

Navigating the Restaurant World

The good news is that nowadays many restaurants and cafes offer plant-based and vegan options!

Here are some general recommendations and tips for eating out:

Look for any specific vegan or plant based options on the menu and start there (even though many foods are vegan and plant based by nature!)

Whenever possible ADD! Bulk up your pasta marinara, pizza, burrito, taco, or stir fry with any veggies/beans/grains/pasta you see in other dishes on the menu. Ask for extra lettuce, tomato, onions and pickles on your sandwich and steamed vegetables added to your stir fry and Asian noodle dishes.

Look at the plant-based ingredients in other dishes and sides (if they serve beans, ask to add beans to your dish or salad; baby spinach or broccoli? Request they toss some in your soup, pasta, etc.).

Choose several side dishes as your meal, hold the dairy! For example; baked potatoes or hash browns, rice or other grains like farro or quinoa (plain is best), veggies, corn, and side salads, and don't forget olives, pickles and condiments as flavor enhancers. You'd be surprised at the wonderful dishes the chef in the kitchen will compose for you (and everyone at your table will be envious of your colorful plate!).

Ask for your sauce and/or dressing on the side and then use less, and if there's no preferable option, ask for balsamic vinegar, lemon, lime (which all restaurants have in their kitchens!).

Hold the cheese, mayo and butter! Sub avocado (think sandwiches, toast, tacos, burritos).

Request no oil or easy on the oil (especially at Asian cafes which tend to use a fair amount of oil in things like stir fries).

Choose raw, grilled (little to no oil), or steamed vegetables over fried and stir fried whenever possible.

If they offer them, have your potatoes and yams baked over fried (hold the fixins).

When possible, actively participate in the restaurant choice (i.e. Asian, Mexican, and health food restaurants).

Do not be afraid to ask for a change in the menu – you may be surprised at what a restaurant is willing to do to help you if you ask (i.e. little or no oil, dry toasts/bread, steamed instead of fried, etc).

Do not be afraid to ask for clarification of ingredients and keep in mind hidden ingredients such as buttering of rice and breads, chicken broth and oil in soups, dairy in bread, pork/lard in beans, oil in tomato sauces/salsas, refined flours in a lot of whole grain products, egg products in pastas and Asian dishes.

If there are no options available, tell the waiter you are a vegan and ask if there are any meal options they would recommend or if you can speak with the chef (easier to do when the restaurant is not busy during off hours).

When invited to someone's house, offer to bring a dish or two (and make sure you are seated by these dishes).

MOST IMPORTANTLY, know that sometimes all you can do is your best. In these situations, the meals may not be "perfect" (you should almost always be able to avoid meat and dairy but you may sometimes get meals that have more oil/fat than you want). Progress, not perfection!

Some Examples of Easy Custom Ordering:

Breakfast at a diner-style cafe or hotel buffet: fruit bowl, oatmeal (if not cooked in milk), whole wheat or whole grain toast with a side of avocado, veggie omelet hold the eggs and cheese, easy oil or water saute (no kidding - this is how you get a plate of vegetables for breakfast - ask for them to add breakfast potatoes!).

Cafe or Bagel shop: wheat or whole grain bagel with hummus (and sliced tomato, lettuce, onion if desired) and avocado.

Sandwich shop: sourdough, whole wheat, whole grain or rye with avocado, lettuce, tomato, onion, pickles and balsamic vinegar (add hummus, baby spinach, sprouts, olives - get creative!).

Salad bar: any/all fresh veggies, pickled items, olives, beans, sprouts, nuts and seeds for garnish (sometimes they will have hummus or guacamole, quinoa or rice), a whole wheat or sourdough roll.

The easiest venues for eating out may be your local health food restaurants/stores, Mexican restaurants, Asian restaurants, and Sandwich shops.

Some Restaurant Examples:

Health Food Restaurants/Stores:

For those of you wishing to eat less processed and more whole foods lower in fat, sodium and sugar, when possible (as in stir-fried meals or pastas) ask for little or no oil or substitution sauces such as vegetable broth, black bean sauce, tamari, garlic sauce, diced tomatoes, etc.

Choose the burger made from whole beans, grains and vegetables over the processed ones. Having said that, if you see a popular vegan burger on the menu (like Beyond Meat or Impossible) opt for that because it is a much better choice than a beef or turkey burger and not something you eat every day (just as you wouldn't eat a beef burger every day!).

