then sliced into ¼ inch thick rounds

225 gm beans, blanched in boiling water for 1 minute

Method:

Place the *miso* paste, vinegar, Agave nectar, salt, pepper, shallot, garlic, mustard, lemon juice, and 1 tbsp water in a food processor and pulse to combine. With the motor running, slowly add the oil in a thin stream until the vinaigrette is emulsified. Fold in the chives.

Place the Arugula, potatoes, and beans in a large bowl, drizzle with the vinaigrette, and toss to coat.

“For many of them, it was the first vegan meal they had ever had,” he says about the US Senate dinner. In this case, he used *Gardein*, a protein substance, in order to simulate meat. “If it is too much of a shock, they won’t go for it,” he says. “A large part of what I do is building a bridge between the two diets.”

Gardein is Tal’s favoured faux meat product because it can morph into the texture of any desired meat, even fooling eaters. Also unlike other faux meats *Gardein* is not composed of only soy or gluten; instead it packs in a rainbow of garden proteins with ancient grains like Quinoa (*masoor*) and Amaranth (*chauli*). It is considered a more sophisticated

faux meat.

Another of Ronnen’s trademark analogs is cashew cream, a magic ingredient to fill *ravioli*, thicken soups, or top desserts, all without dairy and cholesterol. Anyone can easily concoct this vegan delight. Simply soak raw cashews in water overnight, blend them in a *Vitamix* until a smooth paste is formed. This pale delicate cream is entirely plant-based, so it is much easier on the waistline than its dairy equivalent.

“I really like to use cashews,” says Ronnen. “Raw cashews taste totally different from roasted cashews; they are kind of smooth and bland.”

However lack of access to *Gardein* ➤

or even cashews should not inhibit anyone from creating vegan cuisine. There are many alternative faux meats and milks, including those made from soy. Often vegan chefs do not use faux meat or faux dairy at all. After all, as Ronnen shows us, in order to cook vegan one must possess an intrepid spirit. Preparing this food is an adventure for the mind and the taste buds.

Many people are under the spurious impression that cooking vegan means cooking with no fat. However, cashews are used in Ronnen's dairy staple substitute partly because they contain high levels of fat, making them a creamy and delicious substitute. Reducing the amount of total fat consumed however remains a major benefit to eating vegan, because even cashews cannot approach the sheer quantity of fat in meat and dairy.

There is also a major difference to be drawn in terms of types of fat. More and more nutritionists are differentiating between animal fat and plant fat. Plant fats are usually liquid at room temperature, and contain no cholesterol; high levels of which are associated with heart disease. So the amount of fat is no longer the only consideration. Ronnen prefers cold-pressed oils and never uses unhealthy hydrogenated fats. "I am very open to using good fats," says Ronnen. "I know fats can equal a lot of flavour; they can be a great vessel for flavour." Certainly this attitude is largely responsible for how succulent his food tastes to all varieties of palates. He recommends cold-pressed, non-hydrogenated coconut oil or olive oil for low heat sautés, and canola oil or grapeseed oil for high heat frying.

All of these tips and many more can be found inside Ronnen's luxuriously illustrated book, *The Conscious Cook*. The book opens with the question, 'Why vegan?' It then fills us in on the many reasons to consider veganism, as well as the top five myths about veganism. Ronnen shows us how vegans can obtain all the protein, calcium, and iron that they need, and his food certainly busts the myth that vegans must be eternally hungry.

Each elegant page contains an

interesting recipe placed next to food pictures which are simply stunning. Featured here are two recipes with ingredients easily available in India: *Green Bean and Fingerling Potato Salad with Miso Dressing*, and the hearty *Mediterranean Chickpea Wrap*.

When asked if he minds giving out all of his hard-earned culinary knowledge on TV, the internet, and in his cookbook, soft-spoken Ronnen only laughs and replies, "No, I don't keep any secrets. The more people that eat like this, the better."

Of course those who go vegan out of concern for animals, or a desire to reduce green house gases would agree. However going vegan for ethical reasons is not the message Ronnen is pushing. Instead, he emphasises the health aspects and the gastronomical pleasures. "I will let them

find out about it (the ethical aspects) on their own if they are inclined; I just let the food do the talking."

Ronnen also observes that vegan cuisine would make a great fit here in this nation. "India has a long tradition of lentils and grains," he says. "When I am travelling, I always look for an Indian restaurant because I know I can get something there."

India already boasts a diverse vegetarian food culture. Removing the ubiquitous dairy, such as *paneer* and *ghee* would be the final step to developing an Indian vegan cuisine. Indian chefs are up to the challenge, and will surely wish to purchase Ronnen's elegant book for inspiration. After all it is only a matter of time before this healthful, slimming, Hollywood diet finds its way over to Bollywood, and beyond. ❄

