

[Health: What's a Veggie Student to Do?](#)

Category : [October/November/December 2011](#)

Published by dharmalingam on Sep. 05, 2011

Health

What's a Veggie Student to Do?

A sorely deficient diet burdens many young vegetarian Hindus attending college in the US, but some schools are responding to calls for change

By Pooja Patel

Every year a new group of hindu seniors heads off to their first year of college, many to Ivy Leagues and prestigious schools around the country. A student's entry to college can be likened to stepping into a realm of brand new possibilities and opportunities for growth, friendship, education, and, most of all, discovering freedom. Often overlooked, food plays an integral role in the mood, health and perhaps even success of a college student. "You are what you eat" seems to be more apparent than ever in the age of organics, "Super Size Me" and Food Network. More often than not, by the time summer break rolls around and students are back home, the impact college cafeteria food has had on their bodies, especially for freshmen still adapting to a new lifestyle, is beyond noticeable. What was once termed the "freshman fifteen" may now be bordering on the "freshman fifty." Pounds added, that is.

Most vegetarian Hindu students spend their college years living off of unhealthy yet easy-to-find foods. Pizza, pasta and salad have made their mark in college cafeterias as "safe" staples for the vegetarian. However, many schools across the nation are spearheading the effort to make more nutritious dishes--such as crispy fried tofu with pineapple chutney, sesame-noodle and pea-pod casserole, and sauteed portabella mushrooms over polenta--just as readily available.

The fantasy of many a college student is to eat their favorite foods, snack on sugary sodas and binge on junk food for weeks on end, away from the prying eyes of Mom and Dad. Despite how delicious (or not) that may sound, this sort of diet

lacks balance and nutrition; there is a severe absence of vegetables and protein-rich ingredients, such as legumes. Finding a wide selection of healthy food that meets the needs of students while still tasting great can be an immense challenge, especially if you depend on one of many university dining halls that operate on the concept that salad and pasta bars are enough for vegetarian students.

Rupak Dhoot, a student at Austin College here in my home state of Texas, shares, "A majority of my meals consisted of assorted boiled vegetables, bread, pasta and, in all seriousness, quite a few peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. My meals were highly variable.... One consistent thing I could count on eating was cereal. Overall, the school seemed to recognize that there were many vegetarian students they needed to cater to, so there was always an option. However, as a picky eater, the options were not always appetizing. One problem was finding a good source of protein. A staple that serves as a rich source of protein in Indian households, dal, was obviously not available. Finding lentils, beans, nuts, etc., to satisfy the nutritional need for protein was a daily challenge."

A deficient, unbalanced diet similar to what many of these students are eating on a regular basis can cause most people to feel physically and mentally lethargic and dull. Deepika Ram from Texas A&M University admits, "At night I would go back to my room just craving for my bed. I was usually exhausted at the end of the day. Another common trend I saw was that, with a large workload, I found myself staying up late and eating whatever was available, snacking on whatever I could find. With a lack of sleep, many times I found myself sleepy in class and even drowsier after a large lunch."

A balanced, healthy diet helps students feel energetic, poised, concentrated and clear-minded. But they don't necessarily realize that their diet is the likely cause of the carb hangover they feel when trying to study or drag themselves out of bed in the morning (set aside whatever else they may be doing to contribute to that, such as partying). Akshar Patel from the Illinois Institute of Technology echoed the same complaint: "Because I lacked a proper breakfast every morning, I found it difficult to pay attention in class. Around many a meal time, the strong hunger distracted me from my professors."

The importance of a healthy diet cannot be emphasized enough. It provides weight control, promotes adequate sleep, enables a student to meet his or her daily

nutritional needs and to enjoy a higher overall quality of life. Eating a balanced diet is one of the easiest ways to protect oneself from many diseases associated with aging, including diabetes and heart disease, which young people seem to be acquiring at increasingly alarming rates. According to the US Department of Agriculture's new food plate (which recently replaced the more common food pyramid), you should make half your plate fruits and vegetables; and at least half of your grains should be whole grains.

Priya Wiersba, who attends the University of Michigan, says, "Whenever I eat healthily, I feel more energetic and better about myself in general. Sometimes, when I am not paying attention to what I'm eating before an exam, I will feel worse when taking the exam. Eating a healthy breakfast in general helps my concentration and helps me stay awake and aware during class."

