Vegetarian and Vegan cuisine

A short introduction
by Billy King
Dedicated to the memory of
Leonard McCaughey
Vegetarian and vegetarian restauranteur, 1840 - 1926
- my great-grandfather,
born in Armoy, Co Antrim
Proprietor of the XL Cafe in Cornmarket, Belfast and the College restaurant in College Street, Dublin, operating by the turn of the 20th century

Photo right: Leonard McCaughey with a daughter-in-law and grandchild, probably in 1910

One key element in curbing climate change is dealing with agriculture. If humanity’s appetite for meat and dairy products grows at the rate currently projected, by 2050 agriculture could use up the earth’s entire global warming emissions budget.

So to avoid the catastrophes and violence associated with climate change, we need a much more plant-based (vegetarian/vegan) diet.

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Photo right: Leonard McCaughey with a daughter-in-law and grandchild, probably in 1910
This publication is an edited and revised version of material which appeared in the Billy King: Rites Again column in Nonviolent News, the monthly publication of INNATE www.innatenonviolence.org

The first thing to note is that it is not a conventional cookbook in always giving precise measurements and so on, and covers other ground in cooking advice. It makes the assumption—true or false—that those using it will use their cooking skills and judgement, or experiment as appropriate.

One rationale behind a nonviolence network producing a cookbook is to be found in the poster on the previous page. We are going to hell (out of control global warming) in a handcart (or SUV) if we continue to develop our meat eating habit.

There are many reasons to be vegetarian or vegan. Being vegan is certainly a more logical approach insofar as the dairy industry, for example, depends not just on cows but the slaughter of bullocks for meat, and cattle are a primary contributor to global warming—as mentioned in the poster.

Another reason to be veggie is to stop cruelty to animals (and I would clearly include fish as animals in this—we now know that fish are sentient and social beings who die a miserable death when taken out of water). Efficiency in feeding the world in a situation where we cannot afford the luxury of everyone eating meat is another. There are others; we simply do not need to eat meat or fish. Vegetarianism can also be healthy for us.

However not all of us are willing to make the whole jump to being vegan so what I have tried to do is give vegan alternatives where I provide a lacto-vegetarian (dairy) recipe. Personally I do eat dairy products but try to get most of my protein from non-animal sources.

The situation of Ireland in relation to vegetarianism is an interesting one. Cattle have been a primary product in this country since time immemorial, and there are those who would say that Ireland is supremely suited to cattle and sheep rearing.

However there is potential for growing much more in the way of vegetable and other crops, for a variety of reasons. An issue here is food security. Our diet currently is very dependent on imports of food, and certainly some food may be more efficiently imported than grown here, but come the end of oil-based transport, or major dislocation to trade through natural or unnatural (human made) disasters and there could be major issues regarding food provision. While some green groups have thought through these issues, and made proposals for dealing with them, there is no indication that the appropriate authorities have done so, in any part of this island.

There are those who wonder what they can eat if they follow a vegetarian diet—won’t it be boring? The fact of the matter is there are far too many brilliant vegetarian recipes to get around to half of them, and great culinary traditions (Indian and Chinese, for example) which have vegetarianism as major strands. We are spoiled for choice. This small publication just looks at some possibilities; there are a million and one others available on the internet and elsewhere.

Material is divided into a number of sections on major themes within vegetarianism but I also include pieces on balance, special occasions and so on.

Cooking is a great creative activity which is sometimes given a competitive twist on television. Cooking at home should be enjoyable both in process and product, and ethical in terms of content. If we don’t enjoy both cooking and eating what we have cooked then there is something radically wrong. I hope this publication will help your enjoyment.

Billy King, June 2015.
Weighing in on gram flour

The advantages of gram flour are enormous: it is easily made into a batter (just add water), it is versatile, gluten free, vegan, and nutritious. Whether you use it for bhajis, pakoras, falafel, or even pancakes, it does the trick. It just takes a bit of getting used to cooking with it but if you start then you’ll probably wonder what you ever did without it. It is great if someone is on a gluten-free diet or you like Indian food. I usually make bhajis with onion, peas and mushrooms – a meal in itself.

Gram flour, or chick pea flour, is a special variety of chick peas for making into flour. It has all the nutrition of chick peas. The first rule is always to sieve it, even if your kitchen is very dry and it is stored in an airtight container it is still liable to go lumpy. So weigh the amount you need first, then get out your big sieve and put it through and you won’t have any problems of trying to get lumps out of your mix (always a pain). The variety of spices that you use with your gram flour recipe is open to a lot of tweaking to support your personal taste. Despite having a variety for different recipes I now tend to use a similar spice mix whatever I am doing, except for falafel – experiment is the only way.

As to the consistency of the batter, well, experimentation is also the answer. The terms pakora and bhaji are interchangeable and have northern and southern Indian origin for the same kind of thing. My own personal use (and it is only personal and has no basis that I know of in Indian cuisine) is I call pakoras single pieces of vegetable covered with the batter and deep fried, and for this I tend to make a slightly more runny batter than for bhajis, for which I use more chopped up veg. You can use basically any vegetable in the pakoras; mushrooms and cauliflower are good, but vegetables which need some cooking need to be small and the oil to be hot but not too hot, or the outside can be well done but the inside not.

Variety is the spice of life, and spices are one of the varieties of life, so don’t be afraid to try different flavours and mixes, though it is always wise to cook some particular blend first just for yourself or immediate family so you are not inflicting something that doesn’t quite work out on those apart from your loved ones!

You do need to make something saucy to go with gram flour recipes, unless of course you are eating your bhajis on the hoof. I give an easy sweet and sour recipe here, though I tend to go easy on the sweet and heavier on the sour. You could also do a tomato, or any other kind of sauce – an easy tomato sauce appears below. You can do whatever else takes your fancy, mashed potatoes or root vegetables, a salad, another complimentary veg, whatever.

Gram flour pancakes are perfectly doable and the most nutritious pancake you are likely to get. But the mix doesn’t stay together as well as a wheat flour batter so you need to be careful not to let it stick to the pan, and not make them too big so you can turn them without them breaking up. With these savoury pancakes you can do small-cut sautéed veg and a sauce, or even sautéed veg in a sauce, or whatever else you might like with savoury pancakes. I have never tried them sweet, without the normal spices, but you could experiment with cinnamon or other ‘sweet’ spices and serve them with stewed fruit.
Bhajis

Here’s the recipe I have for bhajis: 400 – 450g gram flour, 4 teaspoons ground cumin, 4 teaspoons turmeric, ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper, 1 teaspoon garam masala, 4 teaspoons ground coriander. Sieve gram flour and add spices. If you want a lighter result you need to add a teaspoon of bread soda (bicarbonate of soda) just before cooking and mix well. I usually add some chopped chilli as well and you can, if you like, add salt and/or chopped coriander. Add cold water to this mix, stirring well, until you have a thickish batter. Then add a couple of large chopped onions (more if the onions are smaller), some chopped mushrooms, and peas (if frozen, unfreeze with boiling water and drain before adding). This would make enough bhajis for 5 or 6 people, if serving other dishes with the meal so for three people I would halve the amount of gram flour. You can make bhajis with just onions, or with any other mixture of veg that takes your fancy.

Your oil needs to be hot but not too hot or the outside of the bhajis may be well done before the inside. You can use your chip pan (though chips may subsequently taste of Indian cuisine!) or a few centimetres of oil in a pan. It is easier to be sure of cooking them through if you make them smaller, like a desert spoon full or a small tablespoon full put in at a time. Don’t overfill your oil with the spoonfuls of mix so you can move them about and turn them over. Remove one with a slotted spoon and place on kitchen roll to absorb excess oil and taste it, checking it is done. You can adjust seasoning in those you cook subsequently.

Sweet and sour tomato sauce

The easy sweet and sour sauce I do with it sometimes consists of tomato ketchup, maybe a quarter cup or mug, a bit less cider vinegar, a few spoons of soya sauce, and some brown sugar – not making it sweet I add just a couple of dessert spoons, and then almost a cup or mug of water. I heat and mix this before adding a few dessert spoonfuls of cornflour for thickening; mix this with a small amount of water before stirring in to the mix, and bring gently to the boil and it’s ready to serve.

Falafel

Falafel (also sometimes spelt felafel), has Middle Eastern origins, and I find very difficult to make with just whole chick peas – I tried a recipe this way and it was pretty disastrous. However Denis Cotter came to the rescue with his recipe in ‘The Cafe Paradiso Cookbook’, which used both whole chick peas and gram flour. His recipe is for 250g chickpeas, soaked, 250g gram flour, 250mls water, 5 cloves garlic, a tablespoon of ground cumin seeds (if possible grind them freshly – don’t use bought cumin if you have a means of grinding them, as it is the main spice it makes a big difference to have it freshly ground,) ½ teaspoon of chopped chilli, 1 small onion, a teaspoon of salt (I would use less), juice of ½ lemon, ½ teaspoon of bread soda, and it’s not in his recipe but I often add a load of chopped parsley (or might serve it with a parsley sauce).

For cooking the chickpeas, as with all beans, I use a pressure cooker: 18 - 20 minutes at full pressure, with the beans soaked all day (or overnight) beforehand, allowing it to come down to room pressure itself. That should be sufficient (I have better things to do than wait on beans cooking in a conventional pot). Chickpeas are also available canned, ready cooked. Puree the chickpeas with the garlic and spices and then mix the onion, gram flour, salt and lemon juice. Then cook in the hot oil, dropping in small spoonfuls, check they are cooked through, and drain on kitchen roll. You may want to do a sauce or yoghurt dip, and you can serve in pitta/pita bread if you wish.

Pulse-ateing pressure

Beans and pulses are such a wide variety of products that you could write up a series of books and continents. In this context they are usually dried. However I will try to give a very brief overview and a few hints for your experimentation.

If you want to use beans and pulses, the first advice I would give is – buy a pressure cooker. They are not fashionable at the moment, at least in our neck of the woods, but indispensible if you are using dried beans. When Cuba fell on hard times with the downfall of Russian communism, and the end of cheap fuel, the government gave every household...
a pressure cooker, and it is economical and ecological as well as speedy. You can of course use tinned varieties of beans, now more readily available beyond ‘baked beans’ (haricot beans in tomato sauce), but it is cheaper, better and less wasteful to use dried. The first thing is to soak your beans or pulses for about 8 hours – e.g. from breakfast to cooking dinner in the evening. If you forget and have a couple of hours you can ‘catch up’ by pouring boiling water on them in a casserole dish and leave them covered.

Rinse and check your beans or pulses for dirt (less needed now than heretofore but still a wise precaution) before putting them in your pressure cooker but most are perfectly clean. Soaked whole lentils only take 3 – 5 minutes at pressure in a pressure cooker, and chick peas I would give 18 minutes at pressure. If you didn’t soak chick peas and used an open pot (I never have) I think you’d be talking about a couple of hours! Chick peas are the one to go for if you want a bean that stays fairly firm no matter how much you cook it. Soaked butter beans for frying I would give about 12 minutes – otherwise they can be too soft.

