



Food Fight Restaurant Group / CC Jacob



Food Fight Restaurant Group / CC Jacob



Food Fight Restaurant Group / Chris Hynes Photography

New plant-based products and fresh seasonal ingredients allow chefs more space to innovate menus and offer new vegan dishes. Top left: Spring gnocchi at Everly (vegan/gluten free); Right: Executive Chef and Proprietor Giovanni Novella of Bar Corallini; Bottom left: Fresh seasonal dishes from Everly.

WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

Restaurants size up vegan trends and menu offerings.

BY **KIMBERLY HAZEN**

A recent *Vegconomist* article cited research examining North American food trends during the first six months of 2020. According to the DoorDash study, sales of meat-free burgers have surged 443%, and research points to an overall shift in dietary habits. Twenty percent of respondents stated they have seriously considered veganism.

Locally, some restaurants are starting to take notice and with the COVID-19 pandemic challenging them in unprecedented ways, they aren't wasting any time catering to vegan tastes. Toppers Pizza, a national franchise pizza company, is working with Wisconsin-based vegan chef Melanie Manuel to develop several new vegan pizza offerings, and the menu shift has a lot to do with customer and staff feedback. Manuel, who earned a certification in plant-based nutrition from Cornell University, has created several new house pizzas that are currently being tested in Madison and will roll out nationwide in October.

Jordan Bright, a managing partner for Food Fight Restaurant Group, has also seen the trend toward veganism, and he says it's important to double-check local demand. "You can pay attention to all the national trends, but if you don't know what the customer in your neighborhood wants, you're not doing yourself any favors," he notes.

Nathan Mergen, chef/owner of 107 State in Madison, says he's also seeing a shift away from meat. Apart from the trend, Mergen says restaurants need to offer vegan or vegetarian offerings. "At a table of four, you'll have one person who would prefer a vegetarian option and you need to have something for them."

Demand is not the only influence when developing a menu. The availability of good, quality ingredients is of primary importance. These ingredients can be the result of a change in seasons or a result of innovation. Bright remarks, "Now, the exciting thing is the industry as a whole is focused on creating better products for a vegan diet, so it's opening up what we're able to offer."

"Your big-ticket items are usually going to feature a meat item such as rib eye," Mergen adds, "and you can certainly elevate a vegan dish. It just takes more time and expense."

The result can depend on who's in the kitchen because a chef's contribution, especially a top-notch chef, might be the key ingredient. "I don't care if it's a traditional protein or a vegan dish, it comes down to the chef's talent and creativity," Bright explains. "That's where people see value. It needs to be something they're not going to find somewhere else or re-create at home."

Chip Nesser, general manager of Tempest Oyster Bar, says menu innovation needs to be purposeful. Before opening Tempest, owner Henry Doane completely revamped the menu of Restaurant Magnus and adopted a Norwegian food focus. Since the restaurant was still operating under the Magnus name, Nesser found that customers were confused by the shift. Now, years later, the business seems to have learned the applicable lesson.

"We want to keep a general aesthetic that works through every detail of Tempest, including the boat in the foyer, the uniforms of the waitstaff, and the dishes," Nesser explains. "You can change the menu, just stay on brand." ■