What Colleges Are Up To

Many schools are not making decently nutritious and varied foods available to vegetarian students. However, others are taking measures to make vegetarians feel more welcome, in particular the University of California. Their Davis campus runs campus farms, where produce grown is often sold to the dining halls. The UC system has done a fine job of responding to students' requests for wider vegetarian selections in cafeterias, particularly at such urban-liberal-progressive campuses as the one at Berkeley, where students were originally faced with resistance from dining services staff. That changed after tables were set outside the dining halls with a petition, which eventually gained more than 1,200 signatures as well as the support of more than one-fifth of Berkeley's dorm population. The food service staff soon fulfilled the students' requests. After a month of meetings, the administration agreed to provide at least one fully vegan entree at every meal.

Not all colleges are so accommodating. In some cases, food service staff are directed to simply remove the meat from a non-vegetarian meal and call it vegetarian. This practice fails to add variety to meals and can discourage students from trusting the dining staff's options. Most university students buy meal plans, which are not included in regular tuition fees. Separate vegetarian meal plans are almost never available. The cost per meal is around \$6-10, depending on the school, about the same as eating a meal off-campus. Accommodating the requests of vegetarian customers would not necessarily be more expensive; it would simply depend on the demand. This becomes obvious at schools such as the University of Pennsylvania, where dramatic change has been afoot simply in the sheer number of vegetarian restaurants around the area, as well as the tremendous increase in other restaurants catering to vegetarians. Revamps such as this are linked to a greater

demand for nutritious vegetarian food, including from non-vegetarians. Even grocery stores in the area appear to be catching up on the trend, providing entire sections dedicated to vegetarian products.

Bon Appetit Management Company, an onsite restaurant company that provides cafe services to schools from Massachusetts Institute of Technology to Seattle University, is also taking steps toward providing healthier vegetarian options. The company makes an effort to cook nutritious dishes from scratch using fresh ingredients. The Princeton Review has, for several years, named this company the "No. 1 College Food Service in the Country." In 1999, Bon Appetit launched a Farm to Fork initiative, buying at least 20 percent, and often more, of its vegetables and other products within a 150-mile radius and having waste composted and distributed to area farms each week.

The nationwide campaign Meatless Mondays is on a mission to encourage mindful eating. Contrary to what the name suggests, animal proteins aren't necessarily prohibited in the dining halls involved in the effort. But for one day a week, the dining services involved offer additional vegetarian and vegan options to consumers to promote awareness about dietary choices among students. Already a staple at about 50 colleges, including Syracuse University, the University of California at Davis and even Oxford University, the program could see more than a tenfold increase at college campuses this fall. Sodexo, the food provider to about 650 colleges, will offer Meatless Mondays to its institutional clients starting next semester. Campuses and food providers now have more options because of the growing number of people committed to being vegetarian or vegan.

What You Can Do?

Moving from home to college is such an immense life change, the last you need is to be improperly nourished. If you're unhappy with your school's dining options, don't be afraid to take your concerns to campus dining services personnel. Use your voice; you are the paying customer. This is a way students can take a stand and be active in helping change the policies of colleges.

Students across the country are pushing for change, and they have had their fair share of successes. For example, at St. Mary's College of Maryland, students pushed Bon Appetit Management Company, the school's food provider, for more vegetarian options. After a Facebook campaign, a protest against popular fast-food giant Chick-fil-A and student meetings with Bon Appetit, their requests for a greater

variety of food choices were met. In April of this year, a petition for more vegetarian options on campus, now bearing more than 1,750 names, began making its way through Utah State University. Lauren Mata, a member of Vegan News, said, "It's kind of a fight for your food. You don't want to be a burden for them, but, at the same time, you've got to eat."

While you work to convince your campus dining services that nourishing vegetarian options will make students more successful and benefit the institution as well, you can also take matters into your own hands. Cook for yourself! Many vegetarian students have admitted to getting stuck in the pasta-and-marinara-sauce rut, as Indian food can be challenging and time-consuming to prepare. However, there are a variety of online resources that provide easy-to-make vegetarian recipes, including vegweb.com and allrecipes.com. Often such sites have designated areas displaying thousands of easy-to-make meals.

A 2004 survey by ARAMARK, a leading food services company, found that one in four college students wants vegan/vegetarian meals offered on campus. Seven years later, although problems continue to exist for vegetarian students at many colleges, great accomplishments have been made. Universities are always growing, and in the past decade this growth has been met with an openness to making sure every student feels welcome and well taken care of.

But there is still more work to be done, and the best place to do it is at the grassroots level--at your campus, in your town. A movement has even begun to bring greater vegetarian options into high schools; students are starting vegetarian clubs and writing letters to their schools' food service directors. That inspires me as a high school student, and while college seems to be closer on the horizon every day, as excited as I am to be introduced to a new place, I am also eager to see what my college campus cafeteria will have in store for me, and what I can do to make it even better.

