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# The Innovative Spirit of Vegan Cooking

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Chef Kyle Evans knows firsthand that eating vegan can be fabulous—because in his kitchen, humble nuts and veggies become the stuff of culinary magic.

I make my living as a vegan chef, but I didn't start out as one. I trained in France and California, learning all the classic techniques—you name it, I cooked it. Then I got a job at a luxury resort in Sedona, Arizona, making spa food: lots of bright, beautiful salads and grilled vegetables. Although I ate meat at the time, it was exciting to create dishes without it. Luckily, I had

amazing materials at my disposal: The plant world is full of brilliant flavors, and as time passed I got more and more inspired by them. And that's how I became vegan, and then a vegan chef—I learned that I could make terrific, satisfying food without animal products.

Which, of course, is the point where people get skeptical. I always hear the same objections—I'd starve as a vegan! It won't taste good! Fake meat is gross! Part of that is cultural; we're not as familiar with some vegan staples, like quinoa or lentils, and that foreignness can turn people off. But the other part is that people assume—as I used to—that they won't get everything they want: sweet, salty, sour, bitter, umami. That's just not true. If I want crunchy and fried, I can have a black truffle croquette or a fritter made with curry-infused potatoes. If I want hearty, I'll have a big fat mushroom grilled with herbs and lots of spice. I can get the great flavor that goes with barbecued meat by smoking mushrooms and vegetables over mesquite chips. I can "butter" my bread with a delicious white bean puree. Trust me, it's not all tofu and broccoli. And I understand completely the objection to fake meat—soy nuggets don't taste like chicken, and never will. But who needs either when you can have polenta with balsamic glaze, or zucchini burgers with plum-onion jam?

There's a mad-scientist aspect to what I do in the kitchen—I explore every possibility of each ingredient. Chop up a cashew, for instance, and it's great in a stir-fry. Dehydrate it and you can achieve a texture similar to cheese. Blend it and it takes on the creaminess of dairy. I use cashew cream in a vegan spin on raita, which is traditionally a yogurt-based condiment—mine is flavored with lemons, apples, cucumbers, and spices; it will top the sweet-potato-filled Indian crepe I'm working on. My crabless crabcakes went like hotcakes at a festival in Mendocino last winter, and for Chinese New Year I served Chinese yam and shiitake dumplings. With ingredients like these, it's hard to feel like I'm missing out.

Last night I asked my 4-year-old son what he wanted for dinner, and he started pulling things out of the fridge: kale, rainbow chard—he loves the bright red stalks—basil, garbanzo beans. I could see his enthusiasm, his desire to help me invent. And that's what I love: the spirit of innovation. Chefs always say you should leave a job when you no longer enjoy it. Well, I'm not going anywhere—cooking vegan is definitely the most fun I've ever had in the kitchen.



### Chef Kyle Evans' Recipes

- ◆ Zucchini and Carrot Lasagna
- ◆ Kamut Sea-Palm Sliders

**Next:** Food guilt: Where do you draw the line?

*Kyle Evans is executive chef at Ravens' Restaurant at Stanford Inn by the Sea, an eco-lodge in Mendocino, California*