Mexican Restaurants:

What to avoid: greasy corn chips, refried beans (prepared with either vegetable oil, lard, or pig fat), rice cooked in chicken broth, and most flour tortillas (contain oil).
What to order: soft corn tortillas (to dip into sauces instead of corn chips), salsa, whole beans (usually pinto or black beans), grilled vegetables (on a dry griddle with little or no oil brushed on top), roasted corn, pico de gallo and guacamole.

What you can bring with you: non-fat tortilla chips from home - see our recipe for baked corn chips that are super easy to batch cook and throw in a zip lock to bring with you!

Common Menu Options you can choose from:

Bean Burrito – With whole beans, lettuce, tomatoes, salsa, and guacamole. Add grilled vegetables if they can make them as above and rice if it is not cooked with chicken broth. **MAKE SURE** to specify **NO** cheese and **NO** sour cream and **NO** crema.

Soft taco – soft corn tortilla, whole beans, lettuce, tomato, & salsa and whatever vegetables they offer.

Sample Options:

Chipotle or Freebird's burrito: vegan bowl or a burrito with brown rice, whole beans, vegan sofritos (usually tofu or vegan chorizo), corn salsa, fresh tomato salsa, fajita veggies, romaine lettuce, guacamole or avocado and tomatillo red or green chili salsa.

Fast Food Restaurants: La Salsa, Baja Fresh, Chipotle, and Qdoba. These venues offer whole pinto and black beans, lettuce, tomatoes, and a variety of salsas. Even Taco Bell is possible! (fresca burrito with whole beans, no meat or cheese, add guacamole, tomatoes, lettuce and onions).

*tip - adding a little avocado or guacamole to a burrito or taco adds a creaminess to help you replace cheese and sour cream

Asian Restaurants

*there are always vegetarian options at Asian restaurants. So start there and then modify!

What to avoid: Chai tea (contains cows milk), Coconut Milk (high in saturated fat), Vietnamese coffee and tea (contain sweetened condensed milk), fried/tempura vegetables and dumplings (get steamed not fried) or Egg rolls

What to order: Request your food be cooked with little or no oil. Your server can check with the kitchen to find out which dishes are best to make oil-free. You can also see if they can substitute vegetable broth, water, or an oil free sauce instead of oil. If not, ask for a bowl of steamed vegetables on the side and toss with your dish to dilute.

Sample Options:

Appetizers:

Spring Rolls (also known as summer rolls or fresh veggie rolls), not the fried ones. Usually made with a rice paper wrap, fresh vegetables, sprouts, herbs, and sometimes tofu and/or avocado. These are usually served with either a sweet and sour sauce or peanut sauce.

Lettuce Leaf Wraps – With lettuce, mint, peanuts, onions, chopped lime, and/or tofu. You roll your own leaf and top it with a sweet and sour sauce.

Grilled Tofu Satay served with a peanut dipping sauce

Vegetable soups: Clear Vegetable Soup, Miso Soup, Tofu vegetable soup, Vegetable Pho (ask for veggie broth). Salads: Most vegetable salads are ok, ask for the dressing on the side or use a squeeze of lemon or lime juice and/or soy sauce on your salad instead.

Sides: plain noodles, Rice (preferably brown), steamed vegetables and greens

Entrees:

Vegetarian Pad Thai – With rice noodles, tofu, scallions, and bean sprouts (a great dish to toss in a side of steamed veggies!).

Mixed sauteed vegetables (can add tempeh or tofu) with garlic, ginger, thai basil, soy sauce and vegetable dishes like sautéed eggplant with scallions, basil leaves, and a bean sauce (again with as little to no oil as possible)

Vegetable sushi rolls; cucumber, pickled vegetables, avocado, inari (marinated tofu skin), natto (fermented soy beans), marinated shitake mushrooms, pickled plum with shiso leaf. Try your best to avoid the fried (tempura) rolls. Most Japanese restaurants have traditional vegetable sushi rolls like cucumber, pickles, and avocado and will also customize rolls for you.

Spinach gomaе (sesame sauce), Ohitashi spinach (hold the bonito/fish flakes), salad, steamed edamame, cold buckwheat noodles with ponzu or other traditional sauce, Udon soup (request vegetable broth, steamed not fried tofu, extra veggies).

*tips: add hoisin or sriracha sauce!

** order a side of steamed veggies and greens to bulk up your noodle and other dishes!

*** request tofu that is steamed and not fried, if possible

Italian restaurants

What to Avoid: meat, fish and dairy (parmesan is often used as a garnish, ask for no cheese), fresh/handmade pasta (contains eggs)

What to order:

Order dried pasta (spaghetti, penne or rigatoni or whatever shape they have that is dried not fresh) with marinara and add mushrooms, eggplant, zucchini, broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, olives or Alla Checca (a fresh tomato, garlic and basil sauce) - whatever they've got!

