



THE TREND FOR PLANT-BASED EATING HAS TO BE AN UPWARD CURVE

Find out what local experts predict will be the big plant-based foods of 2022, and why this lifestyle has grown in popularity. By Danielle Lett

Another January is upon us, and for many, that kickstarts Veganuary - an annual challenge that aims to promote and educate people on the benefits of veganism.

With figures showing that plant-based diets and 'flexitarianism' (casual vegetarianism) are on the up, it's no surprise that more and more businesses across the country are adjusting their practices accordingly to accommodate the growing trend.

By 2020, all of the UK's top major supermarkets had unveiled their own vegan ranges - with Tesco revealing a 300% rise in plant-based meat alternative sales that year.

And right here in East Anglia, a number of local businesses are similarly following suit.

Here to explain why shifting towards a more plant-based way of living is not just good for business, but good for you and the planet too, is restaurateur Loui Blake.

One of the biggest names in the East Anglian plant-based scene, he's the founder of Erpingham House - a 100% plant-based, plastic-free and mostly gluten-free restaurant based in Norwich city centre.

But what was it that inspired Loui to go follow a vegan lifestyle and start his own business?

"I've been vegan for eight years now, and I started opening restaurants because I wanted to normalise plant-based food and make it accessible for all," he explains.

Loui, who also invests in plant-based businesses and alternative proteins, realised his diet was playing a big part in him constantly feeling sluggish and poorly.

And it wasn't until he overhauled his lifestyle that he realised how much of a difference veganism can make.

"I had chronic fatigue and burnout in my mid-20s. I was eating a pretty standard Western diet, eating out all of the time and eating on the go. And I recognised the negative impact eating a lot of meat and processed foods had on me.

"After going plant-based for a month, I soon noticed an increase in my energy, my sleep improved, my inflammation reduced and my skin cleared up. And that was the

catalyst, essentially.

"But when I first went vegan, a lot of the vegan restaurants didn't appeal to a mainstream audience because the ingredients weren't recognisable, or they felt drab or fast-food orientated. I wanted to champion the health and sustainability benefits of veganism, and do it in a way that was recognisable and accessible to a mainstream audience."

That inspired Loui to open Erpingham House in 2018. And while the restaurant has since gone on to become a roaring success, it wasn't always such smooth sailing.

"I was living in London and had this assumption that veganism was a lot bigger than it was. The first two years were a real struggle, and it was hard to communicate the benefits to people. But certainly over the last year or so, we've seen a huge rise in the popularity in people going plant-based."

Receptiveness to veganism has grown so much in East Anglia that a recent survey ranked Norwich in the top five vegan hotspots in the UK. The survey, which was conducted by retail giant Ocado, placed the county town behind the likes Brighton, Stroud, Lewes, and Hove.

Loui thinks a number of factors are to thank for this - including the ongoing pandemic of the past two years.

"I think Covid has given people a real awareness of how important their health is, and building up their immune system by eating more natural foods like fruit and vegetables. And people are realising the importance of where their food comes from, and ensuring it's as sustainable as possible. I think sustainability as a whole is really high on the public agenda, and people are becoming more conscious of the negative impact on the environment, so I think that's helped people make the shift," he says.

For some, vegan food often conjures up connotations of bland, flavourless, and unappetising fruit and vegetables - but innovation is big in the plant-based sector, and Loui only sees this rising in 2022 and beyond.

"We've worked hard to make our food as recognisable as



MAIN: Eateries such as Norwich's Erpingham House - which specialises in plant-based fare - are becoming more popular thanks to a rise in the number of people going vegan

ABOVE: Inside Erpingham House

RIGHT: Loui Blake, owner of plant-based Erpingham House

Pictures: STUART ANDERSON/ ERPINGHAM HOUSE

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possible, but using only plant-based ingredients,” he explains.

Head to his restaurant, and you'll see exactly what he means.

Popular dishes include fish and chips made using banana blossom, shredded mock lamb and feta, and katsu king oyster mushroom to name but a few.

“Initially, I was using some of the more fake meats, but we're shifting away from that and using natural whole foods. We also use something called tempeh, which is a cultured and fermented soy.

“I definitely think fermented foods are going to be popular in the coming years. We all now know how important gut health is, so things like kimchi, sauerkraut and tempeh will only grow in popularity.”

