

The playful side of veganism

Plant-based diet need not be austere and boring

BY SUSAN SCHWARTZ, THE GAZETTE AUGUST 6, 2013



Robin Asbell offers recipes made with whole grains and alternatives in *Sweet & Easy Vegan*, such as these raspberry muffins.

MONTREAL — Polenta with wild mushrooms, hazelnuts and figs: a treat for the eyes — and the tastebuds. Took a bit of time to assemble, but, oh, the flavours: savoury with a hit of tart sweetness, the smoothness of the mushrooms pairing beautifully with the slightly grainy polenta. Lovely.

It's one of 70 recipes "for beautiful meals and clean living" in Joseph Shuldiner's engaging and beautifully illustrated cookbook.

Its title? Pure Vegan.

So much has been published about veganism during the past couple of years that it seems sometimes as if there's a new title every week.

Some are Serious and Important and Talked About, like Mark Bittman's *VB6: Eat Vegan Before 6 p.m. to Lose Weight and Restore Your Health ... For Good* (Clarkson Potter, 2013), and *Forks Over Knives: The Plant-Based Way to Health* (The Experiment, 2011), a companion to the widely seen 2011 documentary *Forks Over Knives* and a New York Times bestseller.

These books, aimed at vegans but also those thinking about incorporating veganism into their

lifestyles, perhaps part-time, highlight the health benefits of a plant-based diet — people who follow vegan diets eat no animal products; that includes dairy products, eggs and, honey — and weigh in on the ethical and environmental ramifications of meat consumption.

But they can be dogmatic and a bit preachy and earnest, and they reinforce the stereotype of a vegan diet held by many: that it's austere and more about what you can't eat than what you can, and that vegans exist on a higher moral plane than the rest of us because they avoid "anything that came from a source that ever had a face or a mother," as the Forks Over Knives film companion describes adherents.

Pure Vegan (Chronicle Books, 2012) is something else entirely. It's inventive and fun. The recipes are terrific, the photos beautiful. It is instructive — but it's also irreverent.

"First, let me tell you what this book is not," Shuldiner says straight out in the introduction. "Pure Vegan is not about politics or any kind of spiritual doctrine. My intentions in writing this book are not to debate the virtues of one belief system over another, nor to promote the health benefits of eating a plant-based diet. Aside from having little interest in these debates, I'm not qualified to take up a pair of boxing gloves in their defence," he writes.

"Making my own day-to-day-choices about what to eat and what not to eat is complicated enough without trying to tell you what you should and shouldn't eat."

Pure Vegan is about "pure versus puritanical ... Instead of focusing on the foods eschewed in vegan cookery, my guiding principle has been to highlight and celebrate ingredients that are inherently vegan."

No matter what dietary philosophy his readers follow, "my hope is that reading and cooking from this compendium of recipes will inspire you to look at how you eat in a new way, sharpen your sense of relationship to the ingredients you encounter, and, above all, always demand more from the food you eat: more variety, more flavour, more intensity," he writes.

Too often, according to Shuldiner, "eating a plant-based diet can seem synonymous with self-deprivation." To counter any doubts we might have on where he stands on the issue, Shuldiner organizes the book's recipes by time of day; chapters called Late Night and Very Late Night feature such fare as tea-poached pears in caramel sauce and chocolate sea-salt tart.

And happily, his is not the only fun — and dare I say tempting? — vegan cookbook out there. It's also not the only cookbook aimed as much at non-vegans as vegans.

For Makini Howell, a second-generation vegan, "vegan food is about flavour first," as she observes in the introduction to her terrific new vegan cookbook Plum (Sasquatch Books, 2013), named for her vegan bistro in Seattle. She's the only vegan on staff right now, "but everyone loves eating what we cook," she writes.

"My recipes are shaped by traditions such as butter sauces, chimichurri dressing, and handmade

pasta,” she writes. “I also use classic grilling techniques for everything from pizzas to vegetables, and I don’t really heavily on tofu. I’m really not trying to replace anything because I don’t feel — and I’ve never felt — like I’m ‘missing’ anything. I’m just using other sources of protein. What you’ll find in these pages is a vegan reinterpretation of modern, smart, thoughtful food.”

Many of the books about a plant-based diet entering the marketplace now “are wanting to address vegans as well as those interested in the vegan lifestyle/cuisine — either full-time or part-time,” said Robert McCullough, Vancouver-based publisher of Appetite by Random House, which recently published Mouthwatering Vegan.

Miriam Sorrell, author of the Mouthwatering Vegan blog (www.mouthwateringvegan.com), observes in her introduction to the book that “after trying a few of my recipes, you’ll realize that eating vegan needn’t mean sacrificing flavour or beautiful presentation, or missing out on the joys of creative cooking and delicious eating.”

She includes more dishes featuring processed meat substitutes than I think necessary — does the world need another recipe for “Best-Ever Bolognese” that calls for vegan ground meat substitute? — but, happily, there also are all kinds vegetable-based dishes with no such substitutes and wonderful Indian and Mediterranean flavours, dishes like Greek garlic bean stew, like lentil & spinach tandoori masala, like rolled stuffed eggplant in smoked tomato sauce. Yum.

