

Vegan Food Snob Mini-Guide to Restaurants in the Quiet Corner

By Mark Mathew Braunstein

Call me a food snob. Most restaurant dishes are overloaded with salt, refined sugar, and motor grade oil, so for nourishing food I grow some myself and prepare most of it at home. Nevertheless, socializing with friends at restaurants does provide a more enjoyable dining experience than sitting home alone eating raw sprouts. So being both indulgently decadent and gratefully affluent, I do eat at restaurants.

And call me a vegan food snob. I prefer to dine only at eateries that placate finicky vegans by identifying their dishes with the word Vegan right on their menus. By vegan, I don't mean industrialized and chemicalized mock meats designed for meat eaters who wish they didn't eat meat and for vegans who wish they did. Hence this a mini-guide is intended for omnivores, vegans, and anyone who prefers to eat real food.

Danielson:
Heirloom Food Company

Griswold:
Mei's Kitchen

Mansfield Center:
Fenton River Grill

Willimantic:
Trigo Wood Fired Pizza
Willimantic Food Co-op

HEIRLOOM FOOD COMPANY

in Danielson
www.EatHeirloomFood.com

Food here is fresh, whole grain, often organic, often local, and mostly (not all) vegan. Quote: "At Heirloom all of our recipes begin vegan. That means, with the exception of two items (tuna and turkey), everything at Heirloom can be ordered vegan. All of our soups, baked goods and prepared foods are always made vegan." For cheese, you can choose either cow cheese or vegan cheese.

Open until 5pm, Heirloom serves breakfast and lunch. The soups are always thick and luscious. The sandwiches are tall and meticulously crafted. To truly appreciate their contents, I eat with a fork and drill down layer by layer. The salads are wholesome and large, with many add-ons to make them even larger. My two favorite add-ons are the thinly sliced Tempeh and the Mock Chick Salad.

The person who takes your order often also prepares it, so waitstaff are fully knowledgeable about all the ingredients. Three idyllic eating areas complement the food. (Even the parking lot is idyllic.) Its interior hosts many booth-like nooks that provide an intimate dining experience. The patio and the shaded deck overlooking Main Street both offer outdoor dining. Exotic plants sometimes from nearby Logee's Greenhouse (worth your visit!) decorate both indoors and outdoors. During summer, the outdoor plants are especially bountiful. As are the plant-based foods.

One mile off I-395, this café is especially worth visiting around Halloween when a few blocks south of it Davis Park is occupied by an army of homemade scarecrows.

MEI'S KITCHEN in Griswold
www.MeisKitch3n.com

First, an advisory. Asian-American restaurants are no more a safe haven for vegans than any other ethnic eatery. Often you will find fish and other sea animals listed as menu items in their "vegetarian" sections. Unlisted ingredients in sauces can include furtive fish, clandestine clam, or covert oyster. For instance, fish swim in the sauces of all Thai-American restaurants. Both a cultural divide and a language barrier separate American vegans from Asian-American waitstaff.

Mei's, however, is different. Mei's passes both my sniff and taste tests. Its extensive "vegetarian" menu not only is truly all vegetarian, but also all vegan. (Its menu heralds the 21st century, but its vocabulary is still stuck in the 20th.) While the veg menu largely consists of mock meats made from either soy protein or wheat gluten, there's also a plentiful array of wholesome vegetables, with or without tofu.

Chinese-American eateries typically serve sugary-sweet red sauces or clam- or oyster-based brown sauc-

es. My tender palate prefers the brown sauces, of course here minus the clam and oyster. Among those, I recommend the Mixed Vegetables (with or without Tofu) and the Triple Green. Note that Triple Green appears in the printed menu's Veg section, but among the online menu's Healthy Specials, which include many vegan dishes, too.

For one-dollar more, Mei's offers brown rice, not white. The nutritional difference between brown and white is slight. But both for the restaurant that serves it and for the diner who orders it, choosing brown rice is a social statement advocating nutrition over convention. While brown rice is simple to prepare, it is easy to ruin. Mei's brown rice is perfect, and always packed to the brim. All entrées, too, are packed to the brim, enough for two portions.

Mei's hosts a spacious dining area, but you serve yourself, so you might as well do takeout. When you're driving northbound on I-395, Mei's is a quick stop off of Exit 22. Driving southbound requires a few extra turns. Incidentally, Mei (pronounced "May") is a sweetheart.



FENTON RIVER GRILL in Mansfield Center
www.FentonRiverGrill.com

The printed menu and online PDF (not the web-pages) clearly mark with a V the Vegetarian (not necessarily Vegan) dishes. The Brussels Sprouts, for instance, lack a V for a good reason. They are made with fish sauce, standard for Thai but not American restaurants. When checking the online menus, be sure to view the extensive daily specials, lunch specials and dinner specials listed separately.

