

TUCO



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**MAKE YOUR NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION TO
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Roast cauliflower, rosti potato apple
and raisin puree from the fine dining
menu



AN ORGANIC APPROACH

Rather than go all guns blazing on their approach to vegan catering, Murray Edwards College has shown how a softer tactic is working with their customers

Words: Morag Wilson

There are always different ways to introduce a new dining concept or menu. You can open with a bang on the first day of term, or market your new changes with a big social media campaign. Or you can dip your toe in the water, slowly introducing a change to the menus without anyone really noticing. Of course, it depends on what the concept is, but when it comes to vegan cuisine, Murray Edwards College is like many others that have found a gradual introduction has worked best.

"We've been slow on the uptake if I'm honest," admits Chris Pope, general manager of catering and events at Murray Edwards College. "It's been organic, with students asking for a change in what we're doing and us responding to those changes by watching their uptake to them."

Of course, Chris and his head chef Joe Dean aren't slow on the uptake at all. But he is right to be wary of going at it

full throttle. As Stuart Hemmings, head chef at Swansea University's Bay Campus, says, his focus on vegan hasn't correlated with an increase in sales.

"Sometimes customers will ask for a change because it is ethically better but there hasn't been the uptake," explains Chris. "This has been rewarding because we responded and they engaged in return."

Students and staff – as well as corporate

clients – have responded well to Murray Edwards' new-found love of vegan food.

"The more they engage, the more my team are happy to engage, so it has been a really shared growth – professionally speaking for the chefs and in uptake from the student body," says Chris.

At the start of the Easter 2017 term, Murray Edwards put a vegetarian and a vegan dish on the main menu, which was often gluten-free as well. As this was so well received, the Michaelmas term saw the hotplate reordered so that the vegan dish is the first choice on the servery as customers approach, followed by a vegetarian choice, a sustainable fresh fish dish, and finally the meat choice.

They don't push their plant-based message any further than that, but because the vegan dish is so colourful, inventive and appealing, it is getting some great uptake. The joint demand for vegetarian and vegan is outstripping the fish dish and is almost equal to uptake of the meat option, which

Roasted chick pea, sweet potato and kale salad

“There is definitely demand from commercial clients for vegan options”

WHAT ARE OTHER UNIVERSITIES DOING?

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD: The [V]iew Deli in the Students' Union has the tagline 'For [V]eggies, for [V]egans, for meat free [V]ariety' where 'carni[V]ores are welcome'. It serves a wide range of vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free food such as stuffed peppers, sweet potato skins, falafel wraps, spinach soufflé, omelettes, crepes, fruit salads and pastries, as well as serving the usual hot and cold drinks.

UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER: The Greenhouse is Manchester's new vegetarian and vegan café. There are three soup options per day, with at least one being vegan, a quiche option and a hot option, as well as a range of vegetarian and vegan sandwiches. Elsewhere, vegetables are incorporated into more of the meat dishes to support healthy living.

UNIVERSITY OF WALES TRINITY ST DAVID: A team of volunteer Buddhist monks provide three vegan meals a day to students and staff, run separately to the main catering department at the university's Lampeter campus.

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN: Roots specialises in vegetarian and vegan food, with large main meals or smaller snack deals for £4. It is located within the Students' Union food court.

ROYAL HOLLOWAY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON: The refurbished Boilerhouse venue has created more space to stock more products, allowing the university to include vegan options like sandwiches on its menu.

“What has been fascinating is that veggie or vegan dishes have been the working chef's afterthought for years and all of a sudden it is the focal point of the hotplate”

has dropped overall in sales apart from when chicken is on the menu. Generally, the college has had to double the number of veggie and vegan dishes it serves.

“What has been fascinating is that veggie or vegan dishes have been the working chef's afterthought for years and all of a sudden it is the focal point of the hotplate,” says Chris. “Here it is the first thing people see and so the dishes have become fresher, more colourful, there's more focus on them. If you ask the chef they'll say it's nothing different to usual, but they are conscious of when, arriving at the hotplate, the food is being judged. So it has changed the chef's attitude to producing them.”

Chris is the first to admit that he would find thinking up a vegetarian dish awkward and says he is fortunate to have Joe who is “always open to thinking about different dishes”. Now, he is totally converted, as are the chef team, who have relished taking on this new challenge.

“They've taught themselves, we bought

some vegan cookbooks and it's gratifying to see chefs put themselves forward for vegetarian and vegan courses to open up what they can do,” says Chris. “That's the organic way we've gone about it. Other colleges might look at that and think we're reacting and not planning or strategising, but we've responded to our customers and are here to develop our staff and facilitate growth that way. We don't work by direction, but by working together.”

Formal halls have been a great way to promote vegan options. The Green Formal Hall in May was purely vegetarian/vegan and diners had to indicate if they wanted the fish main (there was no meat) instead when booking their place, just as a vegetarian or vegan has to do on a regular basis. Dishes included Elveden potato cakes with roasted English broccoli, capers and pine nuts; and a key lime pie.

As the vegan offering at Murray Edwards has been so well received, Chris is starting to offer it to commercial clients and will

launch a healthy bowl menu in the new year as well.

“There is definitely demand from commercial clients for vegan options,” he says. Dishes include roasted chickpea, sweet potato and kale salad; roast cauliflower, rosti potato apple and raisin purée; and chocolate, avocado and peanut butter pot for dessert. Desserts have been a particular challenge for the chefs.

“We did a vegan dessert but the kitchen are going to take it as one that they're not going to hear the end of!” says Chris. “But that spurred them on, they've pushed themselves and created meringues out of chickpeas and they're astonishing; I think they're nicer than meringues.”

So sometimes, responding to customer demand and slowly introducing a new vegan menu while the chefs themselves are learning this different style of cuisine where they can't rely on meat as the star, is the right approach to take. For Murray Edwards College, it has paid dividends.