I would advise you with beans and pulses, particularly split peas, to turn the heat under your pressure cooker down to the minimum needed to maintain pressure as soon as possible after it reaches pressure. Otherwise the pressure cooker can overheat and ‘blow a gasket’ – potentially dangerous for you. I think this is because some pulses absorb heat more than other foods. I would also advise using a pressure cooker on a cooking ring away from you so if anything does happen you’re not under the spur of steam. When opening you can either leave it to come down to room pressure itself (if you want the food concerned to continue cooking a bit and you’re in no hurry) or use your cold tap to cool it down. If you take care then pressure cookers are perfectly safe.

Now, what do you say about digestibility issues concerning beans and pulses? I won’t go into detail but say that experimentation is the only way to find out – and as part of a balanced diet should not be a problem. Some people do question the use (and overuse in commercial food) of soya beans, and their digestibility, apart from their traditional treatment to produce tofu or tempeh which are quite different to ‘beans’. So I generally don’t use TVP – texturised vegetable protein – like a vegetarian version of minced meat but that’s up to you. Oh, and don’t forget the good old frozen pea which is a very useful last minute addition, by themselves or added to something else, to a meal which needs a bit more nutrition.

All right, on to what you do with them. You can find a million and two recipes on the internet if you search for ‘Latin American bean recipes’, ‘Chick pea recipes’, ‘Indian recipes’ (using chickpeas, or split beans or lentil dhal) or more specifically a particular bean or pulse. They can be used in stews, vegetable crumbles, as sauces, fried, and in salads or as the basis of a salad. Here are the outlines of a few recipes we do:

**Dhal**

Basic lentil or split pea dhal (a k a ‘dal’ or ‘dahl’): Cook your lentils (we usually use the common red split lentils) or split peas. With lentils you can add tomatoes or tinned tomatoes while cooking. I usually flavour it with curry, Cajun spice and some veggie bouillon. This is our basic dhal but if you want something more exciting you can find recipes online, which would usually add other ingredients before adding to the dhal (e.g. cook onion and garlic with finely chopped fresh ginger and freshly ground spices - using freshly ground cumin seeds is particularly good). If you are lacto-vegetarian and you want a richer dhal you can add grated cheese.

**Chickpeas**

Chickpea stew: We tend to make this slightly Thai-style with coconut milk and creamed coconut. Basically sauté (cook in a small amount of oil but cover so the moisture stays in) a number of different veg, including chilli – red or green according to taste. When the veg is nearly cooked add your coconut milk or creamed coconut and cooked chick peas, and flavour, and heat together gently.
Whole lentils
Whole lentil stew; I tend to use a fair bit of onion, maybe some sweet pepper, and mushrooms, as well as flavourings which vary quite a bit (wasabi – horseradish-type powder – is handy). You can use brown or green lentils.

Adukis
Aduki bean stew: Adukis which are soaked may require 16 minutes cooking at pressure though if they go mushy it just makes a different kind of stew. Bean cooking times can vary for different batches of the same beans; you can cook beans for some minutes more if they are not done, but you can’t make beans un-mushy which have gone too soft. Sauté onions and sweet pepper with a bit of chopped chilli and, when they are nearly done, I add a peeled and cored cooking apple which I have chopped. Throw in your cooked beans, some water to moisten the lot, and what flavourings you like, this one usually includes some soya sauce, and simmer gently to get it all to gel together.

I have a fondness for the word ‘aduki’ because when my eldest child was a toddler, the word always caused them laughter. If you don’t have enough of ‘whatever’ left for another meal, keep it and make a soup, adding some fried onions or other leftovers. I am particularly fond of lentil soup....and have a sister in law whose dog was called ‘Lentil’ (yes, they are veggies too...)

Butter beans
Fried butter beans: as mentioned above, I just give soaked butter beans 12 minutes at pressure (as above, this can vary) and take them off and strain them to avoid them getting mushy. I then fry them up in oil (or oil and butter if you like) flavoured with garlic, wasabi and maybe some curry, before a final dash of soya sauce.

To fulfilling tofu
It is ‘toe-fu’ rather than ‘tof-u’ but, however it is pronounced, tofu gets very mixed reactions, well, to be honest it tends to get negative reactions from many people. By itself it is bland so it depends what you do with it, but then a lot of food is like that. Some people react against its consistency where, even when ‘firm’ it tends to be a bit the consistency of scrambled eggs. But people in this part of the world don’t react against the consistency of scrambled eggs do they? So it’s a bit of what your expectations and cultural experience is of food. And tofu is a very easy vegan source of protein.

Tofu is coagulated soya milk, then compressed. So it’s a solid turned into a liquid turned into a solid (or semi-solid). There are some questions about the modern mass use of soya flour (finely ground up roasted soya beans), and the digestibility of same, in processed foods (they’ve taken the goodness out so they try to put something back using soya flour.....) but so far as I know there are no questions about the use of a traditionally processed soya product such as tofu beyond a) the question of whether it’s made from GM soya, and b) the fact it contains lots of phyto-oestrogen (plant based substances which act like oestrogen on the body) – so men may not want to eat too much of it, as in every day. If you have questions on this you can do a web search but remember tofu is a traditionally processed soya food.

The first thing to be considered is getting your tofu. You can buy tofu very cheaply in some supermarkets now but it may or may not be made with genetically modified soya. In specialist shops and Asian food stores you may be able to get fresh, GM-free tofu (including a couple of excellent brands made in Dublin). Buying fresh tofu is likely to be better for you than long life, but you definitely do need to use it within a short space of time because it will go slimy and perhaps unusable if its sits in your fridge for a week. But if it’s long life that’s available, go for it (that tends to be firmer again).

In starting with fresh, firm tofu, after I take it out of its pack I rinse it under the tap, let the water drain off and if firm enough I squeeze it ever so slightly while avoiding crushing it, and then put it on a tray on which I have placed several layers of kitchen roll underneath a clean tea towel. I then slice it, a block of 16 x 11 cm (5 cm deep) giving me perhaps ten slices lengthways which would typically be about 1.5 cm width. The slices are spread around on the tea towel to let...
more water drain out. This may need an hour or two and you will notice, over time, that the firmness or consistency of tofu from even the same supplier can vary. If you want to get the tofu firmer then it is necessary to fry the slices in a small amount of oil over a moderate heat until lightly browned; you will need to move it frequently with a slice to avoid it sticking. Pre-cooking it like this also means your tofu will keep for up to a week further in a fridge so for this reason alone it may be worth doing in advance of its use by date.

**Fried tofu slices**
The easiest thing to do with tofu slices is to simply fry them up in a small amount of oil on a heavy pan with flavourings such as some chopped chilli, garlic and ginger (or you could use onion, mushrooms or whatever ingredient or combination you fancy). To do this with finely chopped accompanying ingredients, you may need to start frying the tofu (not too high a heat or it will stick and burn, some sticking may happen anyway) for ten minutes or more first (five minutes each side) or your accompaniments will be crispy bits before the tofu is browned – but maybe you like your chilli, garlic and ginger like this. You can finish off with a bit of soya sauce or other flavourings before removing from your pan. Serve the tofu slices with the accompanying bits piled on top, and possibly a tomato sauce along with your other meal constituents.

**Marinated tofu**
A very easy oven tofu can be made by slicing your tofu into cubes and cooking them in a marinade. Some recipes make lots of marinade that the tofu sits in and you then remove the tofu and presumably throw out the rest of the marinade. This is unnecessarily wasteful. If your tofu has been drained then it will easily accept a coating of your marinade and there is no waste.

For somewhat less than a block of tofu, say 700g (the blocks I buy are 950g), I usually use perhaps 6-8 dessert spoons full of soya sauce, 1 – 2 heaped teaspoons of dry mustard powder, and a few cloves of garlic put through a garlic press. Mix the tofu in the marinade, spread out in a casserole dish so it is only one cube high, and cook in the oven for 30 – 35 minutes at gas mark 4-5, 180-190’ C. You can experiment with different marinades including curry or wasabi ones, according to your taste. The length of time in the oven, and the temperature, will obviously affect how crispy or firm the top of the tofu goes; this is a matter of personal taste, and needs experimentation.

**Battered tofu**
To make tofu go further (if cooking on a budget and/or for a number of people, or simply because you like it) you can cook it in a batter with other ingredients. You can make a chick pea/gram flour batter or a flour and egg batter. Simply fry the lot until cooked and don’t be too worried about trying to keep all the pieces separate – unless doing in very small batches this won’t be possible and is unnecessary. You can experiment with different flavourings for this and obviously it needs well flavoured and/or seasoned.

**Other uses of tofu**
You can add tofu to all sorts of other dishes, e.g. into sauces, into a ‘palak paneer’ instead of the paneer cheese (which will make it vegan), when I suppose it becomes a ‘palak tofu’, into risottos or vegetable crumbles, stews or stir fries, or pasta (see below). It is usually better to add it near the end, giving it just enough time to heat up; it doesn’t need further cooking and with vigorous stirring it may disintegrate.

Just cooking for two or three people I tend to get tofu as an ingredient for two meals in the week out of one block. If I am using sliced (rather than diced) tofu I would fry up all the slices and then take off the ones for keeping for another meal. For that day’s meal I then add whatever flavourings I am using to the pan. The remaining tofu, kept for a few days in the fridge, would typically go into a pasta dish to add some protein – in this case I would usually dice the tofu and heat it up by steaming and adding it to the pasta before serving, unless the pasta is being heated or cooked in the oven when it is added before going in. Ajvar/Ayvar (pronounced ‘Eye-var”), spicy Balkan pepper sauce – if you can find it - is an easy and tasty alternative to pesto for pasta.
which with tofu is a meal in itself, though I’d usually throw in a couple of other things as well.

‘Silken’ or soft tofu is for use in cooking, i.e. adding to mixes, and not eating ‘as is’. For other purposes generally the firmer the tofu the better. Tofu is one of those ingredients which is infinitely flexible but which initially can be infinitely baffling, as to what to do with it. But with a bit of experimentation it will soon be a regular part of your diet and nutrition, you will know immediately what you want to do with it, and not know what you did without it.

2. Pasta mastering

There are a million and one varieties of pasta and noodles, and a billion and one ways of serving them. If you are vegan when it comes to noodles you need to look out for ones that don’t have egg in the making. Most pasta, however, is vegan and you can get different specialist pastas without wheat or gluten, but you will probably pay a fair bit extra for the pleasure. So far as a wheat-based pasta is concerned I would however go for wholemeal pasta when you can; it is heavier but more nutritious.