Loui also predicts we'll see a continued interest in localised foods.

“For me, nature is intelligent. The foods that grow at certain times of year give our bodies what they need at those times of year, so a move towards seasonality will be on the agenda.”

With plant-based diets showing no signs of going anywhere, more restaurants are making changes to their menus to accommodate this rise - something that Loui encourages.

“We welcome it - we wish every restaurant was plant-based,” he says.

“We love seeing new vegan businesses, we've even reached out and helped other restaurants with vegan menu items. We're more focussed on sector growth rather than market share - we care more about the growth of plant-based diets rather than us taking all of the business.”

Time for tofu

Elsewhere in Norwich, there's another vegan-friendly business that's been working hard over the years to put one plant-based food firmly in the spotlight and reclaim its reputation.

Jenny McCann is co-owner of Tofurei - a vegan café and shop based in The Lanes that specialises in all things tofu.

A self-proclaimed 'soy alchemist', Jenny has been a vegan for a decade now, and set up her business six years ago alongside Steve Lepper.

“When we first started out, we came across the problem that a lot of things have tofu in them, but the tofu we found wasn't up to scratch, so we thought we'll try and make our own.”

After realising nobody else in the country was making their own tofu from scratch, Jenny and Steven found their unique selling point and ran with it.

Tofu - also known as bean curd - is a popular food derived from soya. It can be traced back thousands of years, and is made by curdling soya milk, pressing it into a block and cooling it before use. It's known for its versatility,

“We love seeing new vegan businesses”

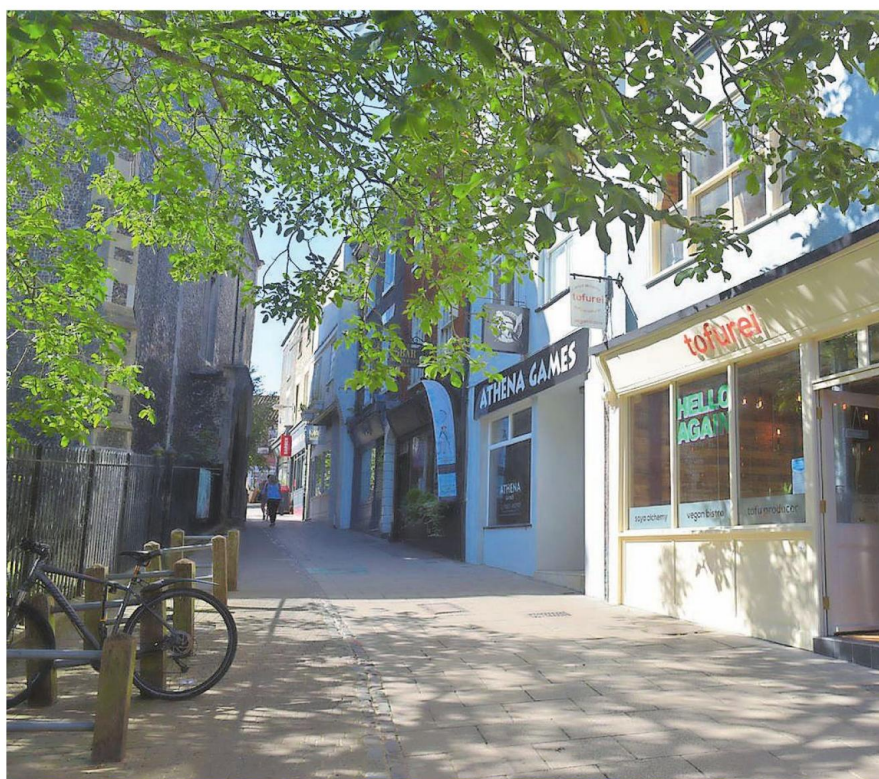
LOUI BLAKE



MAIN: Tofurei's tofu is made from Norfolk soya beans

RIGHT: Jenny of Tofurei - a plant-based café and shop that makes its own tofu

FAR RIGHT: Tofurei in Norwich
Pictures: DENISE BRADLEY/BRITTANY WOODMAN



and is a popular staple in Asian cuisine.

Six years on, Tofurei has become something of a cult favourite in the region, with people flocking from all over to try its innovative menu. And the power and popularity of tofu looks here to stay, thanks to the rise in the number of people trying plant-based foods.