Its outstanding Vegan dish is Curry Vegan Shepherd's Pie. It is unique, even among vegan shepherd pies. *Connecticut Magazine* recognized its exceptional qualities, so highlighted it and even included its recipe in its July 2021 issue:

www.CtInsider.com/connecticutmagazine/food-drink/article/RECIPE-This-vegan-shepherd-s-pie-is-a-17046214.php

The spacious and picturesque interior is matched by its spacious and airy outdoor patio. There must be something in the water that is outdoorsy because Mansfield is also home to the Mansfield Drive-In, one of only two remaining drive-in movie theatres in Connecticut.

TRIGO WOOD FIRED PIZZA in Willimantic
www.TrigoKitchen.com

It's been said that an alcoholic can find booze even in a desert. Can a vegan find a full meal even in Willimantic? With the closure in 2023 of the all-vegetarian café, Not Only Juice (NOJ), Willimantic has lacked a full-time eatery catering to vegans. Offering the option of pizza with house-made vegan cheese, Trigo may yet become a vegan haven.

For vegans and omnivores alike, Trigo is a fun and friendly place to eat. Its attentive and informative waitstaff are super friendly, in fact even other customers are super friendly. Beyond pizza, its food menu is brief, but

it also offers a unique and delicately flavored house-made hummus. The crudités that accompany it, too, are unique, including white daikon radish. For me, the hummus was the main attraction. But for most people the pizza with cow cheese will be the main event. Its house-made vegan cheese is a treat. While I typically shun white flour, on the plus side its white flour crust is crisp and thin, so the white flour is minimal.

The postmodernist interior décor is inviting. The sturdy wooden tables are noteworthy, but the teeny tiny plastic schoolroom chairs are suitable only for leprechauns. Trigo is new, so the furnishings may still be only transitional. Maybe someday the uncomfortable chairs will be returned to that dumpster behind the local junior high school from which they may have been rummaged.

"Trigo" is Spanish for Wheat. (Wheat's binomial Latin genus name is *Triticum*.) Ironically, Trigo offers a wheat-free pizza crust, for a surcharge. Surcharge or not, I dream of the day when it will offer its vegan cheese pizza with whole wheat crust.

My food fantasies are best summarized in two mantras. Delicious *and* Nutritious.

WILLIMANTIC FOOD CO-OP in, you guessed it, Willimantic
www.WillimanticFood.coop

Willimantic Foods Coop is a blessing. The glorious and colorful produce section that greets you when you first enter is enhanced by the warmth and community of the staff and the other shoppers. The Co-op offers the best quality and widest variety of local and organic produce in all of Connecticut, and every day, not just on delivery days. In addition, it's open every day until 8pm.

Not quite an eatery, Willi Co-op does provide casual seating where you can imbibe in prepared foods from the fridge unit next to the coffee bar next to the seating area. Those prepared foods include my favorite of all store-bought hummus, Yalla Vermont hummus delivered from a vegetarian café in Brattleboro (not to be confused with Yalla hummus from Fairfield, CT), and desserts and entrées delivered from Shayna B's, an all-vegan and gluten-free café in Westbrook, CT. The Co-op has long-term plans to open an inhouse kitchen to offer its own takeout items, at which time it indeed will qualify as an eatery.

For 30 years, all food except for the dog and cat food sold in the Co-op was vegetarian. In 2005, membership voted on whether to allow the coop to sell meat, but meat was defeated. Then in 2010, while promoting the myth of "humane meat" (more accurately, "less inhumane meat") and by way of a pre-order buying club, meat was voted into office. The meat locker initially was sequestered in the back of the store, where few could be reminded of the Co-op's fall from innocence. But by 2014, meat began being sold openly in a freezer for all to view.

Nowadays its proportion of meat items remains smaller than at other food stores, so vegan coop members have learned to accept the reality of meat at the Co-op the same as more widely in our larger society. Same as I can hold dear my friends who eat meat, I still hold dear the Willi Co-op.

If by chance you have never been to Willimantic, you now have two reasons for visiting. The other reason is to view the Frog Bridge, the subject of the cover story of the June 2024 issue of *Neighbors*.

Mark Mathew Braunstein, a vegan since 1970, is the author of *Microgreen Garden*, *Sprout Garden*, and the first book to espouse veganism, *Radical Vegetarianism*. First published in 1981, *Rad Veg* was revised and republished in 2010 by Lantern Books. For a free PDF of the revised *Rad Veg*, contact the author at www.MarkBraunstein.Org

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