One of the problems of eating pasta ‘out’ is that a restaurant or hotel tends to give you a huge plateful, enough to sit in your stomach uncomfortably until the middle of the next day. It is much better to treat it as one ingredient in a meal.

Stir fry with noodles

Our ‘Friday special’ (not every Friday, and not always on a Friday but so called because it can just about be cooked in half an hour and is therefore an ‘energy running low’ possibility for the end of the working week) is noodles with a stir fry and a simple dhal. I would usually serve the dhal poured over the noodles to keep them hot. Sometimes people think they need fancy ingredients for a stir fry; not so. My basics would be onions, carrots, cauliflower, chilli, garlic and then whatever else is in season, possibly broccoli or courgettes. If I want to add a bit ‘extra’ I might add some slightly chopped stoned olives, or some dried tomato that I have soaked in boiling water and drained and cut up a bit. If you don’t have a wok you can use a heavy pot but you need to cut the veg small in any case. If adding diced peppers or mushrooms I add these when the rest is nearly cooked as these don’t need long on the heat.

You can also use flavoured oils (sesame, chilli etc) for cooking the stir fry or as part of the oil you use. Obviously you can mix your veg with your noodles if you like before serving. So far as pasta is concerned many recipes stipulate the pasta should be ‘al dente’ (firm) but you should cook it how you like it. And if it is being cooked to go into a sauce and that is cooked further then it is going to get less firm.

For noodles you can add any flavouring you want, I would do them spicy-hotter for ourselves than if we have a young child eating, in which case they would be flavoured with bouillon, dried and/or fresh herbs (dried parsley and basil), and occasionally cheese at the end if need be to get the child to eat them.
Pasta sauces

In terms of pasta sauces, the sky is your limit. You can make your own pesto but I stopped doing it as it didn’t get any more rave reviews than bought pesto – and actually cost more to make unless I had a load of my own basil. But if you are a vegan or on a specialist diet you need to look at what is in a bottled pesto. I have already mentioned ajvar/ayvar (pronounced ‘eye-var’), Balkan spicy pepper sauce, as an alternative to bought pesto, and that should be vegan. Or make your own ayvar or alternative. I make a simple sauce for cooking what we call ‘Indian cauliflower’ which could be used as an ayvar substitute; see under ‘General vegetable dishes’. You can also use a split red lentil mixture, or an onion and tomato sauce.

Cauliflower/Macaroni cheese

If you use cheese you can make a ‘macaroni cheese’ or mix it with cauliflower to combine macaroni and cauliflower cheese; steam or sauté the cauli a bit but not so it is soft before combining with the cooked pasta in the sauce and finish it off in the oven for fifteen or twenty minutes. For a cheese sauce I would usually add mustard powder and/or chilli (red or green) to give it a bit of a lift if not a kick (the latter if you use a lot). Start with your roux (you won’t rue the day...oil and flour), and add your milk, stirring constantly as you heat it, and then add grated cheese and your flavourings. I haven’t done it but if you are vegan you could experiment with cauliflower in a well flavoured soya milk sauce with perhaps a dried yeast (Engevita) topping.

Lasagne

Lasagne is a dish we tend to do for visitors but we find it is now difficult to get wholemeal lasagne. Spelt flour lasagne we have found just too heavy on the stomach so we are reduced to white or pasta verde (green pasta usually including spinach). The brief recipe for what we do is as follows.

Take a couple of large onions and a small head of celery, all chopped, and sauté them in oil or butter and, when they are nearly done, add 200g of chopped mushrooms. Put in two 400g cans of tomatoes (or fresh equivalent) and some bay leaves to flavour and boil rapidly for quarter of an hour or so without covering to reduce the liquid. Take out the bay leaves - the structure of bay leaves can actually be dangerous if swallowed so count them in and count them out. Use black pepper or salt according to taste. Do as many layers as you like (well, two to three) of the vegetable mixture with lasagne on top in a large ovenproof dish. Cover the top layer of lasagne with a quarter litre or more of plain yoghurt to which you have added some grated cheddar cheese and maybe a little bit of cayenne or chilli and mustard powder, and sprinkle with rolled/jumbo oats.

A vegan alternative for the topping would be vegan yoghurt or a spiced vegan white sauce made with soya milk before putting on the rolled oats. Cook the lasagne in a moderate oven for three quarters of an hour or slightly more. A possibility to add some protein would be to add red/split lentils to the mixture and you could cook these separately before mixing in or add them when you add the tomatoes – but in either case stir it regularly and watch the liquid level because lentils going dry can burn your pot badly, you would probably need to add more water. Such a dhal type mixture could be great for spaghetti too. An alternative for protein is to serve the lasagne with roasted nuts or peanuts. Or else you can add finely diced tofu into the mixture.

Everyone likely has their favourite, or at least regular, pasta dish. Pasta can be considered a staple but with something like a carefully prepared lasagne it can be a fancy feature as well. And, if you get bored with pasta, well, give it a rest or try something radically or substantially different (e.g. if you usually use a tomato type sauce, instead try mushrooms or peppers or.....). There should be no shortage of pasta or noodle dish recipes online, in fact if you have problems finding them then you may be a bit of a noodle yourself and pasta it....
The ‘humble’ potato should be considered anything but that since it is nutritious and versatile. The pre-Famine Irish peasant diet of potatoes and buttermilk might have been boring but it was healthy enough and the danger lay in the (forced) over-reliance on a vulnerable product – when blight hit, the result was tragedy and disaster. In the modern era, Irish people now eat much less potatoes than even twenty of thirty years ago but they are part of tradition and a tradition it is well worth maintaining. In parts of east Africa, ‘our’ spuds (as opposed to sweet potatoes) are known as ‘Irish potatoes’. And some older people in Ireland can still think a dinner isn’t a proper meal without them.

Potatoes can go as an unnoticed part of a main meal or they can be the main feature or part of the main feature. They fit both roles well (though perhaps it is a shame for any part of a meal to go unnoticed), their versatility is quite amazing, we are so used to them that often they are given neither the attention nor time they deserve.

New or steamed
Starting at the fast and simple end, we have potatoes boiled or steamed (the latter is much preferable to boiled I think), and we cook them in a pressure cooker. New potatoes are simply superb by themselves, or possibly steam or pressure cook them with some mint leaves. If you are not having to feed a large group and therefore need all of your pot for that one meal, you can cook some extra which can be used within a few days for a potato salad or fried potatoes. New potatoes obviously just need washed and any bad bits removed but for several months, until you are getting main crop potatoes with heavy skins, I would scrape off any rougher skin and dirt and leave what skin I can (tastier and more nutritious). Depending on your inclination you can of course boil/steam potatoes in their jackets at any time of year and let the eater take the skin off if they wish.

Mashed is ‘champ’ion
Mashed potatoes are so ubiquitous that again they can be denied their rightful place. The normal Irish approach is to add some butter and a little bit of milk, with a bit of seasoning. This is close to champ of which there are many varieties and recipes, and many ‘champ’ions, and those who champ at the bit to get at it, ho ho. Champ has quite a bit of milk put in as well as the butter, and uses chopped chives or scallions (spring onions for those outside these shores) – in Darina Allen’s recipe you bring these to the boil in the milk and simmer for a few minutes before adding to the potatoes but I would usually just throw them in. You can also add pepper and...
salt though in the interests of a low sodium diet I personally don’t add any salt.

If you are vegan then olive oil is probably best but you can experiment with different oils and, while you could use soya milk instead of cow’s milk you could also experiment with onion stock. You can add fried onion, I like it almost caramelised, instead of the scallions or chives. Personally I like a fair dollop of wasabi powder (wasabi is a cousin to horseradish, also ‘Japanese horseradish’, but you could use horseradish sauce or even cooked fresh horseradish if you have it) but not all the family go for it so I only do it on occasions; if you aren’t used to using wasabi, taste as you add it so you don’t become a wasabist. Wasabi is available as dried powder or paste in a tube.

**Colcannon**

Colcannon is another well known traditional Irish mashed potato dish; it has cooked cabbage or kale mixed with the mashed potato (again with milk and butter). This is the basic recipe and while the cabbage might be steamed or boiled I usually sauté it (cook with a small amount of oil in a heavy pan and put on the lid, when necessary add a small amount of water so it doesn’t burn). Again you can add chives or scallions and I would use well cooked onion – you can sauté the onion and cabbage together. A simple and great traditional dish. For vegan colcannon again use olive oil and your choice of liquid (soya milk or vegetable stock).

**Curried potatoes**

A very tasty curried potato dish can be created by putting cooked, steamed potatoes which have been chopped to the size you want into a curry sauce and heating together a little. Don’t overcook the potatoes or they may go mushy and you want them to stay together. Your curry sauce can easily be vegan: Sauté onion and chilli, and possibly add chopped mushrooms near the end of cooking (you can add anything you like). Put in enough flour to make a roux (I use wholemeal flour) and then gradually add water, stirring to ensure a mix and heat gently, adding more water if you need to thin it more as it thickens. Add some vegetable bouillon or a stock cube (or use vegetable stock instead of water at the previous stage) and your curry flavourings.

Alternatively you can use lentils as the curry sauce base which adds protein (I vary it, and it also depends what else in the meal will have protein). You can just use curry powder but using freshly ground spices (e.g. cumin and coriander seeds) makes the taste much superior; I use a coffee grinder for grinding spices and seeds in general (e.g. linseed). Taste and add additional spices or flavourings as desired. Add in the diced potato and heat gently, and stir frequently, so the pot doesn’t get burnt. Eat.

**Roast**

When roasting potatoes I use sunflower oil but some swear by olive oil. Depending on time and your inclination you can parboil them (partly cook the spuds) before putting them in the oven. Experimentation, and enough time in the oven at the right temperature, are needed to get your desired degree of crispiness. Basting them periodically with the oil is part of the secret too. Or potatoes can be just part of a mix of roasted roots which can include onions. Roasting or frying up previously cooked potatoes you can use whatever flavouring you want to try – the list is endless including possibly herbs like rosemary or spices like curry or fenugreek.

Potato wedges are just roast potatoes cut into ‘wedge’ (triangular chip) shape. For spicy wedges experiment with Cajun or other spices, spreading the spices evenly once you have basted your wedges with oil.

**Baked**

Baked potatoes are great but need a decent sauce or butter when it comes to the eating. Finding spuds with reasonable skins is key to preparing them for baking; clean well and cut off any bad or discoloured bits. If you have a perfect spud you still need to cut off one or two small bits so there is no risk of your potato exploding in the oven. I do put on a wee bit of salt on baked potatoes before cooking but that is according to personal preference.
Potatoes need an hour and a half in an oven at gas mark 4 – 5, 180 – 200°.