"There's just so much you can do with tofu - you can put it in sweet things, savoury things, you can make sauces out of it, or you can roast the actual beans and make snacks out of them," explains Jenny.

"I think people expect vegan food to be a bit weird or a bit odd, but it really isn't. And a lot of people think by going vegan, they're going to miss out on flavour and nutrients, but that's just not the case.

"A lot of people who are meat-free still like the taste of animal products, and one of the biggest innovations is plant-based alternatives that taste like meat. You can be a junk food vegan or a healthy vegan - there's something plant-based for every palate and lifestyle."

And her menu certainly reflects that.

"We've got our sage and onion or chestnut and cranberry 'soysage' rolls, which feature all of the great flavours of meat sausage rolls, and our most popular pasty is our creamy tofu leek and mushroom one with a white sauce."

Other items on her menu include Cumberland-style soysages, tikka tofu pasties, roulade roast, and a selection of cakes and desserts.

"We try to incorporate as much tofu as possible in our menu, so we can showcase it and push through the somewhat of a bad reputation it used to have."

Being based in one of the country's most vegan-friendly cities, Jenny has seen an influx in the number of customers stopping by to see what the fuss with tofu is - and can only see veganism rising in popularity as time goes on.

"Veganism isn't a trend - it's about reducing your harm to animals where practically possible. People are becoming more aware of the inherent horrors linked with animal agriculture, and that's why veganism is on the rise and people are looking to eat less meat. They're making kinder choices. And with global warming and climate change on everyone's agendas, by reducing your meat consumption, it not only has a positive impact on your health but the wider environment too.

"At this stage, there isn't any going back - the trend for plant-based eating has to be an upward curve. It's so much better for the environment, and we can't avoid that as far as helping save the planet is concerned."

Striking a balance

Over in Ipswich, Bentleys Restaurants (who own Isaacs on the Quay) has recently added another string to its bow earlier this year by opening up The Gallery, an upmarket cocktail bar that specialises in plant-based fare - something that is proving

popular with the local clientele.

Explaining the inspiration behind this venture is Karl Newman, general manager and catering manager for Bentleys Restaurants. He says: "The Gallery was set up by Jack Coughlan, who is the owner Aidan's son - and they're both plant-based themselves."

While Karl isn't plant-based himself, he certainly sees the benefits - and over in Isaacs, the restaurant's vegan-friendly menu has helped drive up business.

"I'd say our sales up at least 30 per cent in Isaacs just on the plant-based options we offer there. And while the sales in The Gallery are focussed more on the drinking side as it is a bar first and foremost, we've definitely had a good year so far, especially as we opened during the pandemic. We've had some good reviews so far."

Dishes that have appeared on the menu at The Gallery include soya Italian meatballs, black pudding slices, BBQ pulled pork-style open sandwich, and coconut soya chicken saag aloo - all of which are completely meat-free.

"When we were working on the menu, I was experiment with what was on the market to see if we could achieve things like finding an alternative chicken product, which I think we've done quite well. The chicken saag aloo and meatballs have gone down especially well.

"We're just trying to provide people with good alternatives for anyone trying to go plant-based - and I will say that over this past year especially, a lot of the plant-based options out there, there's more of a focus on them being more like an animal product, which I think is helping convert people to a more flexitarian way of eating."

And Karl has had groups of customers come in, unaware that the entire menu was vegan - only to be pleasantly surprised at what they've just eaten.

"We've had parties come in, and the once they've found out it's all plant-based, it's almost like we've conned them, but they've realised that there are good meat-free options out there that are still flavourful and filling.

"While I think a lot of people are cutting out meat as they want to improve their diets, plant-based doesn't always have to be healthy - it can be fun and indulgent too."

With The Gallery still a fairly new business venture, Karl believes flexitarianism and plant-based diets are still in their infancy - and have a lot of potential as more people look to make those all-important lifestyle changes, whether it be for environmental or health reasons.

"We're definitely going to see a massive increase there, especially when it comes to innovation - we ourselves are always developing and reworking our own menus and recipes."

In addition, Karl and the team are currently working on the Viking Bakehouse, a grab-and-go style café that will serve an entirely plant-based menu of food, drinks and snacks.

"There's a lot going on for us," he adds.