

Vegan, Vegetarian, Gluten-Free: A Guide for the Perplexed

By Ellen Bayer

“Help,” I say to myself, “Everyone is coming for Shabbat this weekend and I have to prepare twenty different main dishes!” Or do I? It can be daunting when you have a bunch of different guests coming, each with very different dietary needs. This one is a vegetarian, that one is a vegan, this one has allergies, and that one is gluten free.

Fortunately, people’s expectations for Shabbat meals nowadays are very different from the meals I remember as a child. For the most part, chicken and meat are not the primary focus of a meal anymore. Most people are diet conscious and want to eat more healthily. Vegetables don’t have to be turned into kugels and you don’t have to have to serve several types of meat. This year’s Thanksgiving section in the *New York Times* had [94 recipes for side dishes](#), most of which could easily be a main dish for vegetarians, such as baked spaghetti squash, caramelized acorn squash stuffed with cranberries, or cauliflower roasted with chickpeas. Many of the different sweet potato and white potato recipes, as well as [vegetable biryani](#) could easily be made parve by omitting the ghee and the yogurt.

Probably the most overwhelming part of catering for all these different dietary needs is simply understanding what each designation means.

Typically, a person who refers to themselves as a vegetarian does not eat meat, but usually does consume eggs or dairy products (or both). Before the advent of all of the processed foods we have today, a vegetarian diet relied mostly on vegetables, grains and nuts. Because of all of the processed non-animal products available today, the term “plant based” has become popular. The number of people conducting a Google search for “plant based” doubled from 2017 to 2019, showing an increasing popularity of plant-based diets. This term emphasizes the vegetables as the main focus of either a vegetarian or vegan diet.

The word vegetarian was first used in 1841, and in 1944 vegetarians who consumed no animal or dairy products began calling themselves “vegans.” According to the Vegan Society, a vegan is someone “who consumes no food that comes from animals.” In addition to not eating dairy products such as milk, butter or eggs, many strict vegans will also refrain from eating honey. Generally, vegans eat a plant-based diet. Some people create their own terms, for example the “vegan” in my family does not eat hard boiled or fried eggs but will eat foods that are cooked with eggs.

People that follow a gluten-free diet do not eat foods made from gluten. According to the National Celiac Foundation, gluten is a protein which is found in wheat, barley, and rye. Celiac is a disease where the consumption of gluten triggers an immune response in the small intestine. One of my children has celiac disease and is medically required to follow a gluten-free diet. There is gluten in many products that you wouldn't expect, such as candy: in particular jelly-type candies like gummies.

Depending on the sensitivity of the person, the gluten-free dishes may have to be cooked in separate ovens. I prepare for my daughter's visit by cooking the dishes separately and being very careful not to cross-contaminate the food. It is not easy but it can be done. Today it is very easy to find gluten-free recipes online and I easily adopt recipes by switching up flour for almond flour, gluten-free oat flour or a gluten-free flour mix. The secret ingredient to make these baked recipes better is xanthan gum.

Aleksandra Crapanzano, of *The Wall Street Journal*, recently had a full-page spread about gluten-free recipes, more proof that the condition is very common. For the best gluten-free recipes, keep your Passover cookbooks out all year. Look for the recipes with almond flour or no flour at all. Some of our favorite recipes are the Chocolate Cakey Brownies, found in [My Pesach Kitchen](#) and the Vanilla Cupcake recipe found in [Perfect for Pesach](#) by Naomi Nachman. Another favorite is the Blueberry, Almond and Lemon Cake recipe by Yotam Ottolenghi, published in [The New York Times](#). I substitute rice flour for the all-purpose flour and add ¼ teaspoon of xanthan gum.

For vegetarian recipes, one of my most favorite and easy dishes to prepare is the vegetable roast. I roast eggplants, sweet potatoes, zucchini, mushrooms - and any other vegetables from my refrigerator that are about to go bad - at 400 degrees for about 30 minutes. I spray the pan with olive oil spray, season with my favorite spices and eat as is or add to salads. Another favorite is the Fabulous Rice recipe in [Dinner Done](#) by Leah Schapira, Victoria Dwek et al. This recipe calls for uncooked rice, raw red pepper, mushrooms, onion flakes, soy sauce, ¼ cup oil and 3 ¾ cups water. Basically you put it all in a 9x11 inch pan, cover the pan, and bake at 350 degrees for about one hour. You can make this recipe with uncooked quinoa, beans or pasta if you are not making it gluten free. It is very simple and tastes delicious. There are so many different varieties of vegetables you can substitute, so you can repeat this dish with slight variations and no one will get tired of it.

Another essential basic in vegetarian cooking is tofu. Tofu is very versatile, and reminds me of manna from heaven. Nutritional yeast is a great supplement to add. The taste is

unique, some vegetarians use it to make mock macaroni and cheese. I sprinkled it on some baked tofu, mixed it with string beans and had a great side dish.

Chickpeas are another great source of protein. They can be roasted, pickled or eaten fresh from the can with some salt and pepper. You can grind them to make your own hummus or add them to a salad.

Squash can be stuffed with rice, quinoa or barley if you are not gluten free. Craisins, dried apricots or raisins can be added to the rice to give the dish a sweet taste. If savory is more your taste, add some fried onions and mushrooms along with a little spinach to add some fiber. Everything comes together at the end.

It's important to remember that the point of the meal is to get together with friends and family. Especially now, with all of the isolation we've experienced because of Covid, we can appreciate how nice it is to be able to eat with people again. So next time you find out that you are expecting guests who are vegetarian, vegan or gluten free, don't panic! Think side dishes and vegetables and it will all work out.