

HOW TO PLAN A vegetarian wedding

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One couple and their wedding caterer reveal how their vegetarian menu turned out to be a highlight of their celebrations.

'On our special day we didn't want to support the meat industry by serving up steak, and being a vegetarian couple it just felt the right choice to make our wedding exclusively veggie,' says Sarah Foster, who married Jamie Foster on 20 July 2013 in a beautiful sunny ceremony at a country barn venue in East Sussex.

With many vegetarians and vegans sharing Jamie and Sarah's view that it goes against everything they believe in to serve meat to their guests on the most important day of their lives, more couples are finding the confidence to reject the 'veggie option' in favour of going completely meat- and/or dairy-free at their wedding breakfast.

Sarah, a professional actress and owner of Toadstool Parties, a children's entertainment business, and Jamie, now a special needs teacher working with adults with Asperger's and autism, first met when they were both employed as actors for a touring production of *Scooby Doo*, the stage show. 'It was an American company and Sarah and I were the only English actors, which gave us something in common straight away and we started hanging out together,' says Jamie. 'That was six and a half years ago and we've never looked back!'

The couple also discovered a mutual interest in the vegetarian lifestyle, although their culinary backgrounds were poles apart. 'I was brought up as purely vegetarian since birth,' says Sarah. 'When I met Jamie he had long wanted to be veggie but growing up in Northern England in a very meat-and-two-veg environment it was more difficult to make the transition, and when we met he saw it as a great opportunity to give it a go.'

'When I was growing up I had a massive love for animals,' says Jamie. 'But I never connected this with what I ate. But when I was about nine years old I was on a plane going on holiday and I just had this moment where I didn't want to eat the bacon because it came from pigs and it felt wrong. But at that age it was difficult to sustain being vegetarian and gradually meat crept back into my diet again. Then, when I met Sarah, I realised it was the right time to try again and it's really easy and natural now.'

Vows and values

When it came to planning their wedding, the couple knew they wanted a celebration that reflected their personalities and values. 'We wanted a natural, outdoors ceremony,

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JAMIE AND SARAH'S WEDDING MENU

MEZZE STARTER PLATTERS

Falafel, salsa romesco, chive and caper hummus, char-grilled artichokes, mixed marinated olives, sun-dried tomatoes, pickled garlic, roasted aubergine purée, rocket salad, olive and rosemary focaccia

MAIN SHARING PLATTERS

Caramelised red onion, Brie and basil tart tatine

Mediterranean-style stuffed mushrooms

Butternut squash, yellow pepper and thyme

Spanish omelette

Mixed roast vegetable and feta salad with quinoa tabbouleh

Cherry tomato, cucumber, olive, basil and sourdough crouton salad

Mixed artisan breads

Strawberry and Champagne sorbet shots

DESSERTS

Raspberry chocolate pots

Berry and rose pavlova

Banoffee pie



TOP 10 TIPS FOR VEGETARIAN OR VEGAN WEDDING PERFECTION

- 1 GET REFERENCES** Before booking a caterer, ask to see their portfolio of previous events, including menus and photos, and if they've not been personally recommended, ask to be put in touch with a previous client to check their credentials.
- 2 QUIZ YOUR CATERER** Especially if you're using a venue's in-house chef or a caterer that is not a vegetarian or vegan specialist, check they are experienced enough to be aware of problematic ingredients, such as Parmesan, honey, gelatin or non-vegetarian wine.
- 3 CONSIDER THE SEASON** A hearty pie might suit a winter wedding but it won't necessarily be right for high summer, even if it is your favourite dish. Local and seasonal produce is usually fresher, tastier, more eco-friendly and is often better for your budget too.
- 4 CHECK DIETARY REQUIREMENTS** On your invitations, it's a good idea to ask guests to inform you of any dietary issues such as nut allergies or gluten intolerance, and give your caterer plenty of notice.
- 5 TRY SOMETHING NEW** It's easy to get into a food rut, so to make your celebration really memorable ask your caterer to suggest something special and surprising that will be a new experience for everyone – even for you.
- 6 INTRODUCE VARIETY** Opting for tapas-style or buffet dining with lots of dishes (including a few safe options) offers a wider choice if you've got a large number of guests who may be nervous about exclusively veggie food.
- 7 TASTE TEST** Always request a tasting session for your complete menu in advance to check the flavours, quality and presentation of the food and make sure the dishes work together.
- 8 SCOPE OUT THE VENUE** If you're using an outside caterer, arrange a site visit to your venue to ensure they are familiar with the kitchen, dining area and the equipment available.
- 9 LISTEN TO ADVICE** If your caterer raises concerns about the feasibility of your chosen menu or the logistics of the food service, do take them seriously. They may be able to help come up with solutions to any problems that arise and find an agreeable compromise.
- 10 MAKE A LIST** Find out exactly what your caterer is providing and what you need to arrange or source from other suppliers to avoid last-minute panics and to ensure nothing is forgotten on the day.



