

Plant-Based Makeovers for Your Favorite Meals

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Eating a plant-rich diet is easier once you learn to make over the meals you love.

FOCUS ON TEXTURES AND FLAVORS

Eating a plant-rich diet does not mean giving up the meaty, creamy, and egg-y elements you've grown to love. It just means relying on plants for them, and using flavor agents.

Use a steak rub seasoning, for instance, before grilling your portobello mushrooms. Sprinkle poultry seasoning into a flour mixture when making tofu, mushroom, or cauliflower fried "chicken." To create plant-bacon, marinate thinly sliced eggplant, tofu, or tempeh in soy sauce, maple syrup, and smoked paprika, and slow-roast to crisp-chewy perfection. Bacon is all about the texture and sweet-smoky flavor.

Plenty of brands already deliver meaty, creamy, and egg-y for you. Among my favorites, Oatly, Ripple, or Califia for milk, Miyoko's for cheese and butter, Kite Hill and Forager for yogurt, Field Roast, Gardein, and Beyond Meat for meat replacements, and Just for eggs or mayo. There are many more; pick up a few the next time you're at the store and find your own favorites.

LEARN HOW TO COOK PLANTS

So many people hate brussels sprouts because they grew up eating ones that had been cooked to a mushy death. A revelation for me was discovering how flavorful they—and just about any vegetable—can be if you properly roast, steam, or lightly sauté them.

Finding my way around an oven was what ultimately led to my ability to give up meat.



[Tofu scramble](#) with eggplant bacon is your new go-to breakfast.
Photo Source: Alec Tilly

COOKING TIPS

Vegetables have different cook times but the following general guidelines apply.

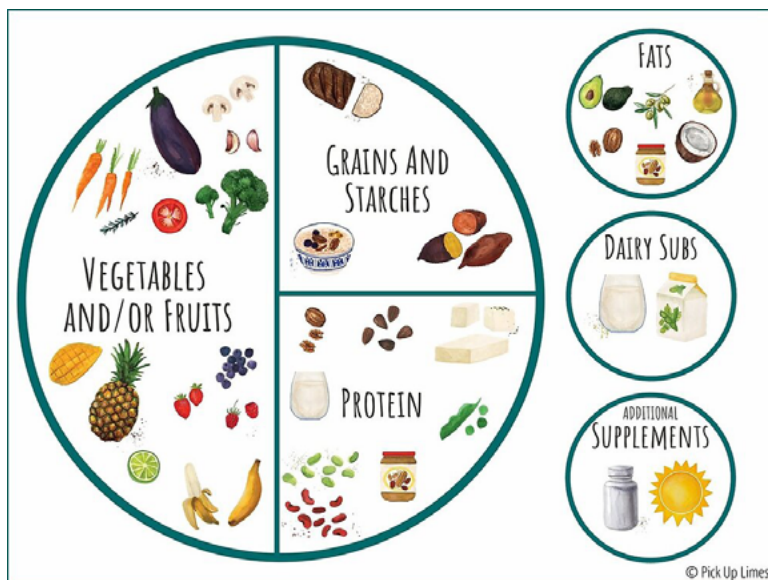
ROASTING – Crank up the heat to at least 400 degrees, cover the veggies lightly in oil and salt (spices too if desired), and space them out a bit on the baking sheet. Then watch as they turn into browned, succulent flavor bombs.

SAUTEING – Heat the stove to medium or medium-high, and don't over-stir if you want a good outer sear. Keep the heat lower if garlic is involved. Add a little water and cover hardy greens or vegetables for a quick steam-sauté—this is also a great way to reheat beans and grains.

STEAMING – A steamer basket is cheap and fits into any large pot. Place it over an inch of water and cook greens until just wilted but still bright green. (Careful, it goes quickly!) For summer veggies, cook until just fork-tender. Starchy sweet potatoes and squash can handle a little more heat.

REBUILD YOUR PLATE

Most people feel comfortable with the traditional classic plate I grew up with—a high-protein entree with a side of starch and vegetables. So why not build on what's most familiar?