Pooja Patel, 15, is a sophomore at Robert E. Lee Senior High School in Midland, Texas. She actively participates in her local Hindu youth group. E-mail: pooja.patel.mp@gmail.com

peta2's Most Vegetarian-Friendly Colleges

1. Indiana University-Bloomington

Newspaper and television stations all over the Midwest were buzzing about IU's options: Sesame Noodle & Pea Pod Casserole, Vegan Garden Burger, Hot Cakes and more. All vegetarian and vegan options are clearly marked and always delicious.

2. Humboldt State University

This Cal State school features entrees like Vegan Stuffed Green Pepper, Sauteed Portabella over Polenta, and even Soy Yogurt. Students tell us they are absolutely overjoyed with their vegetarian options.

3. University of Puget Sound

UPS certainly delivers. Featuring options like Vegan Cheeseburger, Vegan Biscuits & Gravy, Vegan Field Roast Sloppy Joe and more, the vegan options at this school could convert even the most die-hard meat-eater.

4. Yale University

Yale's options include BBQ Vegan Ribs, Chef's Choice Vegan Pizza, Vegan Enchiladas and a rotating list of other phenomenal options.

5. SUNY Purchase

Some of our peta2 Street Team members tipped us off to the all-vegetarian Terra Ve cafe on campus. We found out the school serves meals such as Tofu Marsala, Tempeh Cacciatore, and Tabouli & Tomato Salad with Tofu.

6. Oberlin College

Estimates put the vegetarian population of this Ohio school at about 40 percent. Meat-eaters, watch your back! With Southwest Vegetable Paella, Mexican-Style Lentil Bake, Teriyaki Tofu with Pineapple and many more options, there's no reason to eat PB&J.

7. New York University

For starters, NYU is close to many of the best vegetarian restaurants in the country. And on campus it promotes Weekly Vegetarian Nights and Monthly All Vegan Meals. Daily goodies such as Risotto with Spinach and Sun-Dried Tomatoes, Sweet and Sour Tofu, and Caribbean Baked Beans are always just a dining hall away.

8. University of California-Berkeley

It makes sense that a school integral to the protest movements of the 60s would stand up to corporate meat mongers. Sure enough. Students' brains here are fueled by Tofu Scramble, Vegan Meatloaf and Hazelnut Cutlets, among other fabulous foods.

9. University of Pennsylvania

Rivalling a gourmet vegetarian restaurant, UPenn gets it done with Fettuccine with Vegan Tomato Artichoke Alfredo, Crispy Fried Tofu with Pineapple Chutney, and Vegan Carrot Cake with Tofutti Cream Cheese Icing.

10. University of Florida

Home of Animal Activists of Alachua, one of the country's most dynamic animal rights groups, it's no surprise this school made the list. Daily vegan options in the "Vegan Corner's" rotation include Tofu Creole, BBQ Boca

Burger and Thai Peanut Noodles.

9 Ways You Can Improve the Diet on Your Campus

Petition. Whether or not you are on the campus food services committee, work to get students to sign an open letter requesting more vegetarian options in the dining facilities.

Talk to the People in Charge. Schedule a meeting with the school dietitian and/or food service director in charge of ordering food for the dining halls.

Make Suggestions. Provide simple, cost-effective suggestions for plant-based options.

Provide Information. Give the director a copy of the list of companies that produce vegetarian food products.

Be Practical. It is unlikely that your college will open an Indian vegetarian kitchen for its students. Hearty vegetarian burritos, pasta primavera (lots of veggies!) and tofu burgers are more practical, more the norm and cover a broad base of vegetarian tastes.

Include Treats. The dining hall at Connecticut College in New London offers vegan options at every meal. It also serves Tofutti and Rice Dream bars, which are frozen, non-dairy ice cream alternatives. At get this: every Thursday night, the vegetarian dining hall provides fruits and vegetables for juicing.

Request Clear Labeling. Work with the dining halls to label all vegetarian foods with ingredient information, and to make comment cards available for student feedback. Dining services will continue providing vegetarian meals only if they are in demand. If some students are not satisfied with the dining options, go back to dining services with new suggestions.

Help Taste Test! The University of Maryland at College Park recently created a "Vegetarian/Vegan Advisory Board" composed of students, the school dietitian, a student employee and dining hall managers. They meet monthly to test recipes, with the goal of improving the vegetarian menu and adding more non-meat choices. Wow!

Promote, Promote, Promote. Work with the food service director to promote the new vegetarian options in the school newspaper and the food service circular.