**Potato salad**
For potato salad there can be many different dressings and combinations. I tend to use a mixture of mayonnaise and yoghurt but, as a vegan alternative, olive oil is also very good, you could use a vegan yoghurt or vegan mayonnaise. You can use chopped red onions, chives or scallions as a basic flavouring but I much like about half and half chopped chives or Welsh onions (like the stems of big scallions) and chopped parsley. You can add cooked or raw veg – e.g. cooked peas or corn, uncooked chopped pepper or fine raw celery. I wouldn’t add salt since it should be flavoursome enough without it (and if using mayo it has salt) though I would tend to add some black pepper. Depending on your potatoes and how well they hold together, you should cook them enough but not too well so as not to have mashed potato salad, where the potato goes all soft - but if that happens don’t worry, it is still tasty.

**Boxty / Rosti**
Irish boxty and Swiss rosti are closely related grated potato dishes or families of dishes. There are endless varieties of both it would seem and I am not an expert. Despite the words being a bit similar in their endings in English they are totally separate etymologically; boxty comes from ‘arán bocht tí’ or ‘poor house bread’. But don’t let that name put you off. And it looks like if you make one you’re also making the other, so you can ask people whether they would like boxty or rosti but only make the one! You can check out some recipes online or Darina Allen’s ‘Irish Traditional Cooking’ has a number.

Recipes for boxty vary according to whether you use the starch that comes out of the spuds on grating them, add flour, or eggs, or other ingredients, and whether you use parboiled potatoes, raw potatoes or a mixture of the cooked and raw. In my experience, using olive oil is probably easier than using butter as it seems to be absorbed less and therefore the boxty is less likely to burn. What follows is ‘my’ recipe; I use onions for extra flavour. Wash your spuds well, enough for 3 – 4 people, and leave the skins if you can (if they are not great just peel them). Grate the spuds into a colander and rinse off the starch, leaving to drain. Halve a couple of medium onions and slice into lengths. Put a generous amount of olive oil into a heavy frying pan, add half your grated potato, then spread out the onions, season with salt and pepper to taste, and then the rest of the grated potato. Press it down a bit; it will reduce in height a bit and ‘come together’ as it cooks. Cook using a low medium heat and check frequently it is not burning, and if need be add more oil or turn the heat down. Use a slice to check underneath periodically.

When, after 15 minutes or so the underside looks like it is done, turning golden brown, loosen the boxty if need be and place a large plate on top, turn over, put some more oil on the pan as necessary and slide the other side of the boxty onto the pan. Cook for another 15 or so minutes. You can keep it hot in the oven or also eat it cold – if it lasts that long without being eaten. You may need to slice it with a knife. It’s tasty stuff.

**Scalloped potatoes**
There are many ways of doing potatoes in the oven; baked, roast, or sliced in a gratin dish (‘scalloped’). While you can cook sliced potato along with garlic and cream, you can also just use milk, putting a layer of potatoes, a layer of sliced onion, and a top layer of potatoes, wet it with the milk and put some small pieces of butter on top and maybe some paprika. You probably only need to get the milk level up to about a third of the height of the potatoes in the dish – it will bubble up anyway. Cook at 4 - 5 on the gas scale or 180 – 200° electric for 90 minutes or more. Using cream instead of milk makes for a richer dish and you can also add garlic or other flavourings.

**Onion potato bake**
However the lacto-vegetarians shouldn’t have it all their own way. You can do a very good vegan potato bake; I have used an onion gravy (an onion cube thickened with cornflour), fairly liquid as opposed to thick as much of the moisture will evaporate in the oven anyway.
though I imagine you could use plain unthickened vegetable stock, homemade or bought. I have added some dried parsley for additional flavour but you could use any herbs or flavouring including garlic. I use a 25 x 18 x 4.5 cm dish to serve 3 people. I put my three layers (potato-sliced onion-potato) and pour on the onion gravy, again only to a third or half of the height of the potatoes. I then spoon on some olive oil to cover the top, just 4 dessertspoonfuls for this size dish. Either lacto-vegetarian or vegan this is going to take an hour and a half, maybe more, in the oven at gas 4 – 5, 180° plus; if you want it crispy turn the oven up, if it’s getting too dry or crispy cover it with tin foil. Great stuff. And if you don’t manage to eat it all, this kind of potato dish is also good cold.

**Potato bread**

Potato bread bought commercially is usually made with reconstituted potato. But for a little time and effort you can make the real thing for about a quarter of the cost. It’s quite easy, it just takes time and, once you mix the flour with your mash you need to cook the potato bread straight away because after half an hour or so it starts to go gloopy (a highly scientific term indicating that it becomes sticky and almost impossible to work with). Potato bread freezes really well so I cook a couple of kilos of spuds at one time to make into potato bread and get maybe 50 or so pieces.

Cook your potatoes to completely soft and mash immediately and well, trying to ensure there are no ‘unmashed’ bits. If you like you can add some butter, marg or oil when mashing to make it slightly richer but you don’t need to do this. I don’t add salt or anything else but you can add salt or pepper if you like. Leave the mash to cool completely. Weigh your mashed potato and add one quarter of the weight of the spuds in plain white flour (wholemeal flour discolours and this looks funny though is edible). Mix it completely; I initially use a knife, then a fork, then my hands.

Flour your table or rolling out space and take a fist size piece of the potato dough and roll it out into as much of a rectangular piece as you can – if you want rectangular or square pieces of potato bread; straighten the sides by pushing in the dough with the rolling pin you use. I would usually get around 8 slices from a fist sized piece of dough. When thin enough – maybe 4 – 5 mm, not too thin or it will fall apart, cut it up into the size of pieces you want and cook it dry (no oil needed) on a low-to-moderate heat on a heavy pan or skillet (I use two pans at the same time to speed up the process) until speckled golden brown and firm; you need to lift it carefully, perhaps with a knife if it is sticking to your surface, when putting it on to cook, and shift it regularly with a slice so it doesn’t stick. Put the cooked slices on a baking tray to cool. You may need to clean up your pan periodically so there aren’t burnt bits and burnt flour on it when starting the next batch; I just wipe it with kitchen roll.

Your potato bread can then be kept in the fridge for up to a week or frozen for future use – as mentioned above, it freezes well. Potato bread can be toasted, grilled or fried and is very handy for a quick meal and usually goes down well. Talking of potato and flour mixtures, you can also do a flour-and-mashed-potato base for a pizza see below under ‘General vegetable dishes’.

**And you have had your chips**

Potatoes – you are spoiled for choice in how to cook them.

And I haven’t even mentioned chips; many swear by the ‘cook twice’ method, I don’t bother if the oil is hot enough and you don’t try to cook too many at once – better do two lots than one big one where the temperature of the oil doesn’t get hot enough. But for safety’s sake keep an eye on them or any chip pan which has heat under it (electric ones will be thermostatically controlled).
The veggie crumble

This is one of the handiest dishes in the veggie repertoire, the vegetable crumble. While blending vegetables together is good, so is tasting individual veg – onions, carrots, cabbage, whatever. I would tend to do a ‘blend’ for a stir fry or for a vegetable crumble (that blend should vary if you do the dish regularly) which makes a good main dish though, depending on what you are putting in the topping, may not have the protein for a balanced meal. That can be provided by nuts or seeds in the crumble topping, by tofu or beans in the mixed veg, or by a separate helping of nuts, seeds or dhal.

Firstly, the topping for a savoury crumble is endlessly versatile. I usually use a blend of wholemeal flour, jumbo oats and wheat germ. To this I would add seeds such as sunflower seeds or ground linseed which is great nutritionally. Ground linseed tends to be relatively expensive to buy but brown whole linseeds are pretty cheap; ‘golden’ linseeds have no more nutritional value than brown. I grind them finely in a coffee grinder (which I also use for grinding spices) because they need grinding if you are to get as much nutritional value as you can out of them. I would usually add some curry powder and/or individual spices, possibly some herbs, to the mix before adding oil and mixing by hand to make it ‘breadcrumb like’. For lacto-vegetarians you can add dried cheese to the dry mix, and/or grated cheese at the end. I would usually make the topping while the veg is cooking.

I use mainly ‘in season’ veg for the crumble; the basics could include onion, carrot, parsnip, and cauliflower but you can add any other veg you like (I would include broccoli and courgettes in season) with peppers, mushrooms (these last two added towards the end because they don’t need cooked so much). I usually also use chilli and garlic but sometimes one without the other but you can use other flavourings like horseradish. Making it diverse in terms of colour adds to the aesthetic appeal. I cut up the veg fairly small and sauté it in a heavy pot, for some of the time with the lid on, watching the heat and stirring regularly. You can also add things at the end like chopped, stoned olives, some chopped, reconstituted dried tomatoes, cooked butter beans, or cooked barley.

You don’t want to overcook the veg – it will do more in the oven - so 10 – 12 minutes is probably enough. Now, you need a sauce to go with the vegetables and this can be done by making a savoury white sauce which can be flavoured with herbs (e.g. parsley, fresh or dried) and black pepper, possibly salt or soya sauce. You can make it using a roux (oil and flour, I use wholemeal) and adding milk or soya milk, stirring constantly as you heat it to thicken. Or you can add cornflour, mixed in water, to your milk of whatever kind, again stirring constantly as you heat it. You could also use a tomato based sauce or whatever you fancy; if using passata for a tomato sauce you can thicken it a bit in a pot under a low heat. If you are stuck for time or ingredients you can also use a tin of condensed soup for the sauce. Whatever you use, it will thin quite a bit with the juices of the veg so your sauce can be quite thick to begin with.
Mix your sauce with your veg, and put on the topping and cook in the oven until the top browns a bit, usually 20 – 25 minutes at gas mark 4 or 180°. If I am not doing it for a crowd, I would often make enough for two crumbles, and undercook the one that I am going to keep in the fridge to heat up and go with something else later in the week.

As indicated above, depending what is in your crumble (e.g. if there is no tofu or beans and not much in the way of seeds or nuts in the topping) you need to provide a good balance in the rest of the meal. But that is easy done. You can roast nuts or sunflower seeds separately, or use a dhal for protein. You can serve it with potatoes, nuts and other vegetables or a salad. Depending on your portion control the vegetable crumble can be the main item on the plate.

There are so many possibilities for combinations in this dish that it need rarely be the same as the last time – unless of course you want it to be so and can remember what you did previously!

‘Indian cauliflower’
To make the sauce for this you sauté onions (say 3 - 4 medium) and chopped chilli according to taste (use a small amount of oil in your heavy pot and cover them), and, when the onions are nearly done add one and a half or two good sized chopped red peppers (if you don’t want to go for red you could use yellow peppers). Cook this for another five minutes or so. Then liquidise the mixture (I use a hand blender) but you only need to add a very small amount of water or it will go very soupy. I add some bouillon, some curry powder, and some paprika (which also gives it a darker red colour) and a bit of soya sauce, you can use whatever flavourings take your fancy.

