



PREDATORS VS. GRAZERS

THE WAR FOR THE DINNER TABLE SARAH ROSE

There will be no vegetarianism allowed at my post-breakup breakfast.

“Not in my house!” bellows my high-school friend Marc from the kitchen.

Hungover, I eat biscuit sandwiches with pork sausage, eggs, cheese, and avocado, and am in total heaven. Mornings—and mourning—in meat-eater land can be comforting and gratifying—feelings that a vegetarian diet fails to evoke.

There is a modern-day war afoot between carnivores and herbivores. The vegetarians are gaining ground, smugly. At every dinner party, a gracious host must account for some guest’s increasingly finicky eating choices. No good can come of such considerations, protest the steak lovers; it is nothing but appeasement. All-veg entrees are the Sudetenland.

The medical community takes the nearly unanimous position that a vegetable-based diet is the healthiest way to eat and that eating low on the food chain is good for one’s arteries, one’s bones, and the planet. Still, many protest that a diet just isn’t pleasurable without a little moo in it.

After dating a vegetarian for nearly five years, I joined the surly ranks of the anti-plant cause and came to the following conclusions:

- Vegetarian food is soulless and unsatisfying.
- Vegetarians eat nothing but side dishes.

■ It would take a lifetime of chopping and sautéing to wring from plants half the flavor one can get from a single animal.

While embracing and celebrating my choice to eat meat, I have begun to wonder if predators and vegetarians are wholly incompatible. Maybe there is some middle ground I never explored, a place where vegetable-based entrées are sufficient. Without hope of ever winning the boy back, I began a quest for the vegetarian meal that would please a meat lover.

Peter Berley is the James Beard Award-winning author of *The Modern Vegetarian Kitchen* and *Fresh Food Fast* (both from Regan Books). Berley teaches a class in vegetarian celebrations—no irony intended—at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York City. In Berley’s class we make seasonal dishes: cauliflower soup, golden lasagna, lemon poppyseed rolls, pumpkin hazelnut turnovers with spicy tomato dip, maple ice cream, and a pear-cranberry crisp. Everything is delicious, in no small part because Berley is a genius. With his taste buds and skill for divining recipes, he could make Sheetrock taste scrumptious.

But lasagna? That was one of my favorite fictions while dating Vegetable Boy. I could load up a casserole with enough starch and cheese to make anyone, regardless of their dietary persuasion, feel full. Lasagna is a meat dish without the meat. And it is by no means healthy.

To Berley, lasagna is the perfect way to assuage a meat-fancier's prejudice.

"Start with the form," says Berley. "A single object on a plate."

American meals are based on "The Roast," Berley says. The perceived divide between meat-focused meals and vegetarian meals comes from a Midwestern dining culture. Our culinary forefathers had wide-open spaces, short growing seasons, and northern European roots. If our food culture had been founded on warmer norms, by people from crowded places with many micro-climates such as the Mediterranean, Mexico, or Asia, we would have a more diverse palate and would be accustomed to eating several small dishes.

We are so used to meals that orbit a single object with two sides, a starch and a veg, that we are inclined to feel that vegetarian food lacks a main course. Berley suggests working within our schematic biases, using them as a tool—a taco, a wrap, a slice of lasagna.

There is a strong argument for vegetarianism, of course. Factory farming and slaughtering are extraordinarily cruel. Cattle are costly to ecosystems: they require a lot of water; and bringing meat to market from distant pastures consumes fossil fuels.

"The issue isn't vegetarianism," says Berley. "It's eating in a sustainable way."

In most cities, it is now possible to buy locally grown, humanely raised meat that has a lower environmental impact than conventionally grown vegetables and grains.

"People are very childish about food," Berley says.

I tell him I have secretly come to suspect that vegetarianism is a socially acceptable eating disorder.

"It's really a fear of death," he says. To Berley, vegetarian fanaticism is part of the American fetishization of youth. The nuclear family, which doesn't have grandparents in the house, doesn't see death and old age on a day-to-day basis, he explains. "People think 'If we can avoid the subject of death, if we just don't kill anything, we can glide through life without causing suffering and go to heaven.'"

Berley seems to understand, as I did not for five years, that it is on the symbolic level where vegetarians and meat-lovers part ways. Maybe my relationship was doomed from the start; sometimes a celery stick is not a celery stick. ■

a vegetarian entree (almost) anyone could love

SESAME NOODLES WITH TOFU STEAKS AND BABY ASIAN GREENS



Reprinted from *Fresh Food Fast* by Peter Berley (Regan Books, 2004)

- 1½ pounds firm or extra-firm tofu, cut into 12 equal slices
- 7 tablespoons soy sauce
- 3 tablespoons mirin (Japanese rice wine)
- 3 tablespoons honey
- 1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
- 2 tablespoons neutral oil such as grapeseed, canola, or sunflower
- ¾ pound udon or soba noodles
- 2 tablespoons sesame seeds (toasted)
- 2 tablespoons sesame oil
- 1 pound baby bok choy, rinsed well but not trimmed
- 1 cup kimchi
- 1 scallion

Fill a large pot three-quarters full with water and place over high heat. Bring to a boil and keep the water at a boil while you prepare the tofu.

Lay the tofu slices on one half of a clean cloth towel. Fold the other half over the tofu and gently press down to extract any excess moisture.

Place 6 tablespoons of the soy sauce, the mirin, the honey and the red pepper flakes in a small bowl and whisk to combine.

Warm a large nonstick skillet over high heat and add the neutral oil. Let it heat for 30 seconds. Add the tofu and fry until golden brown on the bottom, about 3 minutes. Flip the pieces over, pour on the soy mixture, and cook until the sauce has reduced and thickened, another 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, add the noodles to the boiling water and cook according to the package instructions. Drain the noodles and transfer them to a large bowl. Add the sesame seeds, sesame oil, and remaining soy sauce, tossing the pasta to blend well.

Return the pot to high heat and add the bok choy and 1 cup of water. Cover the pot and steam the bok choy until it is crisp-tender and bright green, about 2 minutes. Serve the noodles topped with greens and tofu, sprinkled with scallions. Accompany with kimchi.