The Plate Method gives you a familiar starting point for putting together nutritious, plant-based meals. Photo Source: [Pick Up Limes](#)

Let's say you replace your steak with grilled portobello steak. Make one side green beans topped with a ground tempeh or almond gremolata. For your starch, add a heaping spoonful of polenta. (If you're concerned about getting enough protein, look [here](#) and [here](#)). For more suggestions on assembling nutritious, plant-based meals, see the [Plate Method](#), developed by nutritionist Sadia Badiei of Pick Up Limes.

Plant-based cooking can be whatever you want it to be, but it sometimes requires rethinking what we're used to. While tofu scramble with eggplant bacon makes a great breakfast substitute, for instance, the classic egg-bacon-cheese combo needn't be your only breakfast possibility. Some go-to's for me include granola, smoothies, and grain porridges, basically anything on toast, as well as various potato, bean, and veggie hashes. Also, don't hold back on sauces: I always have hummus or another homemade sauce on hand for an immediate flavor boost. The world is your oyster (mushroom), and once you get started you may well find that cooking plant-based opens up more food possibilities for you.

THE WHOLE FOOD SUBSTITUTION LIST

MEATY

TOFU – The days of tofu being gross are over. When prepared well, it makes a great substitute for chicken or seafood, in stir-fries, pasta, casseroles, you name it. TIP: Try freezing it first for a chewy, layered texture.

TEMPEH, especially when steamed and marinated, can be the most savory and delicious addition to a dish. Try using any marinade you like for meats, and pan-fry the tempeh in oil. Add more marinade so it gets nice and glazed. Works very well as a ground turkey or chorizo substitute.

WALNUTS (and other nuts), when crushed up, make for an amazing ground meat texture, and lend an appealing fatty quality, too.

LENTILS, especially when combined with nuts and spices, make for a satisfying ground meat substitute.

SEITAN is made using vital wheat gluten (easily found at most natural foods stores), and the high protein flour is used to make many of the meat substitutes you'll see at stores. It has the perfect texture for something like pastrami, and it's fun to try to make on your own.

VEGETABLES can be used alone as meat replacements, especially when flavored with plenty of spices and other condiments, like soy sauce. Eggplant in particular is very meaty, and cauliflower is great in a taco when chopped up, roasted, and sprinkled with spices.



Crispy tofu “chicken” salad. Photo Source: Alec Tilly



Hearts of palm meet white beans for a delicious [no-tuna salad sandwich](#). Photo Source: Alec Tilly

GRAINS like rice or quinoa, when cooked to be chewy and artfully combined with veggies and spices, can also become meat-like. For example, you can make an amazing burger by combining chewy rice and lentils with beans for binding, add shredded beets for color and nuts for fattiness, along with loads of the flavor-agents mentioned below.

BEANS are high-protein and can stand alone or be fashioned into something new. Mashed chickpeas, for instance, make an excellent mock tuna salad when combined with mayo, capers, red onion, vinegar, seaweed, and mustard.

JACKFRUIT and **HEARTS OF PALM** with their stringy, shredded meat-like textures, can make a great replacement for tuna or crab cakes. (See? It's all about re-creating the flavors and textures you love.) Find them in a can at most grocery stores.

MUSHROOMS are my favorite meaty option. Try portobello, lion's mane, or maitake as a steak, shredded oyster mushrooms as pulled pork or pulled chicken, or king trumpets cut into wedges like scallops or chicken. There is a whole world beyond those button or cremini mushrooms you may be used to, and boy do they taste meaty. Try looking for mushrooms at your local farmers market, where they're often cheaper and more varied.



Substitute these [portobello asada tacos](#) for meat and no one will be the wiser. Photo Source: Alec Tilly.

CREAMY

NUTS, often cashews, almonds, or sunflower seeds, can be turned into milks, (sour) creams, and cheeses that mimic goat's cheese. The nut milks and creams can usually be used in any recipe that calls for cow's milk or cream. They're easy to make at home with a blender: just soak the nuts overnight, blend with the desired quantity of water (generally a 1:4 ratio), and strain with cheesecloth.



Tofu-ricotta and a cashew-mozzarella sauce make up the creamy elements in this irresistible lasagna. Photo Source: Alec Tilly

Adding thickeners such as tapioca starch to a cashew milk can transform nuts into a stretchy, mozzarella-like sauce when heated (this is great for lasagna). Add nutritional yeast for a cheesy flavor. Here are a few more delicious [cheese](#) substitutions.

