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Chefs explain how even vegetarians can find comfort food



A roasted cauliflower with anchovy pesto, arugula, pine nuts and parmesan cheese is seen served at the Public House Restaurant inside the Grand Canal Shoppes at the Venetian casino-hotel Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

By **HEIDI KNAPP RINELLA**
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Chilly winter days have us crying out for comfort food: pot roast, short ribs, maybe meatloaf.

But what if you're a vegetarian — or at least trying to incorporate more vegetable-based dishes into your diet? Does vegetarianism dictate a sentence of salads and steamed vegetables? Do vegetarian comfort foods exist?

That would be no, and yes. But first, let's consider the meaning of "comfort food."

"I would define it as anything you would cook at home and find it reminds you of your childhood," said Anthony Meidenbauer, corporate executive chef and director of culinary operations for Block 16 Hospitality, whose restaurants include Public House at the Grand Canal Shoppes and Holstein's at The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas. "You could do stews and stuff."

Which sound like they would, by definition, incorporate meat, but Meidenbauer said that's not always the case.

"Do pot roasts with vegetables instead of using meat," he said. "Use hearty sauces, slowly braised and stewed, to give you that rich, unctuous type of stew texture without using the meat."

Use hearty winter squashes, he said, and root vegetables.

"Build them exactly as you would a stew," he said, starting with the mirepoix mixture of chopped onion, carrot and celery, plus tomato paste and red wine.

"I like to take the hearty root vegetables, dicing those up and roasting them first in the oven, and getting some nice caramelization on it," he said. "It doesn't take as long to cook because you're not using those rough cut types of meat. Cook it a half-hour and serve over mashed potatoes or boiled noodles, just like you would do a regular beef stew."

Meidenbauer said his favorite vegetarian comfort food is roasted cauliflower with anchovy pesto and pine nuts. (His use of anchovies in the sauce obviously isn't a strict interpretation of vegetarianism.)

"Topped with some dressed arugula and shaved Parmesan cheese, it makes for an amazing meal that is perfect for those chilly winter nights," he said.

Cauliflower also is a popular vegetarian comfort food at La Cave at Wynn Las Vegas and Crush at the MGM Grand, said Billy DeMarco, corporate executive chef for the Morton Group.

"Our roasted cauliflower, a lot of people don't do that," DeMarco said. "We jazz it up with chili, mint, garlic — something a little more creative.

"I love the beets that we do" at La Cave, roasted whole on a bed of salt. We cook them with a little sherry vinegar, a little butter, a little whipped goat cheese and pistachios."

Mushroom grits, he said, is another staple of the restaurant.

"People shy away from grits," DeMarco said. "We add chives, mushrooms, make it very unique and heavy."

Another kitchen secret, he said, is cashew cream.

"It's a great vegan/vegetarian item that is awesome in soup," DeMarco said, "and it helps thicken sauces. When you soak the cashews overnight, it gets all the impurities out of the nut. It's just like a thickening agent. It's a very cool, unique item."

And you don't have to completely shy away from salads, just make them warm. DeMarco uses a warm mushroom vinaigrette on salads. Lyle Kaku, chef of Cleo at the SLS Las Vegas, takes that a step further by starting the salad in a wood-burning oven.

"Right now we're taking carrots and cauliflower and romanesco and some fennel and we roast it in the wood oven," he said. "With quinoa, frisee, cumin, cilantro, Moroccan-spiced almonds and a little red wine vinaigrette, it's a nice warm and hearty salad."

Some of Cleo's other vegetarian comfort foods include vegetable beignets, made with seasonal vegetables and served with Cleo Ranch, and ricotta dumplings, which are coated in semolina.

Barry Dakake may be executive chef of a steakhouse — N9NE Steakhouse, at the Palms — but he said he prepares plenty of vegetarian dishes.

"It happens almost every day," Dakake said. "When you're dealing with a lot of covers in a restaurant, you're always going to get different challenges that come up. We always want to oblige the customer."

And Dakake has a slightly different definition of "comfort food."

"When you say 'vegetarian,' it's up to me to go up to the table: 'What can I do for you? Tell me what you can and can't eat; that way, I can pick your brain.'

"We don't just throw slop on a dish. We make them feel comfortable that they're going to be able to get a great vegetarian meal. When you say, 'comfort food' — we all eat because we're hungry. When we eat, we're comfortable. I think the biggest thing is I go out and meet the guests. Any food that I give them, they're going to be comfortable."

"Not everybody wants to go with salads and a vegetable platter," DeMarco said. "You want to try to be a little creative, and have a little more fun."

ROASTED CAULIFLOWER WITH ANCHOVY PESTO

1 head cauliflower

1 cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for tossing cauliflower and arugula

Salt, to taste

Pepper, to taste

1 tablespoon anchovies

1 teaspoon fresh garlic

1 tablespoon Dijon mustard

¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese

1 egg yolk

Tabasco

½ teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

2 teaspoons lemon juice, plus more for tossing arugula

2 teaspoons toasted pine nuts

Shaved Parmesan cheese

2 cups baby arugula, tossed in oil and lemon

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Clean and break up cauliflower into small (approximately 1-inch) flowerets, lightly toss in oil and season with salt and pepper. Place on sheet tray and bake 30 minutes, or until tender and lightly caramelized.

In a blender place anchovies, garlic, mustard, Parmesan and egg yolk. Blend briefly until smooth and change to lowest setting. While running, slowly add 1 cup olive oil in a small stream to emulsify.

Remove mixture from blender and place in a bowl. Season with Tabasco, Worcestershire sauce, lemon juice, salt and pepper.

Toss cooked cauliflower in dressing and pine nuts. Place on a platter and top with shaved Parmesan and arugula.

— Recipe from Chef Anthony Meidenbauer