I usually cook cauliflower florets in this sauce but it could equally do as a pasta sauce in which case it just needs heated up. If cooking cauliflower in this sauce, watch the heat initially in particular so it does not burn, and you need to stir it periodically; the moisture that comes out of the cauli will, as it cooks, dilute the sauce somewhat and you can adjust the thickness as it goes along by leaving the lid off (to thicken it) or on (to keep it the same or more moist). The cauli may need half an hour cooking.

Potato base pizza
A very good potato base pizza can be made using flour (self raising or add baking powder) with marg or oil and moistened with mashed potato. For a large round flan dish of 30 cm I would use 400g of self raising flour for a thick pasty, less if you want it thinner. Mix in your marg or oil, perhaps 75g marg, and then take 400g of cold mashed potato (the same weight as flour but much less volume). For this you should have mashed the potato very well, ideally so there are no little unmashed bits, but don’t worry if there are – you can just take bigger bits out or leave smaller ones in and they are not noticeable when cooked.

When you have your flour in your mixing bowl I usually colour and flavour it before adding the marg or oil. For 400g flour I would add a couple of dessert spoons full of paprika and one or two teaspoons of curry powder or other spices. Mix your marg or oil well; vegan margarines are now available in many supermarkets as well as specialist food shops. I then add in the mashed potato and initially cut it up small with a knife, then mash it in with a fork, before kneading it in with the flour to give a uniform pliable dough. As mentioned above, if there are obvious bits of unmashed potato you can remove them if they are bigger, leave them in if smaller.

I don’t usually roll out this dough but spread it out on the well oiled flan dish and press it into shape to uniformly cover the base and sides. When this is almost done I usually go around the vertical sides with a fork to make it neat. I would then cover the base with a small tin (140g) of tomato puree but you could skip that if you don’t go for it.

The filling for your pizza is very versatile according to your taste. Two possibilities include mixed veg or mushrooms. I tend to sauté some onion with garlic and chilli, later adding some diced peppers and mushrooms and just cooking it briefly when the latter are added. If moisture has come out from pre-cooking these before adding to the pizza, use a slotted spoon or drain the veg so you don’t add excess moisture to the pizza. You
can have the vegetable mix as thick or as thin on the pizza base as you like; I tend to go for thick.

If you are lacto-vegetarian you should then add grated cheese on top – you can use mozzarella or cheddar, or a mixture. If you want a vegan pizza I would suggest used sliced nuts (e.g. almonds) or dried yeast extract (e.g. Engevita) for your topping; it should take about half an hour in a moderate oven (Gas Mark 4 or 180° or slightly more). If you do more than you need for the meal, you can keep the rest in the fridge for use within a few days.

**Vegetable stews**

I tend not to make vegetable stews which don’t have beans or pulses in them, for reasons of protein. But you can make any mixture of vegetable stew you like, and use other grains, particularly barley but even cooked whole wheat, according to taste. I would sauté my veg, adding things which need less cooking later, before adding other ingredients, e.g. cooked barley, some water and/or tomatoes (a tin if you have it handy and no spare tomatoes) and flavourings. Let it simmer gently for ten minutes before serving to let the flavour and ingredients gel together, and check the taste before serving. These can be as ‘hot’ as you like with chilli or curry ingredients, or ‘cool’ with none.

**Stuffed peppers or tomatoes**

These are very easy, it is mainly a matter of deciding what should go in your mixture as you want something tasty and nutritious. I would usually do two half peppers per person (different coloured peppers for presentation purposes); cut them in half and take out any seeds, then parboil them – I steam them – for five or ten minutes so they have started to soften, not so they actually turn soft because they will cook more in the oven.

Meanwhile cook up your mixture. I would tend to use onion, garlic, chilli and diced mushrooms which are fried or sautéed. When this is nearly cooked I mix it with cooked brown rice or quinoa; you could use cous cous but cous cous is just wheat flour so there is going to be more nutritional value in the rice or quinoa. You can use a mixture of these or other grains, e.g. cooked barley – equally you can use other veg, e.g. diced carrot, in the veg you sauté. Adjust your seasoning, you can add bouillon powder, curry, or herbs to taste.

Put your parboiled half peppers in an ovenproof dish and fill them with the mixture, I usually surround them with the mixture as well so the peppers actually disappear and only reappear on serving. If you are using cheese – e.g. cheddar or mozzarella – grate it over the mixture. Alternatively if you want a vegan result you can use a dried yeast (Englevita) or ground nuts. Then place in the oven at 180°/Gas Mark 4 for 20 or 25 minutes.

If stuffing tomatoes then you need large, ‘beef’ tomatoes, one per person. Slice the top off diagonally and use a serrated knife to loosen the inner part and then remove with a spoon. You are trying to keep the outer walls of the tomato intact and this is more fiddly than stuffing peppers which are largely hollow to begin with. Tomatoes I tend not to fill around with the stuffing mixture but oil the outside lightly – you can do what you like. I put the top back on and don’t use cheese or anything else, and cook in the oven for 25 minutes. There are all sorts of other stuffings you could use – even a breadcrumb, onion and herb stuffing – but I tend to think in terms of the nutritional value of brown rice or quinoa. Do keep the innards of the tomato for soup or a soupy salad.

**Palak paneer**

Palak paneer (spinach with cheese) is easily available in various recipes online but I find it is one generally acceptable Indian dish. For vegans the paneer cheese can easily be substituted with fried cubes of tofu; it is a bit softer than paneer but very acceptable. I have, for a family occasion, started by picking the spinach (well, leaf beet) from the garden before preparing it, and made the paneer myself...but it took a long time. You can use fresh or frozen spinach. And, if you do want to make paneer yourself rather than buying it, or if it is not available locally, all you need is dairy milk and lemon juice; there are instructions online but initially you may not always get it right.
Making paneer you need the juice of half a lemon for 2 litres of milk, and in my book this would make enough paneer for three or so people in a palak paneer. Cheese which is made with an acid – in this case lemon juice – stays solid when heated whereas cheese made with a rennet goes soft and melts. Basically you heat the milk slowly and, as it starts to boil up, gradually stir in the lemon juice to separate the curds and whey, keeping the heat on, and when fully separated you put it through cloths or muslin in a big sieve or colander, and it will set fairly fast. But check out more precise instructions online.

For the spinach part of the dish you can change it according to taste, and recipes vary considerably in ingredients and relative quantities. For four people I would take about 750g of spinach or leaf beet, chop it roughly, and cook it in a little oil or water in a heavy pot with the lid on until it is soft. Set aside to cool a bit and then liquidise it – no extra moisture needed.

The spicy part of the dish comes from frying onion, chilli and spices. Some recipes use tomato, and while the lacto-vegetarian version would include dairy cream added at the end this can easily be omitted for vegans. Heat a couple of teaspoons of cumin seeds in your pot covered with a thin layer of oil, and then one or two onions, finely chopped, and a couple of cloves of chopped garlic, 1 cm or more of finely grated ginger, and one or two chopped green chillies according to size and your taste. Cook gently and stir as needed until soft. If adding finely chopped tomato, do it at this stage and cook a bit more. Then add 2 teaspoons of ground coriander and up to a teaspoon of garam masala. Some recipes use bay leaves, turmeric, paprika, asafoetida etc; experiment! Add salt to taste.

Mix your fried onion and spices with the pureed spinach and heat gently, add in your paneer or tofu and leave it in just long enough to be heated through. But you need to heat and stir it gently at this stage – the pot may burn and vigorous stirring may reduce your paneer or tofu to mush. I would probably add one or two tablespoons of lemon juice at this stage and, if using, you can add a small amount of cream, say 50 ml, before serving with brown rice, naan, or what you will.

5. It's nuts

Well, actually nuts and seeds – and in the case of peanuts, a peculiar kind of bean. Barring those who have allergies (about which some recent research indicated there may be the possibility of a cure for some), this area of food is brilliant for nutrition and as simple or as complicated as you like to use. Roasting nuts or toasting seeds is so so simple to do, and very easy to whip up (so to speak – no whipping involved) to add to a meal which needs some contrast or protein.

**Toasted seeds**

You can toast any seeds on a heavy pan and perhaps add soya sauce at the end where it dries almost immediately onto the surface of the seeds, giving them a salty flavour. I use sunflower seeds, usually doing more than we would use in the meal to have as a snack or to add to a salad (a great addition just before serving). Put your seeds on a heavy pan and cook over a moderate heat, stirring frequently to ensure they don't burn. If you are busy doing other parts of the meal I would often turn the heat down quite low so I need to pay less attention to them, although obviously this takes longer for them to cook. When most are golden brown, turn off the heat, tilt the pan so they slide into one corner (though I suppose round pans don't have corners...) and pour over some soya sauce. Stir. The soya sauce will dry on the surface of the seeds almost immediately and the amount you use depends partly on how salty you want them to me.

I use sunflower seeds about once a week in this way, a great and tasty addition to a variety of meals. They are best fresh, whether hot or cold, but will keep acceptably in an airtight container for a week or more (they probably won't go off after that but won’t be as...
Roasted nuts

Nuts can be quite expensive these days so you can use peanuts if you like (which are strictly speaking a bean rather than a nut, and grow in the ground, hence the alternative name for them as ‘ground nuts’). I tend to use a mixture of cashews and peanuts, the cashews bought in either half kilo or kilo bags in my local Asian supermarket (in small quantities in shops and supermarkets the cost of cashews or other nuts can be prohibitive).

Simply place the nuts on your roasting receptacle (I usually use a casserole lid but you could use a roasting tin or ovenproof plate), pour on a very small amount of oil - a couple of teaspoons is ample for enough nuts for two or three people, mix by hand so all the nuts are covered, and add any salt or pepper you wish. Then cook in a moderate oven for about twenty minutes or so. Do keep an eye on them, particularly until you are used to doing it in that particular oven, because it is very disappointing to be sorting through burnt nuts for ones that are edible. If they look like they are doing too much then turn down the oven immediately or remove them altogether (and if necessary heat them up a bit again).

Sesame fried cabbage

I use sesame seeds in toppings, sometimes in salads, and in sesame fried cabbage. For the last you need cabbage for as many are eating, remembering that it does reduce a bit in cooking. Savoy cabbage is good. I place the chopped cabbage in a heavy pot with some sesame oil (you could use another nut oil) or a mixture of sesame oil and sunflower oil, or your usual cooking oil, or add the nut oil towards the end. Keep the pot closed on a moderate to low heat and stir frequently; add a small amount of hot water after five minutes or so, and also stir fairly frequently during the half hour or so of cooking. Add more hot water as needed if it is getting dry or looking like it might burn. Meanwhile put your sesame seeds, as many as you fancy, on a heavy pan over a low-to-moderate heat, stirring quite often, for ten minutes or so, this develops the flavour of the seeds. You stir in the sesame seeds and mix with the cabbage before serving, and add more sesame oil if you like. This is a very simple way to turn cabbage into a meal for kings (metaphorically speaking).