to get married under the sky; this was something we were quite adamant about,' says Sarah. 'But then we discovered you can't get legally married outside, so we did the legal bit at a registry office in Richmond the week before, and then for our outdoor ceremony we read vows that we had written ourselves and we made it really personal.'

As many people discover when they set out to find the perfect place to hold their wedding, it's not easy to find a venue that will give you complete control of every aspect of the day. In fact, for many couples wanting a fully vegetarian or vegan reception, choosing a venue that allows them to bring in their own caterer usually gives them much more freedom with the menu – for example, a community hall or a marquee in a garden or on private land. 'When we looked at venues most

of them seemed to offer a series of pre-defined wedding packages, but we wanted something more personal,' says Sarah. 'We were very lucky to find a private property that could be our blank canvas, which was the beautiful Peelings Manor Barn in East Sussex.' (Note: this venue is on a private property and is currently unavailable for 2014/2015 due to ongoing renovation work.)

Some friends had used John Bayley's company Cashew Catering for their wedding and recommended him to Sarah and Jamie. 'We knew that the vast majority of our guests would be meat-eaters and I thought it would be a great opportunity to show, with the help of a fantastic caterer, how amazing vegetarian food can be and the variety of flavours and textures you can get – traditional meat-eaters often tend to assume it's quite bland



John Bayley of Cashew Catering



and boring and that we just eat cheese sandwiches or pasta with tomato sauce!' laughs Sarah.

'Our wedding menu featured a variety of mezze sharing dishes to start with, incorporating lots of textures and flavours with artisan breads. It was really interesting, proper veggie food. This is part of what really appealed to us about using John, because we spoke to another vegetarian caterer and it was the typical goat's cheese tart and mushroom risotto offerings, but John is really well travelled so he brings inspiration to his food from all over the world. He had things on the menu that we'd never heard of before - like za'atar - which made it really special and exciting for us too and not just for our guests.'

Specialist catering

John honed his professional cooking skills while running Nature's Plate, a festival catering business that he set up 13 years ago with a friend while studying a two-year hospitality management course at Brighton University. 'I had been very much self-trained as a chef, and I decided to do the course to brush up on the management side of running a catering business,' says John.

Previous to this, he had travelled widely, everywhere from India to Australia and New

Zealand, absorbing a range of vegetarian food influences along the way, returning to the UK every summer to work for a festival caterer. Then, while he was taking the hospitality course, he also had an opportunity to consolidate his vegan cooking skills in the US.

'The Savoy Hotel Group offered funding for students to further their education in the hospitality field outside the UK,' says John. 'I found a vegan cooking school in Colorado and I managed to get funding to go there and do their full programme, which was a fantastic experience - not least because I met my incredible future wife over there! After that I spent about four or five years running Nature's Plate back in the UK, but when our children came along it was really tough combining a young family with working the festival circuit.'

Looking for a fresh start, the family moved from Exeter to Lewes and John spent a couple of years working in school catering and at a veggie café/restaurant, while nurturing the concept for Cashew Catering and developing the website in his own time, until an opportunity came up to cover a shift at Tilton House in Firl, East Sussex, one of the leading private retreat centres in the UK. 'I ended up taking over the catering contract



there about four years ago,' he says. 'So that's when Cashew Catering was first officially born.'

Getting the details right

Tilton House is still one of John's main clients, but he now provides catering for weddings and other events as well as cookery classes, specialising in vegan, vegetarian, raw, gluten-free and dairy-free food.

'Certainly in the last year or two I've seen demand for exclusively veggie weddings increasing. It may be a sweeping statement to make, but I find most vegetarians' attitude to life is often a bit more understanding and realistic - in my experience anyway - so I've been lucky and never really had to deal with any so-called 'bridezillas!'

While every event provides a different challenge, these days John has the benefit of years of experience in event catering and understands the devil is in the detail. 'The planning stage is so important - making an advance site visit to the venue, for example, so I can see the kitchen and the space I'll be working with to predict any possible issues,'

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he explains. 'I also make a list of every single item and ingredient I'll be bringing with me, and make a note of everything that needs to be provided by the couple or other suppliers so nothing vital gets left out.'