If they offer chickpeas, kidney or white beans in other dishes, have them add to your pasta or salad, hold-the-cheese. If they offer contorni (like a beet, fennel and citrus salad) add that to your green salad and you won't even need dressing!

Sides! spinach with garlic, broccolini or broccoli rabe, cauliflower, etc. or grilled vegetables - ask which can be steamed or prepared with little oil

Contorni - like a beet with orange and fennel salad, or roasted red peppers, roasted tomatoes, mixed olives with herbs (these are cold appetizers containing some type of salad or pickled or roasted vegetables).

Pizza with marinara or fresh chopped tomatoes and vegetables (the works like onion, bell pepper, mushrooms, spinach, and olives, artichoke hearts or roasted peppers, chopped eggplant (not fried) and don't forget to hold the cheese! Ask them to finish it with fresh arugula or basil.

Dry pasta with mixed vegetables and herbs and a side of lemon to squeeze (usually called Primavera).

If you want to indulge in the bread basket, avoid the butter or oil and ask for avocado, roasted peppers or tomatoes, or fresh checca (even better if they offer an Italian bean dip) instead.

Sandwich Shops

What to Avoid: cheese, aioli, mayonnaise, butter and oily dressing. On Wraps – avoid cheeses, crema or dairy sauces.

What to order:

Bread: whole grain, dark rye, and sourdough varieties are your healthier choice

Veggies – wide variety remember roasted vegetables can be higher in fat because they are often brushed with olive oil

Dressings: choose mustard or a low-fat/non-fat salad dressing or straight up balsamic or red wine vinegar

Wraps - Many offer Portobello, or veggie wraps (usually with cheese so make sure to ask for "no cheese"), and hummus. Choose pita bread or whole wheat/whole grain tortillas.

*same avocado tip! Makes a great replacement for butter, mayonnaise and cheese on sandwiches.

Steak Houses: (Yes, you can eat a very satisfying meal at a Steak joint!)

What to Avoid: steak! and all animal products, dairy and cheese

What to order:

Salad, side of fresh lemon and/or balsamic vinegar

Baked potato, dry, side of mustard (or ketchup, Barbecue or steak sauce. A1 is vegan and oil-free!)

Side of steamed or water sauteed vegetables (or easy oil). Add a little bit of salt and pepper and/or a squeeze of lemon.

Bread (if it is dairy and egg-free)

Look at the sides! Often the chef can compose a plate with several of these items including vegetables (asparagus, brussel sprouts, spinach, broccoli, etc. ask for no dairy, steamed or cooked with little or no oil), potatoes, and corn on the cob.

*tip: these restaurants are often heavy with the butter on their sides, so be sure to request no butter.

Fast Food:

Here are a few more examples of commonly frequented venues when you have limited options:

Burger King: Whopper without the meat/cheese/mayo but with the sesame seed buns, ripe tomatoes, crisp lettuce, crunchy pickles, and onions (if you like, add mustard/ketchup), and a side garden salad (*they now serve Impossible Burgers which are vegan but highly processed, however make an acceptable transitional option on occasion).

Taco Bell: Ask for anything you order Fresco Style and "no meat, no cheese, no sour cream." Bean burrito (ask for whole black beans instead of refried beans), crunch wrap without the fried tortilla in the center, no cheese or sour cream (you will end up with a toasted wrap containing whole beans, guac and salad), soft tacos with black beans, lettuce tomato, guacamole (on corn tortillas if possible), Power bowl (the rice has oil but is vegan, ask for no ranch, no cheese or sour cream).

Panda Express: Bowl with brown rice, super greens, and eggplant tofu.

Pizza Hut - crust with tomato sauce and any/all the vegetables they've got.

Denny's : oatmeal, dry toast, hash brown dry, salad (with NO eggs or cheese and the dressing on the side), baked potato dry

Remember, that although this might seem challenging at first, it is not impossible. You can find something at almost every restaurant. The goal is to do your best and find those foods compatible with where you want to be on the continuum. Often, cooking at home is the best way to make a delicious dish, but you will be surprised what you can get at restaurants (these days, most chefs are familiar with vegan, plant-based, and oil-free).

*Also, when you find restaurants that cater to your needs, remember them, frequent them whenever possible, and let us know about them so we can allow others to enjoy too!