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## Veganism is no sacrifice

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When Rithika Ramesh invited her friends over for her 25th birthday last year, they were sceptical about a 'party'. Having just turned vegan, she herself was nervous but she "made sure they were pleasantly surprised when they came". She cooked up a feast of whole-wheat pasta, Thai curry, breads, cashew dips and a chocolate cake - all vegan - and judging by her friends' reactions, they turned out pretty good too.

"Vegan food can be tasty," says Ramesh, and almost as if to prove a point to her sceptical friends and relatives, she started The Green Stove, a vegan bakery, in February this year. She started with baked goodies such as cakes, cookies, breads and mousse, and when people started asking for vegan food options Ramesh plunged into pastas, Thai curries, pizzas, cheeses, quiches and nachos.

She belongs to a close-knit but growing community of vegans in the city who are helping to spread the vegan way of life. Every year, vegans around the world celebrate November 1 as World Vegan Day. As part of the celebrations, Bangalore is hosting the regional conference of the The International Vegetarian Union (IVU).

One of the key topics of the two-day conference, which ends today, is vegan food and its different aspects. "For a conscious vegan, there are not many options available in India at present, as more and more traditionally vegan food items are getting tainted with unhealthy animal ingredients," says Shankar Narayan, president, Indian Vegan Society.

### Not just a Western menu

India, say most vegans, is by and large almost vegan considering its vegetarian diet. Narayan, who is based in rural Karnataka, confesses: "Rural India is more vegan friendly compared to affluent urban India." But the irony, for Swati Save, 40, who settled in India two years back, is that in a country that is so vegetarian, the vegan food available is very western. "Vegan food is mostly western dishes like salads, pastas, cakes, muffins, etc. Here you have to search for shops to get vegan ingredients, most of which are located in South Mumbai," says this vegan of 10 years.

To celebrate Diwali, Save has come up with a spread of vegan Diwali sweets, each named after different states of India. So, there is Uttar Pradesh *nankhatais*, Kashmiri vegan oat nectar and almond brittle candy (similar to *chikki*), Goan vegan pear banana melba, Sindhi vegan *toshe* (similar to *shankarpali*), Maharashtraian vegan oat besan barfi and vegan *chiwda*, and Bengali dark chocolate. And if that doesn't sound appealing enough, there are always vegan cupcakes to fall back on.

Marisa Paolillo-Patel, 36, founder of the catering service Angel Food, usually gets clients from South Mumbai. "From what I have seen, veganism is either a very elitist choice of lifestyle, or it entails making big sacrifices," she says. For her, the biggest sacrifice has been giving up desserts. Not surprisingly, living in a country where milk and milk products form a large part of everyday food, giving these up can be the most trying.

To compensate, Patel's dessert repertoire includes all her favourites: cakes, parfaits, mousse, cookies, fudge and granola. Her focus though is healthy and organic vegan food and her largely Mediterranean menu, which she dishes up from her Malabar Hill home, uses a lot of fruits, nuts and wholegrains. "If you use mushrooms, potatoes, nuts and grains in the right way, you need not look outside for meat replacements," she says.

### Getting inventive with food

That the vegans in the city are a small and close-knit group is apparent from the few workshops, cooking classes and potluck dinners that are held regularly. Spearheading this is Dr Nandita Shah, founder and director of Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature (SHARAN). She conducts cooking classes in India and abroad so as to popularise the variety of vegan options available. "I serve three meals at my workshops to familiarise people with vegan food," she says.

For those looking for specific vegan options when eating out, there are a few: Falafel outlets, China Garden's mock meat dishes, Kala Ghoda Café that has a vegan snack and serves soy milk shakes, the Bagel Shop, Le Pizzeria and Ray's Cafeteria at Bandra that serves vegan pizza, and Café Coffee Day with its vegan coffee.

Most vegans, however, prefer experimenting at home.



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Sneha Poojary, 23, a freelance event manager, is known in the vegan group for dishing up the best vegan pizza using bread topped with capsicum, brinjal, tomato puree, tulsii instead of basil, vegan mozzarella cheese and sometimes mushrooms. She says her chocolate cake made with wheat bread, Bournville chocolate, almonds and soy milk is a huge hit at her home. "When you go vegan you have to get inventive with food, especially the desserts," says Poojary.

Dr Shah hopes to start a catering service to deliver low-cost healthy vegan lunchboxes, and a vegan store that will stock food replacements, personal care products, books, and more. "We plan to launch a range of vegan dairy products in the city as well as introduce more vegan options at restaurants in the city," says Himani Shetty, 35, campaign coordinator for vegan and leather projects, PETA. A vegan for nearly two years, cooking vegan food is a trial-and-error process for her. With the help of Dr Shah, who "has a recipe for everything", Shetty can dish up kheema, bolognese, stuffed turkey, shepherd's pie, Mangalorean curries and Chinese food using vegan substitutes.

At home or outside, vegans in the city do not mind the extra experimentation and challenge that goes in cooking vegan food. As Paolillo-Patel puts it, "The idea is to cook up wholesome and healthy food without feeling like it's a sacrifice."

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