

Veggin' Out

More African Americans are putting the soul in plant-based cuisine.

BY NINA HEMPHILL REEDER

The plant-based diet is one of the fastest-growing food trends in the last decade. Some statistics point to as much as a sixfold increase in individuals identifying as vegan or vegetarian. But if you're slow to try out the trend because you've been raised to believe it's not something "for us," then think again. It may surprise some, but pockets of the black community have had a longstanding history with vegetarianism.

"My mother was a Rastafarian, so she didn't eat meat. So I was introduced to the lifestyle early on," says Pinky Cole, owner of Atlanta's insanely successful plant-based burger joint, Slutty Vegan. "At Clark Atlanta University in 2007, I was the weird kid. Everyone was like, 'you better get this chicken. What's wrong with you?'"

But in 2019, that mindset has completely shifted—whether due to a growing consciousness in healthy eating, an upsurge in better-tasting plant-based products and meat substitutes, a number of celebrities putting the lifestyle on display or even environmental concerns (according to United Nations research, the livestock industry accounts for nearly 15 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions). Whatever the factors, African Americans and mainstream society are viewing the diet more favorably.

For husband-and-wife restaurant team Marie-Maudelyne and Jhavaun Green, there are other reasons to come to the green side—two being mental clarity and increased energy. As followers of the late Dr. Sebi, a famous naturalist and herbalist, and his ex-wife "Mama Pill," the Greens use their Green Love Kitchen vegetarian restaurant to champion for farm-fresh, minimally processed, nutrient-dense foods to the largely black population of Lithonia, Ga.

"But we're about no judgment," the couple says, eschewing the guilt-trip recruitment tactic that many meat eaters fear. "Veganism isn't for everyone."

But the Greens do recommend adding more plant-based meals to your diet—whether that means making Meatless Monday a thing or just trying out more vegetarian/vegan options every now and then.



Still think plant-based is blah? There are plenty of soul brothers and sisters of the seasoning who are cooking up full-flavored meat-free cuisine nationwide. But if you're looking for a place to start, why not head to the South, the heart of soul food, to try out what's cooking in these black-owned vegan/vegetarian kitchens.

Green Love Kitchen

Lithonia, Ga.

Starting out as caterers and then running a food truck, chef Marie-Maudelyne Green and her husband Jhavaun serve up everything from kale wraps to acai bowls—they even offer options for pescatarians (greenlovekitchen.com).

Southern V

Nashville, Tenn.

Owned by wife-and-husband team Tiffany and Clifton Hancock, the vegan hotspot first started as a take-out-only food stand by Fisk University. Famous for their vegan hot chicken (a Nashville specialty), Southern V takes the title of the first 100-percent plant-based restaurant in the city (thesouthernv.com).



Better U Dining

Kissimmee, Fla.

With a surprisingly large Caribbean population in this Central Florida city, this Jamaican restaurant has become a community fixture thanks to owner Jackie Morris. As a registered nurse and certified dietitian, Morris aims to promote healthful eating, showcasing authentic Jamaican cuisine and ample vegan specialties on the menu (betterudining.com).

Nefetari's Fine Cuisine & Spirits

Tallahassee, Fla.

Not strictly vegan or vegetarian, but with a health-centric, farm-to-table mission, owner and executive chef Sharon makes sure that vegan, rawist and vegetarian options are abundant on her world cuisine menu (new.nefetaris.com).

Slutty Vegan

Atlanta

With sizeable lines acuminating daily outside her plant-based burger joint, Pinky Cole is fulfilling a mission to popularize veganism in the black community and beyond. With all the burgers donning names like Sloppy Toppo (a burger loaded with vegan cheese, jalapeños and more) and Dance Hall Queen (a burger with jerk plantains), Cole shows the world even vegans can have a naughty side (sluttyveganatl.com).

Local Green Atlanta

Atlanta

Owner Zachery "Big Zak" Wallace had the mission of bringing healthier options into Vine City's food desert. With a menu friendly to vegan, vegetarian and pescatarian diets, local patrons can dine on everything from cauliflower tacos to high-fiber smoothies (localgreenatlanta.com).

Sweet Soulfood NOLA Vegan Cuisine

New Orleans

Okra gumbo and chicken-fried cauliflower are just a few options dished out in this Tremé restaurant. The husband-and-wife owners Anthony and Chetwan Smith also make a point not to neglect your sweet tooth with vegan-friendly New Orleans signature desserts, like pralines and bread pudding (sweetvegansoulfood.com).

It's Beyond **question:** **meat substitutes** **are here to stay.**

A recent surge in the availability of flavor-comparable meat substitutes has given the vegan/vegetarian lifestyle new...well, life. And it's also luring over curious meat eaters, who may have previously scoffed at the idea that adequate protein could come from plants.

Plant-based meat producer Beyond Meat is evidence of this. The California-based vegan meat startup recently went public, garnering the most successful IPO of 2019, even outshining Uber. But even before its stock market success, the company was backed by a number of big names, including Bill Gates, Leonardo DiCaprio and Seth Goldman, the co-founder of the Honest Tea brand and now the executive chairman of Beyond Meat. For Goldman, a vegetarian of 13 years, the product has been a game changer on all levels—from personally to globally.

"We had stopped eating what we loved when we became vegetarian, and it was something we missed even though we felt good about the choice," Goldman says about meals like grilled burgers and sausages. "But now we've got products like Beyond Meat products, and it's been wonderful.

"We believe that with products like the Beyond Burger and Beyond Sausage, people can continue to enjoy the foods they love," he says about their gluten-free, soy-free products. "They can just do it with a lighter environmental footprint and obviously a better health impact as well."

Healthwise, the Beyond Meat products boast no cholesterol and half the saturated fat of animal meat. Environmentally, the products claim to have a "dramatically lighter" carbon footprint than meat industry products (which, according to Goldman, specifically totals up to "99 percent less water [usage], 93 percent less land [usage] and 90 percent fewer greenhouse gas emissions").

And some research takes a bit more of an apocalyptic tone, theorizing that the new wave of alt-meats could literally save the world from the brink of self-destruction. Even 2020 presidential hopeful and vegan Cory Booker was quoted issuing a warning about the alleged unsustainability of the current meat industry.

But health and environmental claims aren't the sole source of Beyond's success. The true persuasion has been the nearly comparable taste. Meat eaters have fully embraced the alternative meat brand—in certain stores, up to 90 percent of Beyond Meat patrons aren't even vegetarian, Goldman says. And with more restaurant chains, grocery stores and food vendors picking up the Beyond products and other vegan meat products, it's safe to say plant-based meats are well beyond a passing trend.