Other options: Coconut milk from a can makes for a really rich cream, especially in Asian-inspired dishes and in desserts. And store-bought plant yogurts have come a long way since their watery start.

OATS are the current craze, especially because they use less water than almonds. (Check out our [guide](#) to plant milks.) Oat milk and cream work very well in most recipes.

TAHINI, a paste made from sesame seeds and, in my opinion, the king of all nut or seed butters, makes truly amazing sauces. I love to mix it with lemon and pour it over roasted sweet potatoes. Add some crispy chickpeas or seared field roast sausage and steamed greens for a quick, healthy dinner.

TOFU, blended with citrus, salt, and nutritional yeast in a food processor makes a very convincing ricotta or cream cheese. Add extra water, dill, and shredded cucumbers for plant-based tzatziki.

BEANS can serve as the creamy element in any sauce, or be a healthy replacement for mayonnaise.

BUTTER – I usually use oil or else buy plant-based butter from the store. (Look for one that doesn't include palm oil.) But I've seen butter made with coconut oil and aquafaba (the liquid from a can of chickpeas). Use plant-based butter, flour, and plant milk to make a classic béchamel sauce.



Cauliflower and tahini-based mac and cheese. See the [recipe](#).
Photo Source: Alec Tilly

EGGY

TOFU – All you need for a delicious plant-rich scramble is a block of firm tofu, shredded with a fork or your fingers. I like to use turmeric for color, chile powder, cumin, salt and sometimes mustard or soy sauce for flavor, plus whatever vegetables I have on hand. Sometimes I add silken tofu and black salt for a soft scramble appeal. That's just a start — try out different

flavor combinations to find what you like. Thinly sliced and fried, tofu also makes a great “egg white” to be smothered in a creamy hollandaise sauce. Crispy marinated tofu on a bowl of noodle soup can more than replace a hard-boiled egg.



A tofu and chickpea flour quiche that fits the breakfast bill.
Photo Source: Alec Tilly

CHICKPEA FLOUR, made of ground chickpeas and very common in Indian cooking, can be mixed with water and/or tofu to make a delicious omelette or filling for a quiche. It can be used in baking as well, with great results.

AQUAFABA, the liquid from a can of chickpeas, can replace the eggs in homemade mayo or aioli, as well as in meringue and other baked goods. About 3 tablespoons of aquafaba makes one egg equivalent, or 2 tablespoons for an egg white. Other egg replacements include mashed banana or sweet potato, applesauce, as well as ground flax seeds or chia seeds mixed with water. [Here](#) are seven egg substitutes for baking.

ESSENTIAL FLAVOR-AGENTS

Tamari, miso, vegetable broth, oils, citrus and vinegars, nutritional yeast, mustard, olives, capers, dried chiles and chile condiments, herbs, and spices. Indian black salt seasoning has an eggy flavor, reminiscent of sulfur, that you may be missing in a veganized egg dish. Load up on these. If it tastes good, you won't miss the meat!

SAMPLE MAKEOVER

One of my favorite dinners growing up was a **spaghetti bolognese** (without the side salad). This makeover is kid-friendly, and easy.

Bolognese is a rich, hearty sauce that's usually made with carrots, celery, and onions, canned tomatoes and tomato paste, herbs and warming spices like basil and nutmeg, and sometimes some wine and cream. All that flavor already comes from plants, and if you want to make it creamy, simply use one of the plant-milks suggested above, unsweetened.



Lentil-walnut bolognese is a comfort dinner. Photo Source: Alec Tilly

For the meat, I like to use a mix of lentils, walnuts, and mushrooms for the right combination of texture and flavor. Simply cook about a cup of lentils in water or vegetable broth, then drain and add to a food processor along with equal parts walnuts and a couple cups of cremini mushrooms. Process until it is chunky, like ground meat.

After sautéing your onion, celery, carrots, and garlic, add the lentil mixture to the pot, and cook until the water has evaporated. Add tomatoes, spices, salt, wine, and cream, if using, then simmer for as long as you wish, at least a half hour for the flavors to deepen.

Serve it on top of spaghetti, and top with chopped parsley and some nutritional yeast. Use garlic bread toasted in olive oil to mop up the sauce. Enjoy!

Alec Tilly is a News Fellow at [Stone Pier Press](#) based in San Francisco, CA.



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