Satay sauce

You can use peanuts or peanut butter to make a great satay or other sauce. Again there are numerous recipes online for satay and you can experiment until you get one that you like and works well in getting it together. I would use a small amount of onion and chilli fried up well, I don’t use the enormous amount of sugar some recipes advise but just a little, adding it at the end of cooking the onion and stirring it in well. You can also use garlic, crushed, and curry but depending on how much chilli you use you may not want to use the curry. Add a few tablespoonfuls of peanut butter to this and then, gradually and stirring well, a can of coconut milk. Some recipes also use cider or other vinegar, or lemon juice, and you can add salt or soya sauce according to taste. Don’t expect a thick sauce but it does thicken a bit as it cools, but it may have been consumed before it gets a chance to go cold....
The nut roast
Of course nuts and seeds can also be at the top of the feeding chain (to deliberately change the sense of that term) since a nut roast is often the vegetarian equivalent of the Christmas turkey, or for other special occasions. There are hundreds of recipes for nut roasts and many online. I would suggest trying a few different ones until you get one you really like. To give your nut roast an extra lift you can also use a stuffing mixture in the middle – this can be lovely, the only comment I would make is to make plenty of stuffing or it can be lost and you are left wondering what you did the extra work for.

Finally, you can cover the nut roast in pastry (‘en croute’) either of your own making or, say, a bought puff pastry. Covering your nut roast in pastry can be done before the nut roast itself is cooked or, if you err on the underdone side and the nut roast is a moist one, you can have it cooked in advance and then wrap it in the pastry so it is just the pastry needs to cook, and the nut roast to heat up. The latter option is the one to go for if you want to be prepared in advance because doing a nut roast, particularly if you’re not doing it frequently, it is time-consuming, and not the thing to be doing if you have guests around who need your attention. Your nut roast may need a good onion or tomato gravy or sauce to complement it.

As nuts can be very expensive, and sunflower seeds are less expensive and also often superior nutritionally in food value (protein, B group vitamins and potassium) don’t be afraid to substitute ground sunflower seeds for nuts when you can, and to judge the result for what you do the next time.

We use different recipes for making a nut loaf and what follows is a rough guide to some possibilities. Take a couple of large onions and chop them finely and cook in a generous amount of oil or butter; if you like you can add finely chopped carrot or other veg at the same time as the onion. Take 250 g of nuts and grind them very finely (until they are tending to stick together a bit) – you can use cashews, brazils or whatever nuts you like, and some sunflower seeds as mentioned above.

Separately make breadcrumbs of 150g of bread. Mix together your onion (and other veg if using), breadcrumbs, the ground up nuts, a couple of crushed cloves of garlic (or more according to your taste), 200 ml of vegetable stock or bouillon, and whatever flavourings you fancy – salt, pepper, lemon juice, spices, e.g. grated nutmeg. Line an oiled baking tin with greaseproof paper and put in half the mixture if you are adding stuffing, or all if you are not, and bake in a moderate oven for 30 – 40 minutes (not too long if you will subsequently be adding pastry). Some recipes use egg to help bind the loaf together but for most they should not be necessary and vegans aren’t going to be using them anyway.

Stuffing, if you are using it, can vary greatly according to taste but can include a raw grated onion, 150g of breadcrumbs, lots of parsley, a fair dose of thyme, finely chopped sage if you like it or marjoram, maybe some lemon juice or grated lemon, salt and pepper according to taste, and some oil or melted butter to mix it all together. This gets pressed down in the middle of the nut loaf before adding the top half and cooking.

When taking the nut loaf out, put a plate on top before inverting to get the loaf out, and peel off the greaseproof paper. You can serve immediately or subsequently wrap in pastry for however long that takes to cook, also heating the nut loaf again if it has cooled, the pastry could typically take 25 minutes in a moderate oven. All not only delicious but also nut-ritious I can assure you.

Onion gravy
An onion gravy can be made to accompany it with finely grated onion fried until well done with onion stock added, and cornflour to thicken. Or you can use a tomato gravy; see a couple of items below.

Sunflower burgers
I used to bulk build these when part of a parent-run youth group on residential trips where we were self-catering but I hadn’t made them for years, somehow they had fallen off my regular repertoire. But I started to make them again recently. They are tasty, handy to make, and if I don’t give exact quantities it’s because you can vary amounts according to what you have
The basic ingredients are sunflowers, bread and onions (around about a third each by weight) but you need a food processor of some kind to grind the sunflower seeds, make breadcrumbs, and puree the onions to mush (tears may be in order at some point in the mixing process). I would use 4 slices of wholemeal sliced bread, about 200g; one mug-and-a-bit of sunflower seeds, about 250g; and three medium or two large onions, 250g or a bit more if you like the burgers very oniony. Don’t worry if the amounts are not exact, so long as there is enough moisture in the mashed onions to bind them together they will work – and you can add more onion to the mix if you need it. This amount will give you enough to feed 4 people with two medium burgers each.

You can use nuts instead of sunflower seeds, or a mixture of sunflower seeds and nuts but sunflower seeds, bought unprocessed and particularly in wholefood stores, can be a lot cheaper than any nuts. You could use well mashed potato instead of bread and in this case I would probably fry up the onions a bit first. For additional flavouring you can add some curry powder or wasabi (horseradish), herbs of different varieties (e.g. fresh or dried parsley, basil, thyme, sage etc) according to taste, some garlic or maybe some green or red chilli if you want to spice them up. Pepper and salt according to taste but no salt if you are using soya sauce at the end (see later).

Grind your sunflowers (or nuts) until they are fine and starting to ‘stick’ a bit to the sides (the oil coming out a bit). Put them in a large bowl and add the breadcrumbs. Blend your onions with any herbs (if fresh) or chilli etc until it is mush – you depend on the liquid from this to bind everything together so they need well chopped to smithereens – and add to the sunflowers and breadcrumb. Mix well, perhaps first using a knife. They reduce a lot in size when pressed and shaped into small, thick (maybe 2 cm high or a bit more, and maybe 6-7 cm wide) burgers using your hands, pressing the mixture together well.

Heat a heavy frying pan generously covered with oil and cook the burgers on a moderate heat until medium brown, possibly 15 minutes to let the onion cook somewhat. Add more oil to the pan if you think it needs it. Don’t put too many burgers on the pan at one time so you can use a cooking slice to lift them cleanly and check how they are doing. Turn them a few times, and they should be done when well brown on both sides. Before taking them off you can, if you want added salt, sprinkle on some soya sauce which will evaporate rapidly. Keep them warm until ready to serve with a sauce of some kind, a tomato or parsley sauce (as below) would be good. But you can also eat them cold as a picnic dish.

If served hot the burgers can all be accompanied with mashed potatoes or parsnip or a variety of other vegetables. And there you have a dish fit for an ordinary citizen or a good burgher.

**Tomato sauce, parsley sauce**

An easy tomato sauce can be made by heating mustard seeds (the bottom of the pan half covered) and then adding a chopped large onion, sautéing that, then adding passata (or tinned chopped tomatoes, even finely chopped fresh ones if you have lots and they are ripe) and whatever flavourings you like. If you don’t have whole mustard seeds you can use mustard powder to be added after the onion has been cooked.

Parsley sauce is just a savoury white sauce (whatever condiments you want added) with lots of chopped parsley – I would suggest you leave it heating a minute to two to cook the parsley a bit but that’s up to you (you can use soya milk for the white sauce, rather than cow’s milk, if you want to keep it vegan). Parsley sauce is not as common as it once was but a great little sauce to have in your repertoire. This can all be served with mashed potatoes or parsnip or a variety of other vegetables.
Pasta, spaghetti, noodles

Pasta, spaghetti or noodles can be very fast but it’s what you do along with them is crucial. I used to make my own pesto but the audience (family) reaction was no different to buying it so I save the time, and indeed money, in making my own and buy it. But then I try to add different things to it – diced fried tofu, olives (stoned, i.e. stones removed), dried tomatoes (reconstituted), frozen peas (heated), fried onion, tinned corn, diced paneer, whatever. You can make a herb or cheese sauce quite quickly. Or a speedy dhal, as covered in the beans and pulses chapter – split peas that have been soaked take only a few minutes in a pressure cooker. Even cheesy noodles have their place (grated cheese in cooked noodles).

Naan bread pizza

You can make ‘instant’ pizzas with naan bread. I would tend to sauté the onions and other ingredients (pepper, mushrooms) apart from tomatoes which I would only add before you grill the naan. Tomato puree optional on the base. If you use cheese you grate that on, if vegan you could use a yeast extract (wet or dry) for added flavour and nutrition.

Salads

Salads, particularly in the summer, can be a main course. Again you’re going to have to think what to put in them to make it interesting beyond your rocket or lettuce or whatever base you are using. Plenty of herbs and different mixtures work well, and a variety of oils and vinegars or Ume plum seasoning (this is quite salty but handy in that it doesn’t make salad greens wilt like vinegar). You may like to have a variety of vinegars in your cupboard, experimentation to your taste is needed; I would certainly recommend a good cider vinegar, a balsamic vinegar, and perhaps a sherry vinegar or a wine vinegar. Look out in your specialist food shops as well as the supermarket.

You can also add toasted sunflower seeds, sesame seeds, or croutons (small pieces of fried bread, I flavour them with curry and a very small amount of salt) for crunch, and diced fried tofu or feta cheese for protein. Of course you should vary the ‘salad ingredients’ themselves for variety, and according to people’s taste.

Vegan mayonnaise can be bought or made yourself. The recipe I have is blending a tablespoon of soya milk (4 teaspoons), 1 teaspoon of mustard, 1 tablespoon of vinegar, 1 tablespoon of lemon; mix these together well and, while blending in a food mixer, gradually pour in 200 ml of sunflower oil. To me this tastes a bit vinegary so I add a teaspoon of wasabi to the mix but you can experiment to get a result you like.
A great sauce for a salad, not fast but it can be done beforehand, is to dry fry an aubergine on a heavy pan until it is cooked inside – you do it whole (trying not to pierce the skin) and it may take 20 minutes or just over on a low heat, you have to keep turning it so it is done right through. You could also cook it under the grill, flame it, or do it in the oven. It should be sufficiently soft that the flesh comes away from the skin very easily; the centimetre or two near the stalk may not be done enough to use but don’t worry about that. You then liquidise the insides, let it cool and add a bit of black pepper and some mayonnaise or olive oil, just a little, and stir together well. If making it vegan with olive oil only I would add three dessert spoons of olive oil and one spoon of soya sauce (or you could use a bit of salt or other flavourings). You could do a nutritious green salad and a potato salad (again with leftover potatoes) and you’ve a meal.

