

Cooking Corner: Couple sings the virtues of veganism

by Danielle Hatch

After a seven-year sojourn in California, Sean and Amanda Fitts have returned to the Midwest to spread the word about vegan eating with recipes for everything from pasta sauce to Reuben sandwiches to peanut butter zigzag ice cream.

VEGAN LIFESTYLE - Sean and Amanda Fitts of Peoria, Ill., use sweet Italian vegan sausage combined with canned tomatoes, vegan sour cream and spices to make a robust sauce with penne pasta. In the background at left is a plate of vegan Tempeh Reuben sandwiches, and at right is a vegan deep dish pizza. CNS Photo by Leslie Renken. It easy to find vegan items in the meat-loving Midwest, they say. And the most delicious thing of all? They know that their heart-healthy diet is good for the environment and for animals as well.

VEGGIE TO VEGAN

The Fitts, of Peoria, Ill., have been vegans for about six years, and were vegetarians for two years before that.

Sean is a college science teacher. He said that because heart disease runs in his family he has always experimented with ways to make his favorite dishes healthier.

"I'd take old recipes my family did and turned them into vegan dishes just by playing around," he said.

After being vegetarians, making the move to veganism - and eliminating not just meat but animal products such as cheese, eggs and milk from their diets - seemed like the logical next step.

"When we were living in Los Angeles we decided to try to eliminate as much torture from our food as we could," he said.

Amanda, who is pursuing a master's degree in counseling from Bradley University in Peoria, said she felt even healthier after going vegan.

"I felt like I had more energy," she said. "I used to get colds a lot, and now I rarely ever get colds or the flu."

LIMITED OPTIONS

The Fittses try to follow a vegan diet as closely as they can, but "we have to break the rules a little," Sean said.

Dining out can be tricky, but they have found several restaurants that accommodate their dining needs. They even bring their own soy cheese to the two pizza parlors they frequent.

Eating on the road can be tough, Amanda said, and catered lunches at business conferences seldom account for vegans.

"On the West Coast there was always something at least vegetarian," Amanda said. "Sometimes your only option for a meal might be a roll and something to drink."

Consequently, the Fittses make lots of meals at home from groceries purchased at local stores. However, once every six weeks or so, they drive to Chicago to stock up at Trader Joe's and Whole Foods Market.

They even feed vegetarian dog food by Natural Balance to their greyhound and border collie. They sometimes make dog food using ingredients such as oatmeal, rice, carrots and kelp.

'A SUBSTITUTE FOR EVERYTHING'

There's always a vegan dish to be found in the couple's home, such as Sean's New England Molasses Pudding, a crockpot recipe that fills the house with the scents of ginger, allspice and cinnamon. Sean makes a deep-dish pizza with veggie pepperoni and sausage.

They enjoy Vegan Tempeh Reubens, with vegan Monterey Jack cheese and seasoned tempeh (a soybean cake with a nutty flavor). Amanda's Vegan Pumpkin Cheesecake - made with pureed tofu and nondairy cream cheese - would please the most discriminating of palates.

"At first there were certain foods we really missed, but now we have a substitute for everything," Amanda said. Veggie fish sauce, for example, allows them to make Thai and Asian dishes without sacrificing flavor. A couple of tablespoons of Tofutti sour cream thickens up sauces.

Don't let yourself think Sean and Amanda never stray. You can find a carton of Purely Decadent peanut butter zigzag - a chocolatey non-dairy frozen dessert with chunks of peanut butter - if you happened to go rifling through their freezer.

"I'm not completely healthy," Sean said. "I have a fryer. And we have a vegan version of every junk food."

FUSILLI WITH SWEET ITALIAN VEGGIE SAUSAGE

2 teaspoons olive oil (divided use)

2 teaspoons minced garlic

1 (12-ounce) package Morning Star Veggie Sausage Crumbles

1 (12-ounce) can tomato sauce

1 (14.5-ounce) can chopped tomatoes with basil and oregano

1/4 cup Tofutti sour cream

1 tablespoon raw sugar

1 teaspoon sea salt

1/2 teaspoon hot pepper sauce

1 teaspoon dried basil

1 teaspoon dried oregano

1 teaspoon rosemary

Splash of red wine (optional)

1 pound fusilli pasta, or pasta of your choice, cooked following package directions

Yields 6 servings.

In large cast-iron skillet, heat 1 teaspoon of olive oil. Add garlic and sausage crumbles and heat until lightly brown. Add tomato sauce and chopped tomatoes to skillet, stirring continuously. Add remaining ingredients (except pasta) and let simmer for about 10 minutes.

Serve over pasta.

NEW ENGLAND MOLASSES PUDDING

3 cups vanilla soy milk

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup cornmeal

1/4 cup brown sugar

1/3 cup molasses

2 tablespoons Earth Balance buttery spread

1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1/2 teaspoon ginger

1/4 teaspoon allspice

Yields 8 to 10 servings.

In medium saucepan, bring soy milk and salt to a boil. Add cornmeal slowly while stirring to avoid lumps. Once cornmeal is completely mixed in, reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, for 10 minutes.

In large bowl, combine brown sugar, molasses, butter and spices. Slowly add cornmeal mixture and stir thoroughly. Once combined, pour into crockpot (see note) and cook on high for 2 to 3 hours. Serve hot with dollop of soy vanilla ice cream.

Note: This recipe works best in a crockpot; however it can be prepared in a double boiler. Check pudding often if using this method.

VEGAN TEMPEH REUBENS

Tempeh:

1/4 cup Bragg Liquid Aminos (see note)

1 small onion, quartered

2 cloves garlic, peeled

1 bay leaf

2 cups water

1 (8-ounce) package tempeh, sliced

Dressing:

1/4 cup vegan mayonnaise

3 tablespoons relish

2 tablespoons ketchup

Sandwiches:

8 slices rye bread

5 ounces vegan Monterey Jack cheese, sliced (see note)

1 cup sauerkraut

Yields 4 servings.

To make tempeh: Combine liquid aminos, onion, garlic, bay leaf and 2 cups water in saucepan over medium heat. Add tempeh slices and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to simmer and cook 20 minutes. Cover, and let tempeh cool in broth.

To make dressing: Stir together mayonnaise, relish and ketchup in small bowl.

To make sandwiches: Toast 4 slices bread. Set aside.

Drain cooled tempeh and discard liquid, onion, garlic and bay leaf. Place 3 slices tempeh on each slice of untoasted bread. Place cheese-topped bread face-up in broiler for 3 to 5 minutes, or until cheese has melted.

Top each sandwich with 1/4 cup sauerkraut. Spread toasted bread slices with dressing. Place tops on sandwiches, and slice in half.

Notes: Liquid aminos is a liquid protein concentrate derived from soybeans. You may substitute soy sauce instead. Sean and Amanda Fitts use Follow Your Heart vegan cheese, which they say melts better than other brands.

VEGAN PUMPKIN CHEESECAKE

12 ounces firm silken tofu, pureed

1 (8-ounce) package nondairy cream cheese

1 cup canned pumpkin

1 cup granulated sugar

3 tablespoons flour

1/2 teaspoon ground ginger

1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg

1 1/2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

1/8 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon baking soda

1 prepared graham cracker piecrust

Yields 8 servings.

Preheat oven to 350 F. Puree all ingredients except the piecrust in a food processor and pour into the graham cracker piecrust.

Bake for 50 minutes. Allow to cool for 30 minutes, cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 6 hours or overnight before serving.

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