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Folks who don't want to cook can just veg out

Cynthia Hizer, Cox News Service

If eating is at the top of your priority list but cooking is at the bottom, dinnertime is probably a hassle. And that is exactly why Charles Stahler, co-director of the Vegetarian Resource Group, developed a "30 Day Menu" for people who don't like to cook.

"People write us all the time to say they want to be vegetarians but are too busy to cook or can't cook. Finally, one day I decided to just sit down and write out all the easy ways to eat without cooking," he said from his Baltimore office.

"We believe that you can have a healthy vegetarian lifestyle whether you are a gourmet cook or an on-the-run eater." Whether it's a chickpea salad from the salad bar at the grocery store or a veggie burger on the grill, cooking vegetarian is easy," Stahler says.

Here are some ideas from Stahler:

-- Purchase a vegetable pot pie from a natural foods store or supermarket.

-- For one ore more days, gourmet markets can provide great takeout. Today there are more choices than you could imagine for a complete vegetarian meal.

-- Ethiopian food is relatively inexpensive. Eat in or take out delicious vegetarian stews (consisting of legumes and vegetables) with injera (Ethiopian bread).

-- Pick up vegetable lo mein and steamed mixed vegetables from a Chinese restaurant. Request brown rice instead of white rice.

-- Attend vegetarian and/or animal rights activities and get invited to a friend's home for a vegetarian dinner.

-- Go to the supermarket salad bar, a good souce for a meal. If you do this only once or twice a month, you won't get bored with it. Choose low-fat dressings.

--Order hummus, falafel, baba ghanouj, tabblouleh and any of a variety of Middle Eastern dishes that may contain high-calcium tahini. You almost never see dairy in Chinese or Middle Eastern restaurants, since they generally obtain their calcium from vegetable sources.

-- Open a can of chickpeas, mash them lightly and prepare them as you would tuna salad. Put on bread, and you're ready to eat. If you don't like the salt, you can rinse the chickpeas. Try eggless mayonnaise from a natural foods store.

-- Indonesian restaurants sometimes offer vegetarian tempeh dishes.

-- For a change, try Thai food. You can get spicy food if you wish. Thai resaurants will usually substitute tofu for meat. Specify that you do not want oyster sauce and that they can substitute garlic sauce. The curry dishes are especially delicious.

-- Vegetable chow is a wide noodle made out of rice flour and found in Chinese restaurants.

-- Indian restaurants typically offer many vegetarian dishes. If you don't like spicy food, ask them to make it mild. It is usually served with rice.

-- Make Appalachian Train Stew. It's easy to prepare. Put into one pot and boil until done: lentils, a little macaroni, barley and maybe a cut-up potato. For flavoring, add garlic powder or tomato sauce for a different dish. For a little more variety, add some cut-up broccoli or frozen vegetables.

-- Start with a mixture of vegetables--frozen corn, peas, brussels sprouts and whatever veggies you like--and add to cooked pasta or serve over rice for a quick meal.

-- Pick up some spicy eggplant with vegetables or other such dish from a Szechwan-style Chinese restaurant. Choose different items from the menu for variety.

--Purchase quick vegetarian cups of soup in a supermarket or natural foods store. Serve with whole-grain bread or perhaps a salad.

-- Mexican food is a change of pace. Try a veggie taco, burrito, tostada, etc. You can get takeout or frozen or packaged. Most Mexican restaurants and fast-food chains no longer put lard in their beans, but you should always ask to be sure.

-- From the frozen food case, purchase potato pancakes, potato blintzes or pierogi, and frozen vegetables.

-- The veggie variety can cure a burger craving. A lot of companies are making veggie burgers now, and they are plentiful in supermarkets and natural food stores.

-- Moo shu vegetables is a great vegetarian version of moo shu pork found in Chinese restaurants.

-- Try some tempeh, a cultured soy product that comes in a thick slab, sort of like a square veggie burger. Get some from a health food store. Fry in a nonstick pan and make into a sandwich with bread and any veggies you like. You can also buy tempeh burgers.

-- Most vegetarian groups sponsor potluck dinners at least monthly. You can bring just one dish and have a wonderful meal full of variety.

-- Gluten or seitan is made from wheat and has the texture of meat. You can buy it at health food stores and cook it yourself, or many natural foods stores carry it prepared in dishes such as stroganoff or pot pie. It's very filling and very satisfying.

-- Call for pizza without the cheese. Try a variety of veggies on top, or add a soy-based shredded cheese or grated cheese, such as Parmesan.

-- Prepare your own vegetarian chili quickly from cans or get takeout. You don't need to cook beans from scratch.

-- Organize your own potluck at your house one day a month. You can supply juice, the plates, etc. Let others bring food.

-- Write to the Vegetarian Resource Group, P.O. Box 1463, Baltimore, MD 21203, and request more helpful information for meals on the run.