Planning with leftovers
The secret to a speedy nutritious meal can be in what you have ‘leftover’ in the fridge. ‘Leftover’ should be a misnomer because you can plan, for example, to cook twice as much rice as you need for a meal so that you have cooked rice to steam or turn into a risotto in a couple of days time. I use brown basmati – brown because it’s much more nutritious than white, and basmati because I find it holds itself together better than other rice if you add too much water (in a pressure cooker) or over-cook it. A risotto can have anything in it, I would even add diced banana if my family would let me (they don’t), or raisins/sultanas. But I would always start with onions or leeks. Leftover potato diced into small pieces can be good. But if I’m doing a bean dish or vegetable crumble I would usually do twice as much as I need for one meal and either freeze the rest or keep it in the fridge for a few days – but use it with a different combination of other foods the second time.

Eggs
A million and one things can be done with eggs, if you eat them. You can put a poached or fried egg on your instant naan pizza. You can hard-boil them and throw them in a curry sauce, or, and this is old fashioned, dice cold hard-boiled eggs in a salad. Scrambled egg with some interesting herbs in it can be delicious. Quiches and flans, with a pastry base and vegetables in egg-and-whatever, can be fast if you are speedy at making pastry; if you’re keeping some to eat cold or reheat, try not to over-cook it or it may go very dry, or do a separate one that you take out of the oven early.

A handy little number that we would do sometimes is what was known in my family as ‘Hungarian omelette’, I am not sure why, perhaps because the ingredients can be similar to a Hungarian omelette but it is not an omelette! It is a moist mix of onion, tomato and egg. Take 2-3 good size onions and chop them fairly small, sauté in some oil and then add either a tin of tomatoes or the equivalent in chopped fresh tomatoes. When this is well mixed, add any flavourings you want and then 2, 3, or 4 beaten eggs (according to how firm you want it0. You keep stirring until the egg is cooked. You can serve this, spooning it out (it is not set in one piece like an omelette...), with potatoes, rice, anything – and if you let it cool, or have any left, it makes a good spread for bread.

Souperism
It may not always be soup weather but a good thick soup made with leftovers, and some nice bread, can also be a meal in itself. When does a stew turn into a soup? There may not be too much distinction. If you have leftover dhal then you have the base of a great soup; sauté onions and whatever veg you want (or use leftover veg and any vegetable cooking water you have saved during the week), add the leftover dhal and herbs and flavourings, and liquidise or not according to your taste. Some croutons, chopped chives, yoghurt or cream can help to make a soup special.

So, some days a meal may take an hour or more to prepare, on others it should be doable in half an hour, as with most of the suggestions above. But as with all cooking just consider the nutritional balance so you are getting the protein and other things you need......and if you’re a veggie of any kind and you’re not getting enough vegetables then there has to be something wrong!
In talking about herbs and spices we come to one of the hearts of the matter. The availability of a varied herb and spice supply is an important part of any cooking but especially so for vegetarian cookery. Variety is the spice of life and spice is one of the great varieties of life.

**Spices**
Many spices can be bought in larger quantities in bags, or even small quantities in bags, rather than in the small supermarket tubes of spice which tend to be expensive. Look out in Asian, other ‘ethnic’, or wholefood stores for bagged spices and herbs. I would even buy some spices which I use very regularly in 400g bags but it is false economy to buy loads of a herb or spice which you use rarely – it is likely going to go off or lose flavour before you are a quarter way through. There is a judgement call to be made about how much you are likely to use.

Having bought spices and herbs in bags I put some into an appropriate sized jar for our spice drawer, and the rest get stored together in an airtight container out of the way (on top of a cupboard, to be brought down when the supply gets low). You do need to use labels for your self-filled jars – you may think when you put it in “I’ll remember that is chilli”, but mistaking your chilli or cayenne for paprika is not a mistake you want to make, and you may forget what lesser used herbs or spices are.

I use two generic curry powders (‘Mild’ and ‘Hot’, though more specialist blends are available) as well as ground cumin, coriander etc. However there is a big difference in using freshly ground spices and where a recipe advises grinding whole spices I would certainly try to go with that. I would have whole spices such as cumin, coriander, black peppercorn, mustard seeds, cardamom, cloves, in our spice drawer. I use a coffee grinder for grinding spices and sometimes nuts – small coffee grinders can be bought relatively inexpensively but if using it to grind spices then wipe it out thoroughly before grinding coffee in it the next time unless you want spicy coffee! Though cardamom seeds might make it Turkish coffee....

**Vegetable stock**
It is not a spice but vegetable cubes or bouillon are a very handy product in the kitchen. But beware; even ‘low salt’ bouillon may be up to 10% salt, so use sparingly and if using then you are unlikely to need other added salt. It is to be recommended that you also save your own vegetable water for use in soups, stews etc; leave in the pot to cool, or pour into a container to cool before keeping in the fridge for under a week, and you can add in other vegetable water. I usually use this in soups which tend to get made at the weekend, and anything left from the previous week I tend to throw out after the weekend or you end up with lots of containers of leftover vegetable water which will never be used or go off.

**Herbs**
Dried herbs are great but fresh herbs can be grown by anyone, almost anywhere – and save you a packet. The extent to which this is possible depends on your personal circumstances. This can vary from shop bought basil or parsley which is grown on a window sill...
through to a whole herb garden. Even with just window boxes or a few tubs you can grow a worthwhile amount of herbs; what you grow will depend on your own personal space and choice.

I grow basil indoors because slugs like it as much as I do and trying to protect it outdoors is a waste of time, I find – you may discover differently. I use tofu containers, one inside the other, the inner one with holes on the bottom for drainage. Fresh herbs I would grow include basil, parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme, tarragon, lovage, mint, chives (an early and a later variety), garlic chives, and Welsh onions (used like chives, the stems are more like scallions). Even if you only have window boxes or tubs you could also experiment with growing radishes or rocket. Basil, as mentioned, I grow indoors, and my thyme, lovage, parsley, tarragon and mint, and some chives, are also either all or partly in tubs or window boxes which, despite their name, don’t have to be placed on window sills, mine are on the ground. Mint spreads very easily (close to the surface) so growing it encompassed in some way is probably a good idea anyway.

Experimentation is the name of the game as to what works for you as well, of course, as to what herbs you particularly like. If using potting compost, or even ordinary soil, you are going to need to feed it, and non-oil based fertilisers are available if you search for them, e.g. from the Organic Centre at Rossinver in Leitrim http://www.theorganiccentre.ie. In the outdoors there is no substitute for your own made compost but you don’t want to be using that indoors unless you want worms and insects indoors too – at least this applies in the house if not necessarily in a greenhouse.

8. A balanced diet

‘Finding your balance’ is a difficult act when you don’t know how or where to find it. Finding your balance in terms of diet is an essential part of healthy eating but we will look briefly at it. And yet, if you ate out in cafes and restaurants all the time and are a vegetarian you would (apart from getting very bored) not be properly nourished. I’m not sure who restaurant cooks and managers in this part of the world imagine vegetarians are but a whopping great plate of pasta (likely to sit in your stomach until the next day) is not really what I would call a balanced meal - it is far too stodgy and may not give you vitamins and minerals from vegetables, and it probably has very little protein.

I am not a nutritionist so if you do have very particular needs in terms of a diet then you may need to seek special advice (and there are books which give very detailed run downs on the nutritional constitution of different foods). But seeking out and using different food groups is pretty reliable advice, not very difficult to do, and designing a meal yourself which should cover different bases is not too hard either. I try to get most protein from beans and pulses but also use seeds and nuts, dairy products, and eggs for protein. A meal lacking in protein or crunch? Add some nuts or seeds. A meal lacking in fresh veg? Add a quick salad. Sunflower seeds can be toasted in 15 minutes easily, nuts be nicely roasted in an oven in twenty minutes.
So what would I consider balanced meals? Here are a few examples:

1. **Indian cauliflower**, brown basmati rice, mushy peas, toasted sunflower seeds or roasted nuts.

   What I call ‘Indian cauliflower’ is cauliflower florets cooked in an onion, sweet pepper and chilli sauce. See above under ‘General vegetable dishes’.

   Basmati rice I like for the taste but even more so because I cook it in a pressure cooker (13 - 14 minutes at pressure) and it adapts very well to varying amounts of water (I don’t measure precisely); I usually do extra to have rice as the basis of a filling for stuffed peppers or for risotto. For mushy peas I tend to use split peas, soaked, in the pressure cooker at pressure for 4 minutes or so, flavoured with Cajun space, curry and some bouillon. Roasted nuts I tend to mix cashews and peanuts, rub all over with a very small amount of oil and sprinkle with a small amount of salt; watch them carefully because if the oven is too high you’ll have burnt nuts which isn’t great.

2. **Aduki casserole**, (leftover) pasta salad, onion potato bake, fried mushrooms.

   Soak your aduki/small red beans and pressure cook for about 17 – 18 minutes. Fry up onion, chilli, garlic if you like, and towards the end some green peppers chopped and some cooking apple (cored and skinned, cut into small pieces). Mix the beans and veg together, add some water and any desired flavourings; boil up gently for 5 minutes or so to let everything blend together. Leftover pasta with ajvar, pesto or tomato sauce can easily be turned into a salad by adding some chopped scallions, chopped tomato or pepper, olives etc. Onion potato bake (see above in the potato section) needs to be in the oven the best part of an hour and a half before eating, or pre-cook and reheat. Mushrooms as you like them cooked.

3. **Bhajis**, fried potato with fenugreek, steamed cauliflower with flaked almonds or grated cheese, sweet and sour sauce.

   Bhajis – see above under Beans and Pulses, made with gram flour, are nutritious but with other ingredients like onion, mushroom and peas they are almost a meal in themselves. If you have leftover potatoes, on purpose or by accident, fry them up in sunflower oil but try something different as a flavouring such as ground fenugreek. Using almonds instead of cheese on your cauli makes this meal vegan; you could use another veg instead, e.g. carrots with chopped parsley added at the end with a little butter or olive oil. An easy sweet and sour sauce can be made by combining tomato ketchup, vinegar, a small amount of soya sauce, some water, and thickening with cornflour (stirring well) and a small of sugar, if you like, to taste—the recipe is in the Beans and Pulses section.

4. **Vegetable crumble**, butter beans with garlic and wasabi, mixed salad, horseradish yoghurt sauce.

   I have recommended ground linseed in the crumble top along with whatever flavourings you fancy; see above under General vegetable dishes. Butter beans should be soaked and cooked in a pressure cooker for 12 – 18 minutes (I find butter beans vary more than most others in how much cooking they need – but cook too much and they can easily turn to mush); fry them up in olive oil or butter (or both) with a generous amount of wasabi and pressed garlic. You can make a milder horseradish sauce by simply stirring some bought horseradish sauce into yoghurt. This is horseradish with your horseradish (wasabi) but I find it works well. I find the secret to avoiding boring salads is to vary the ingredients and the dressings; a wonderful salad can be simply diced lettuce with sliced scallions in your favourite dressing with a topping of curried croutons (fried bread made with small pieces of bread). If you want salad to last a while without wilting, try olive oil with ume plum seasoning instead of vinegar but don’t add any salt – the ume plum seasoning is itself very salty (that’s what preserves it).

