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FOOD

Raising Veggies

Creative local chefs are elevating plant-based entrées to the height of fine dining.

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■ *Eat your vegetables!* The command transports many of us back to the family dinner table of our childhood, when we'd devour the meat and potatoes and gag on the overcooked previously frozen peas and carrots. Gastronomic times have changed. Interest in plant-based eating is on the rise, and clever chefs are propelling vegetables from their sad side-dish rut to center stage. In the Coachella Valley, they're constructing dynamic dishes with local, seasonal produce, fine-tuned techniques, toothsome flavor profiles, and a dash of ingenuity that won't leave anyone — including the most committed carnivores — asking, *Where's the beef?*

"I try to use vegetables that have textures and colors similar to the protein you'd normally cook in that fashion," says Shad Newton, chef de cuisine at Mr. Lyons steakhouse Palm Springs. "Early on with vegetable cooking, that became my approach: Treat vegetables like meat and you can really create some interesting standalone dishes."

Case in point: **vegetable Wellington**. Listed alongside the restaurant's more conventional beef wellington, the meatless version layers the inside of a housemade puff pastry crust with a colorful spectrum of ingredients that might include emerald haricot verts and kale, deep-purple dragon carrots, and blood-red beets meant to mimic the look of sliced beef. It's drizzled with a red wine-based *beurre rouge* sauce blended with more beets for a boost of earthy flavor. The result, he says, is not only a substantial entrée, but also a beautiful one: cut in half to highlight the multitude of hues inside. "If you think of any plate in any restaurant, the vegetables — not the meat — make it pretty. It's the colors we see in nature that make things appealing: the red, the yellow, the green."

Vegetable
Wellington at
Mr. Lyons.

Chef Gabriel Woo, who gained a following for weekly communal suppers centered around steak and chicken at The Barn Kitchen at Sparrows Lodge and The Pantry at Holiday House, has launched an entirely plant-based family-style dinner, which attracts both vegan and vegan-curious crowds every Tuesday night at both restaurants. “I was getting requests for vegan or vegetarian at our other dinners,” he says, “so I thought why not dedicate one to those people and make it approachable to people who do eat meat.”

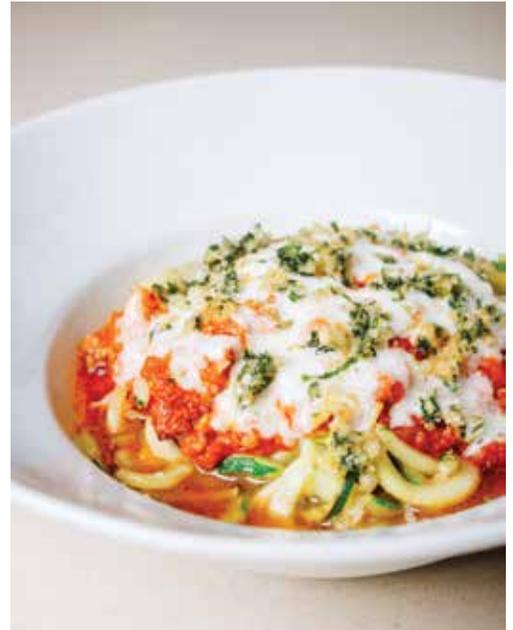
With menu changes from week to week, ensuring a variety of vegetable-focused courses that keeps everyone wanting more can be a tall order. “I want to make sure that it’s still exciting, there’s still spice and hearty flavors, and that I’m using the vegetables appropriately to really make them shine,” he says.

At the first dinner in February, his menu played on bold Indian dishes, including a rich **vegetable green curry** of chunky potatoes, eggplant, and peppers and a traditional **tikka masala**, in which Woo swapped the usual hunks of chicken for medallions of charred summer squash coated in the fragrant creamy tomato sauce. While he says *tikka masala* can accompany just about any vegetable, the squash’s meaty flesh makes it work especially well. “It has to have that char that you’d get with chicken or a nice steak, so we char it and make sure it has a crust on both sides, and that gives it tons of flavor. Sometimes, just seasoning correctly makes a world of difference.”

Andie Hubka, executive chef and owner of Cork & Fork in La Quinta and Heirloom Craft Kitchen and Tu Madres Cantina & Grill in Indio, often leans on ingredients such as cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, and eggplant because they’re hearty and satisfying. “I think those more starchy vegetables and cruciferous vegetables lend themselves really well to that center-of-the-plate concept because they do make you feel full, as opposed to something like spinach, where you have to eat a lot of spinach to feel full,” she says.



Crispy cauliflower (below) and zucchini Bolognese at Cork & Fork. Opposite: The *tikka masala* at The Pantry at Holiday House in Palm Springs.



At her small plates-centric Cork & Fork, Hubka offers an IPA-battered **crispy cauliflower** that's flash-fried — giving it shades of a beach-shack fried seafood dish — and accompanied by a reduced pomegranate molasses and kicky Sriracha aioli and topped with a lemon zest-pine nut gremolata. “The gremolata has a fresh, nutty flavor that plays well with the sweetness and the spice,” she says. “It’s a unique combination of flavors and brings out the best of the cauliflower, which has a steak-like quality when you cook it.”

Although a vegetable is the star, the chef doesn't necessarily keep the dish vegetarian. Hubka makes meat a supporting player in her **zucchini Bolognese**, a big bowl of zucchini “noodles” accompanied by a rich beefy sauce and dollop of creamy burrata cheese “It’s honestly my favorite thing, and I think it’s actually better than pasta,” she says. Like many memorable vegetable offerings, it’s time-intensive. First, they must be spiraled, then salted and dried to draw out the zucchini’s high water content before

sautéing and tossing them with the sauce. “Everyone understands how to make plain sautéed vegetables, but try and turn them into something that makes it feel like a cheat meal and that’s a little more complicated.”

To showcase sunchokes — those nubbed, tubular-shaped root vegetables derived from the sunflower plant — Newton offers **sunchoke en papillote**, steaming the sunchokes along with celery root, Meyer lemon, and herbs in a paper packet in classic French style. Root vegetables like sunchokes, parsnips, and celery root have the benefit of being both creamy *and* delicate and filling at the same time when cooked. “We treat the sunchokes as if they were a piece of halibut or another whitefish-like sole. We open up the packet in the dining room and it’s steaming and fragrant and really feels similar to steamed fish.”

Above all, making an extraordinary vegetable dish starts with procuring top-notch produce, the chefs concur. That means working with local farms to source what’s

in peak season. (Think about the difference between the tender asparagus you find at the farmers market come spring versus those imported hulking stalks you spot in the grocery store in January.) “I’m choosing the best vegetables that I can get my hands on,” says Woo, whose produce distributor hits the fabled Santa Monica Farmers Market each week and sends the chef a list of seasonal specialties. He notes that farms in the Coachella Valley are paying more attention to area eateries, too. “People are starting to come to me and say, ‘Hey, man, I got all these cool vegetables,’ and now I’m finding things like okra and squash and all kinds of stuff I didn’t even know was out here.”

Newton sources most of Mr. Lyons’ lettuces and peppers from within the valley and most everything else from within Southern California. “We have that privilege here. The produce we’re getting is already beautiful and tastes delicious. We’re sourcing it locally, cooking it properly, and paying homage to the farmer and the product itself.”