BRIDE'S GUIDE

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VEGAN FOOD EVEN A MEAT EATER WILL LOVE

Vegan couples don't need to compromise when planning delicious food for their non-vegan guests

By JILL JARACZ | CTW FEATURES

Food is one of the most important aspects of the wedding celebration. But for vegan couples — with non-vegan guests — preparing a menu devoid of the standards like steak and chicken and cheesy pasta can prove tricky.

Luckily, today's vegan menus aren't just plates of vegetables or faux-meat dishes masquerading as carnivore cuisine. They're composed dishes that folks of any food lifestyle can enjoy.

"A lot of dishes try to mask that they're vegan," says Alexa Lemley, operations manager and chef at Lemleys' Catering in Columbus, Ind. "If you're vegan, be out and proud."

Classic Approach, Vegan Twist

In creating a vegan menu, some caterers choose not to make vegan versions of meaty favorites because people can tell the difference. Lemley's company caters to both meat eaters and non-meat eaters, and works with vegan customers to create an experience for all palates.

One of Lemleys' most popular vegan options is an heirloom tomato to bar and carving station. Chefs carve the tomatoes to order, and guests can add oil and balsamic vinegar to them. Lemley usually offers fresh mozzarella. "It's good to have a non-vegan option for non-vegans. They can throw it in there and do their own little Caprese."

Lemley also offers a whole grilled vegetable carving station where a chef grills up zucchini, squash and portabella mushrooms, carves them, and guests can choose various sauces and condiments.

"[Vegans are] not second-class food citizens, but we treat them the same way we treat meat people," says Lemley. "We let the ingredients stand out on their own."

Creative Comfort Food

At the Green Light Café, a vegan and vegetarian catering company in Asheville, N.C., chefs work to create vegan dishes that are at the comfort-food level. Co-owner Shannon Blair says they can make a nut roast that tastes similar to meat loaf, barbecue soy chunks that are like spare ribs, and a cauliflower gratin with cashew alfredo that's like a cheesy potato casserole. For those that are comfortable with vegan options, Blair can make dishes like quinoa tabuleh.

"For non-vegans we try to create a menu that's something they've had before and something they can [recognize]," says Blair, mentioning that her walnut crusted eggplant Parmesan resembles a beefy marinara over eggplant.

"We want to create food so that guests have warm, fuzzy thoughts for the bride and groom and are not thinking about how weird the food is," says Blair.

"You get to do some fun food," says Lemley, noting that in creating vegan dishes, she can explore global options such as Indian and Middle Eastern flavors that people aren't normally willing to do.

"Rock it out animal-free," she says. "It can be done."

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Dessert Without Restrictions

How to put out a sweet spread that fits all your guests' dietary needs

By JILL JARACZ | CTW FEATURES

While wedding cake is the mainstay of wedding desserts, many brides and grooms opt to also have a dessert table for a variety of indulgences, which in itself is a great way to cater to many types of dietary lifestyles

With many people today having some dietary restriction — dairy, gluten, nuts, vegan — bakers can create many different concoctions to suit everyone's needs.

"Brides and grooms shouldn't have to have food that they can't eat at their wedding," says Natalie McEachern, owner of Glutenus Minimus, a gluten-free bakery in Belmont, Mass. McEachern says that if the couple is gluten-free, then all of the food served at the wedding should be gluten-free because you don't want to run the risk of cross-contamination and getting sick during or after the wedding.

Nowadays, many bakers can take classic dessert favorites and make them in a way that accommodates a variety of dietary needs. "I can do almost anything that's at a normal dessert table in a vegan style," says Abby Cobb, owner of Dudley's Desserts in Columbia, Md.

While guests who don't have dietary restrictions may turn up their noses at the thought of a vegan or gluten-free dessert, there are many substitute ingredients such as vegan butter that look the same and taste the same. "If I don't tell you, you won't know," Cobb adds.

When deciding what desserts to offer, it's best to build a menu around the theme of your wedding. McEachern created a dessert table for a wedding in December that had a wintery theme, so she made gluten-free snowflake cupcakes, gingerbread men and other seasonal fare. McEachern also does cookie bars that feature a variety of cookies and milk. "We cater to the look and feel of favorite desserts."

To help food-sensitive guests know which desserts are safe to eat, label tables with ingredient signs. For extreme sensitivities such as nut allergies, bakers can color-code desserts or set up different tables on opposite sides of the room.

Cobb has taken this approach with some of her clients. "In April I had a wedding where the father was gluten-free, so we had some vegan desserts and some vegan and gluten-free desserts. The gluten-free were in different colored wrappers and put on the other side of the room so those people would know which ones were there."

Separate tables and color-coded wrappers aren't a scarlet letter for these alternative desserts, however.

"We've actually found that most of the time, [the guests] have no idea they're eating gluten-free," says McEachern.

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