The first time doing any recipe can take a fair while but when used to doing it then you can get timing down to a fine art, and know what to start when in terms of the different parts of the meal. Cooking at home you have only yourself to thank (or blame) for the
food choice.

The very occasional restaurant menu points out that starters can be served as main courses; as many starters are vegetarian this is an easy way to increase the veggie choice which more restaurants could easily do. If they don’t state this you can simply ask them to turn a starter into a main. And if that gut wrenching big bowl of pasta really is the only veggie thing on the menu, ask them (for the same price) to serve less pasta and give you some veg.

It’s not difficult to have a balanced veggie diet – at home. It just requires some thought and a bit of preparation at times. But trying to have a balanced veggie diet outside the home is a waste of time, at least in Ireland at the moment; hopefully that will change with time when professional cooks and restaurant managers realise veggies and vegans would like proper nutrition and not just what is easy for the cook to prepare.

9. Special occasions

And so, as we get to the last section, we come to ‘special occasions’ when we want to do something extra special, a particularly nice meal or dish.

If you are catering for immediate family or indeed for close friends, then ‘something special’ may be simply some dishes you know everyone enjoys, and doing two or three courses; it does not have to be a labour of love for hours over a hot stove. Of course you can do that if you wish – what I am saying is that there is no need if what people really enjoy is simpler, and the special element can be doing a few different things for the meal that you know everyone will like. And that may allow you to socialise and enjoy the occasion too.

The second and third piece of general advice is, if you are trying to cook for a special occasion and are doing intricate dishes which you are not familiar with, a) try cooking them for a ‘normal’ meal first so you get a feel for doing it, and the ingredients, and are not dependent on using a recipe for the first time – this can be hair-raising if you are cooking an important meal in your social calendar, and b) leave loads of time, if you are not familiar with a recipe then do not depend on the supposed preparation time but if you have done a), cooked it before, you’ll have a better idea of the time you require. And, where possible an additional piece of advice would be c) prepare whatever you can well in advance, you don’t want to be panicking as guests arrive. You want to be able to enjoy the occasion too – though that is easier said than done when you are the host.

For starters

For starters you can do a soup, salad, bruschetta or grilled polenta which can be fairly well organised in advance. If you are doing a salad as a starter it needs to be different but it can still be simple – e.g. lettuce or rocket with lots of chives/scallions/Welsh onions chopped, in a well thought out olive oil dressing (with a good vinegar or ume plum seasoning) and croutons – very simple but tasty.
If you make polenta (with special polenta corn flour) you can coat slices in olive oil, grill them until browning (this takes a while, maybe ten minutes each side) and top with several little mounds of finely chopped green chilli (just a little!), chutney or pickle, hummus or whatever. You could do the same kind of toppings with potato bread although potato bread won’t take as long under the grill as polenta, perhaps five minutes each side. If you want the potato bread to go crisper you can oil it before putting it under the grill. Decoratively the polenta or potato bread can be cut into triangles. Soups can be made special by the addition of dairy cream or nut cream (see under desserts) and some chopped chives or croutons; we tend to do curried parsnip or carrot and coriander soup if we want a soup for special occasions.

**Finding main course recipes**

I am not going to give you ‘special occasion’ main courses but recommend a master chef’s works. Some of the dishes I have included here in this publication - the nut loaf for example, the palak paneer, stuffed peppers or tomatoes, the lasagne - are suitable as part of a meal for special occasions – and you can look out for veggie recipes in many newspapers and magazines as well as online. But you may like to invest in one or more of Denis Cotter’s books, he of Cafe Paradiso in Cork, generally acknowledged to be the finest veggie restaurant in Ireland. We use his books all the time for special occasions. Some of the recipes are very time consuming, so beware and take note of the caveat above about trying the recipe beforehand and leaving plenty of time.

Denis Cotter’s first and most basic (relatively speaking!) book is “The Cafe Paradiso Cookbook”, and this is probably the one to start with. However others include “Paradiso seasons”, “For the love of food” and “Wild garlic, gooseberries....and me”. There’s more info on the books, and the cafe itself on the website [http://www.cafeparadiso.ie](http://www.cafeparadiso.ie) - and this also includes some recipes. If you don’t want to fork out €25 or more for these books then try your local library or ask friends. Unless you are a real cookaholic you are never going to get around to doing all the recipes in any of the books anyway, but you could try some and find a few to add to your repertoire.

If you fancy doing something more traditionally Irish, Darina Allen’s “Irish Traditional Cooking” is certainly not vegetarian – a good whack of it is devoted to various meats and fish - but it contains enough veggie recipes, or ones that can be adapted, to be worth perusal. But, if there is some dish you think you might want to cook you can simply do a word search online and you are likely to find it – you can be ‘spoilt for choice’ and the problem can be choosing between different recipes when you have not yet tried a particular one and know what it’s like.

**Desserts**

Desserts tend to be very sugary confections but you can maximise the fruit content and minimise the added sugar, or add concentrated apple juice or date syrup as a sweetener. Here are a few regulars that we would make, nearly all of which can be done as vegan desserts - and all of which are pretty easy to do.

**Apple and date dessert**

Stew several peeled, chopped cooking apples along with chopped dates, adding a fair bit of water but not covering the fruit with water as the fruit will go soft and sink down as it cooks. For 4 good sized cooking apples I might use 250g of dates; you need to chop the dates and check as you go for any stones. Bring to the boil and simmer with the lid on, stirring if any of the dates are above the mix, this could take 15 minutes. When the apple is nearly done, the dates should have gone mushy and you can use a potato masher (or something else such as a large fork) to mix it all together, it will have turned a uniform mid-brown colour from the dates. Taste for sweetness – it doesn’t need to be too sweet. Let the mixture cool.

When serving, simply put some of the apple and date into a dessert dish, put some yoghurt (dairy or vegan) or yoghurt and cream on top of this, and finish off with a sprinkling of granola on top (this is likely to contain added sugar unless you buy a specialist product or make your own) or chopped nuts. Obviously the yoghurt can be dairy or vegan. Lacto-
Vegetarians can mix whipped dairy cream with the yoghurt, about half and half, for a richer result.

**Vegan nut cream**
You can make an excellent vegan nut cream, which you can use as an alternative to the yoghurt, using finely ground cashews (grind them until they start to stick together) with soya or other milk; I would suggest grinding the cashews very finely first and then adding the milk gradually to your desired thickness. I would suggest using 100 ml of soya milk with 100 g of cashews, and letting it stand for a while; this makes it very thick (while an emulsion rather than a solution, probably something like whipped dairy cream) and you can then add more milk if you want to make it thinner, or, if using it as a topping by itself it may be the right consistency. You could also experiment in adding this to yoghurt, and add your choice of flavourings to that or to the nut cream if you wish (such as natural vanilla flavouring).

**Banana and fig crumble**
Another dessert bursting with fruit sweetness, I usually add some lemon juice to it since it is such a sweet combination. Take 250g of figs and cut them up, removing any stalks. Either soak them for a while and then stew, or stew them straight away with enough water that they go soft and you are left with cooked figs and just a small amount of syrup. Then take four or more good sized and reasonably ripe bananas (you can vary the fig/banana ratio in an elastic fashion), mash them roughly – I used the side of a knife and then a fork and mix them together. Then mix the cooked figs and mashed banana together, and I usually stir in a couple of tablespoons of lemon juice.

For the topping, you can use whatever you like. I would tend to use wholemeal flour, wheat germ, jumbo oats, and enough sunflower oil, mixing well with your fingers, to make the flour ‘breadcrumb’ texture. Before you add your oil however you may want to add flavourings – possibilities include amchur (dried ground mango) or cinnamon (In general I would suggest in general you use Sri Lankan cinnamon and not cassia, for health reasons). Once the oil is mixed in I would add some sesame or sunflower seeds and mix well. Put your crumble mix on top of the fig and banana mix in an oven-proof bowl and cook until starting to brown, maybe twenty to twenty-five minutes in an oven at 180°/Gas Mark 4. Delicious. You can accompany this with yoghurt, ice cream or the nut cream above.

**Fruit fools**
As a lacto-vegetarian I make easy fruit fools with stewed gooseberries, or half mashed blackberries or blackcurrants (brilliant taste for those who like blackcurrants, they are not to everyone’s taste), often from the freezer. Mix half yoghurt and half whipped cream with the fruit and adjust the sweetness level with concentrated apple juice, or sugar if you use it. That’s it. You want enough of the fruit well ‘mashed’ to mix with the yoghurt, but some pieces of fruit to stand out as a contrast. Vegans can do the same with vegan yoghurt and could try adding some nut cream. You can top the fool with chopped nuts (e.g. almonds), meringue (containing both eggs and sugar....), or broken biscuits.

**Fruit salads**
Of course fruit salads or stewed fruit (e.g. pears) are also a great dessert at any time. Depending on what fruits you use, it may be sweet enough but you can make an easy syrup just adding a little concentrated apple juice which will mix with any fruit juice already there, or mix orange juice and concentrated apple juice, or orange juice and a little honey if you are not vegan. You can use a similar syrup with melon (as starter or dessert) where the melon is not as ripe and juicy as you would like.

If you have soft fruit in the freezer then it will form its own syrup on thawing but it is likely to need to be sweetened as above. Ripe strawberries do however form a sweeter syrup and while mushy strawberries which have been frozen are just that—mushy—you may want to consider them as a way of arriving at a fruit syrup.
I didn’t set out to write a booklet about vegetarian and vegan cuisine, it just developed when I started to write about it in my column in Nonviolent News.....http://www.innatenonviolence.org/billyking/index.shtml

George Ohsawa, the macrobiotic guru, when asked the secret of the universe said “Chew your rice slowly”.

I certainly don’t live up to this tenet and don’t feel it is the secret of the universe although it contains a deep truth. I do however think it is hugely important that food is wholesome, ethical and enjoyed.

Ireland is threatened with an obesity epidemic, and with becoming the fattest nation in Europe – highly ironic for a country where a million people starved to death, or died from diseases related to starvation, less than two hundred years ago. You can certainly be an overweight vegetarian or even vegan but a carefully planned veggie or vegan diet can certainly help to cut the weight (though major policy changes and governmental initiatives are needed to tackle the issues involved – and indeed to deal with issues of food security in an uncertain world).

Aside from the reasons enumerated in the preface, a careful vegetarian diet can also be better value—financially and nutritionally—than a meat based one.

Bon appétit.....Enjoy your meal.....Nuair is gann é an bia is fial é a roinnt (When the food is scarce it’s generous to share ).....

- Billy King
Vegetarian and Vegan cuisine

A word cloud based on the frequency words are used in this pamphlet