



**Vegetarians Prove Thanksgiving Dinner Can Fly
Without Turkey**
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By Jennifer Carnig
Staff Writer

Oakland resident Colleen Patrick is an animal rights activist. Her tools? A wooden spoon, a spatula, a mixing bowl, and a baking sheet. And maybe a squash or two.

“Cooking classes are my activism,” Patrick explains, wooden spoon in hand, decked out in her signature “Please don’t eat the animals” apron.

“I think a lot of people have a misconception about what it’s like being, or becoming, vegan – thinking it’s a hardship or a sacrifice. . . But it’s not about sacrifice and struggle.”

It’s about ethics, Patrick says. “And about good food. In my classes, it’s all about the food and how wonderful it is.”

Patrick, known as the “Compassionate Cook,” teaches monthly vegetarian cooking classes at the First Unitarian Church of Oakland. In the year since she’s started holding them, she’s taught everything from breakfast and baked goods to curry and comfort foods.

“The response has been tremendous,” Patrick says. “But nothing’s been as popular as the Thanksgiving class. A lot of people are clueless on how to do the dinner without the turkey.”

Planning a satisfying, turkey-free meal can seem like a daunting task to a new vegetarian, Patrick admits, but it doesn’t have to be.

“There are endless possibilities,” she assures new veggie cooks. “So much of the fear here is a mental block. But think about it – all of the side dishes that you love are vegetables. All you need to do is think out of the box for the main dish.”

In Patrick’s November cooking class, she reminds students that it’s easy to substitute vegetable stock or broth in gravy and stuffing, soy or rice milk in mashed potatoes, and non-dairy margarine in desserts or on bread.

And for the centerpiece dish she makes a gorgeous stuffed squash, a sweet-smelling cinnamon and clove-spiced meal. The deep golden flesh of the acorn squash contrasts with the dark green skin of the shell and the orange hues of dried apricot stuffing inside, making a lovely presentation.

The flavor was even better, a sweet and savory mixture with a wonderful earthy taste and the satisfying crunch of nuts and celery.

“It tastes just like Thanksgiving,” she says.

Patrick developed the Compassionate Cooks about a year ago as an extension of her animal rights beliefs. A vegetarian for more than 10 years and a vegan for five, Patrick was moved to eliminate animal products from her diet when she learned about “factory farming” – corporate-owned farms that herd hundreds or thousands of animals into cramped quarters in a way Patrick says is inhumane.

But going vegetarian on her own wasn’t doing enough, Patrick says. She wanted to touch others and teach them how to successfully become vegetarians, too. She settled on cooking classes as a way to do that, and it seems to be working. Through word of mouth alone, about 30 people attend an average Saturday afternoon class.

Laurel Lund, editor of Vegetarian Times magazine, says she’s not surprised. Her magazine, now 25 years old, reaches more than a million readers a month.

“Vegetarianism is one of the fastest growing trends,” she says on the phone from her office in Virginia. “People are starting to see how healthy it is and realizing that it’s a viable lifestyle change.”

A full quarter of Americans label themselves as vegetarian, Lund says, although that number includes some seafood and poultry eaters. But the point is clear, Lund says, “That’s 12 million people who say they’re vegetarian – 12 million!”

The marketplace is reflecting that – the vegetarian food industry hit a record \$1.25 billion in sales last year. So it’s easier than ever before to make a vegetarian Thanksgiving. “The tools are out there,” says Lund.

Like Patrick, Lund recommends thinking of an attractive centerpiece dish. And she encourages cooks not to be afraid to think outside of traditional Thanksgiving foods. A main dish could be a hearty bean, lentil, or squash soup, stuffed grape leaves, or even vegetable sushi.

“Just make whatever it is look elegant,” she suggests, sharing how she turned a vegetarian shepherd’s pie into a centerpiece dish by using a pastry bag to pipe the potatoes into a pretty design on top.

She also recommends using lots of colorful foods. Not only does that make for great presentation, “the more colors on the table, the more likely it’s a healthy, balanced meal.”

“And you’re not depriving yourself,” Lund says. “You’re enjoying a bounty of wonderful, healthy food.”

For more information on the Compassionate Cooks, call Colleen Patrick at (510) 531-2665 or email compassionatecooks@yahoo.com.