So what are the most common requests for John's vegetarian wedding menus? 'People usually want a star of the show, a real centrepiece dish, often something involving pastry such as a beautiful tart. So in early summer it might be an asparagus and mushroom tart, something that looks very pretty and decadent,' he says. 'Dishes like this are also popular with the meat-eaters as they are not too "wholefood" or "lentilly"! My raw chocolate torte is very popular and we also do strawberry Champagne sorbet shots, which people really love.'

The taste test

While some couples rely on John's experience to devise a suitable menu, usually with plenty of input on their wedding theme and personal preferences, other couples already know exactly what they want – or at least think they do.

'Our favourite meal is a Sunday dinner, a nut roast with all the trimmings, so this was the first idea we suggested to John,' says Jamie. 'But then we went to the tasting session when he presented all the food for us to try and it was a hot day and we were so stuffed afterwards. I have a hearty appetite but I didn't eat again until lunchtime the next day! The food was gorgeous but we realised it wasn't right for a summer wedding. Part of our brief was that we wanted to create a dining experience based on a sharing ritual, to bring people together over the food. So John went away and put together a mezze-style sharing menu, and even just reading the list of dishes blew us away.'



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'When I look back, I think we wasted John's experience initially because we were so set on our nut roast,' laughs Jamie. 'But he never contradicted our choice, he let us try it and find out for ourselves. Maybe if he'd told us from the start that a nut roast wouldn't be suitable, we might have always wondered "What if?" Now we know we ended up with the best possible menu because we let him use his creativity.'

It can seem like a brave choice to make your wedding completely vegetarian or vegan, especially if you come from a more

traditional background and your wider family are confirmed carnivores, but as Sarah and Jamie discovered, it can also add a real wow factor to your big day. 'If you have any doubts or apprehensions from your family or guests about going completely veggie, we found that on the day itself everyone loved it,' says Jamie. 'After all, they are there for you and will embrace your choice, and with the right caterer they may just be blown away by it too.'

● To find out more about Cashew Catering, go to www.cashewcatering.co.uk

THE COMPLETE ETHICAL WEDDING

IF YOU'RE OPTING FOR A MORE ETHICAL CELEBRATION, CHOOSING THE RIGHT CATERER IS JUST THE START...



Wedding jewellery

You can commission new rings made from recycled gold and gemstones or buy antique pieces. For new jewellery, ensure you buy Fairtrade gold and traceable, non-conflict diamonds.



The paper trail

Weddings leave quite a paper trail, so opt for recycled or reusable materials (such as chalk and blackboards) for menus, place cards, orders of service, table plans, invitations and thank-you cards. Or go paperless and send invitations and wedding updates by email or via a blog or social media pages.



The bar

While you may know that not all booze is veggie, check your caterer, bar service or venue can source certified vegetarian or vegan drinks. If you're buying-in your own alcohol, try an ethical supplier such as www.vintageroots.co.uk or www.abelandcole.co.uk.



Local flowers

Seasonal, British-grown flowers are the most ethical choice. Ask your florist to use our native flora and fauna, and consider hiring one of a growing number of organic and eco-friendly florists that use homegrown flowers to cut the carbon footprint for your wedding bouquet – or consider growing your own at home. If you really want exotic imported blooms, choose a Fairtrade supplier.

Vegan cakes

Increasing numbers of specialist bakers are providing vegan wedding cakes and you can also choose to make your own, or ask a foodie friend or relative to make one as a wedding gift.

TURN TO PAGE 34 FOR A STUNNING WEDDING CAKE RECIPE!



Ethical clothing

Silk, the most popular fabric used to make wedding dresses (and posh ties and waistcoats for the men), is not vegetarian or vegan, as the method used to harvest the silk cocoons in commercial manufacturing involves boiling the cocoons with the live silk moth still entombed inside. As around 6,600 cocoons are required to make just one kilo of silk in normal production, it's insecticide on a massive scale. Look for ethically and humanely produced 'wild' or 'peace' silk or choose an alternative material. For ethical couture gowns, try www.tammam.co.uk.



Don't forget your feet

Vegan or vegetarian shoes made with no silk or leather are the ideal choice for an ethical wedding, so brides and bridesmaids can check out sites such as www.beyondskin.co.uk, while grooms may find something at www.vegetarian-shoes.co.uk.