“It is time that vegan cooking evolved from being ‘food without meat or dairy’ to what it really is or can be: delicious — even decadent — rich, and versatile cuisine, free of animal products and processed ingredients,” observes Mérida Anderson in *Vegan Secret Supper: Bold & Elegant Menus from a Rogue Kitchen* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013).

Anderson, a young, self-trained vegan chef who cooks inventive vegan dishes featuring local and seasonal ingredients and serves them at pop-up supper clubs in Vancouver, Brooklyn and Montreal, called tofu “a cliché of vegan cooking, with negative connotations: the overuse of tofu in meatless cooking is precisely why this cookbook does not contain much of it.”

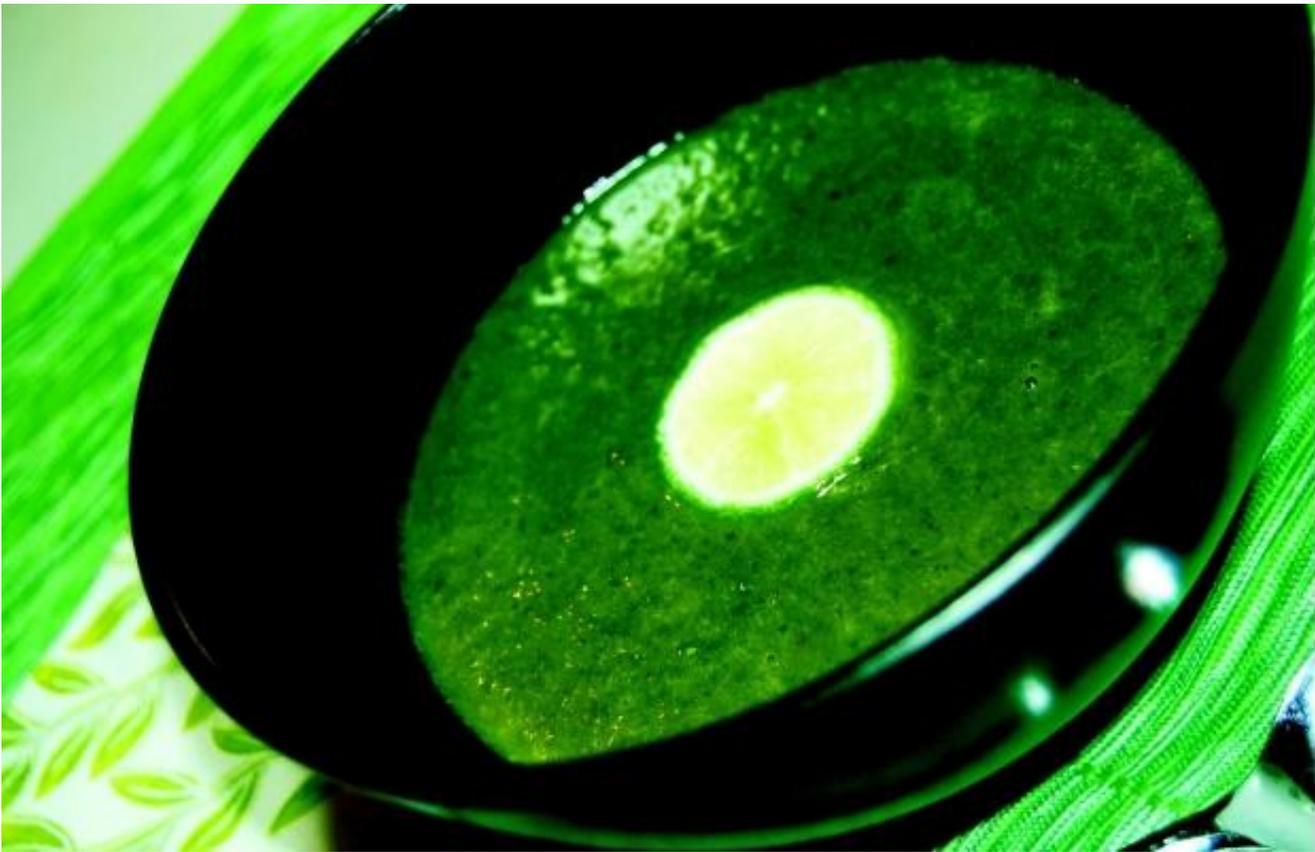
In *Sweet & Easy Vegan* (Chronicle Books, 2012), Robin Asbell offers recipes made with whole grains and alternatives to sugar including brown rice syrup and agave syrup. “You don’t have to adhere to any particular diet, vegan or otherwise, to enjoy these treats,” she writes.

California cookbook author and cooking instructor Deb Rousseau, author of *350 Best Vegan Recipes* (Robert Rose, 2012) and someone who is “not 100 per cent vegan,” said of her book: “I wrote it for everyone: This is a celebration of good food.”

sschwartz@montrealgazette.com

Twitter: susanschwartz

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette



Robin Asbell offers recipes made with whole grains and alternatives in Sweet & Easy Vegan, such as these raspberry muffins.

