



# VEGAN FARE RULES IN CATTLE COUNTRY

## An All-Vegan Cafeteria Scores Big With Students

By David Yeager

From a small seed something big can grow.

The University of North Texas (UNT) found that out when it decided to convert one of the dining halls on its Denton, Texas, campus to an all-vegan cafeteria called Mean Greens. Although the change was announced only in the university's in-house magazine and on the school's website, news of the vegan dining hall spread like wildfire. Within three weeks of the announcement, UNT's public relations office began fielding inquiries from newspapers, TV stations, major news networks, and European universities.

It turns out that while several university campuses offer a variety of vegan food options, an all-vegan cafeteria was a virtually unheard of concept. As far as anyone could determine, no other university in the United States—or possibly in the world—had done this before. The fact that the decision to develop an all-vegan cafeteria came from a simple desire to create more healthful food offerings for UNT students made the outpouring of curiosity that much more surprising.

"We have five cafeterias on campus, and we had a good number of vegan students ask for vegan food in the cafeterias," says Shohreh Sparks, UNT's director of resident dining. "So we decided it was best, since we have five cafeterias, to change one of them to all vegan."

Sparks says another reason UNT created an all-vegan dining hall was because of the difficulty of preventing cross contamination between vegan food and animal products. In addition,

many students had expressed interest in eating more healthful food options. Since there was sufficient demand and the university had the space available, it seemed like a logical step—UNT administrators gave it the green light.

### Unlikely to Succeed

But while the decision made perfect sense to the UNT administration, establishing an all-vegan cafeteria might seem like an endeavor unlikely to succeed in the heart of Texas, otherwise known as cattle country. After all, there's a reason the words "Texas" and "barbecue" often appear in the same sentence. Plus, considering the dining hall was the least populated on campus before becoming vegan, UNT's dining services didn't expect it to be an instant blockbuster. Yet to everyone's surprise, it was.

Since Mean Greens opened its doors in August, it's been generating brisk business. On some days lines stretch out the door, and it can be tough to find a seat, says Ken Botts, UNT's director of special projects. Students who weren't sure whether they'd like vegan food have given it a try, and many have been pleasantly surprised.

"It was actually not what I expected," says A. J. Brown, a UNT student. "When I first tried it, it was much better than I had expected it [to be] because I couldn't imagine what kind of food variations they [could] have with just vegetables and things like that. I think, for the most part, a lot of people have a good response to it." Brown, who isn't a vegan, says corn, mashed potatoes, broccoli, and sweet potato fries are among his Mean Greens favorites. As a participant in UNT's secret shopper program, he's eaten at all of UNT's dining halls, and he's been impressed by Mean Greens' offerings. He admits, though, that some students equate meat with a meal.

Despite the skeptics, Brown says most students are open-minded about vegan cuisine. He says the desire for healthier foods and the attraction of trying something new are the main reasons for the great interest. But even if the novelty is encouraging people to give vegan fare a try, the only thing that will keep them coming back is good-tasting food.

Wanda White, UNT's culinary operations chef, is responsible for serving up tasty cuisine. She believes fresh food tastes best, so from the outset she decided to use only fresh ingredients and cook everything on site—which meant she had to retrain staff and spend more money on fruits and vegetables. White has received overtures from companies that produce premade vegan meals, but she doesn't waver from her stance on freshness. UNT buys as many fresh locally grown ingredients as it can, but because of climate limitations, some items aren't available in the region.

At times, finding substitute animal products has been a challenge. White says the first cheese substitute she tried for the macaroni and cheese “was enough to make you gag.” But she found a vegan cheese she likes better, as well as good-tasting vegan cream cheese and sour cream.

On any given day, students can choose from dishes such as tofu loaf, crunchy vegetable and brown rice salad, or Aztec quinoa salad. Mexican dishes and pasta are by far the most popular. White has incorporated plenty of fresh berries, herbs, and a wide variety of grains into the offerings. And she features a roasted bean of the day. To keep the menu appealing, White constantly seeks new recipes.

### Sweet Success

Since many desserts are made with butter, eggs, and cream, White waited until she perfected the main menu before focusing her attention on sweets. As a certified executive pastry chef, she wanted to ensure the desserts matched the quality of the food. It wasn’t long before she began testing recipes and cooking techniques. “I’ve actually made caramel sauce with margarine and soymilk,” White says. “And they said it couldn’t be done.”

White also has developed recipes for dishes such as strawberry shortcake, bananas Foster, peach cobbler, and carrot cake. Her chocolate cake is especially popular. Since developing the vegan menu, White says she has a newfound respect for the way vegans perceive food, and she’s proud of what UNT’s dining service has accomplished.

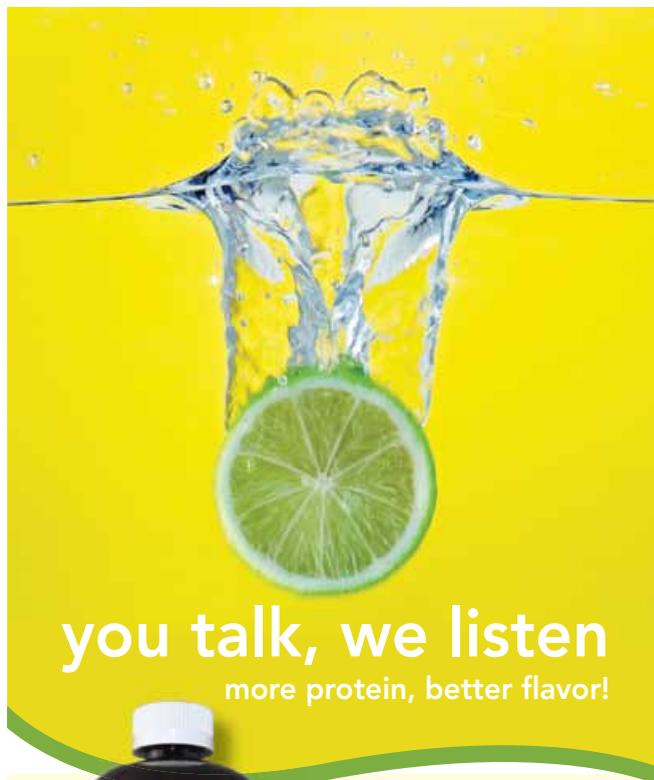
One organization that’s recognized Mean Greens for its stellar accomplishments is the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM). It gave UNT a 2011 Golden Carrot award for healthful innovations on its vegan menu. Botts says UNT is the first university to be recognized in this way; historically, the PCRM has reserved these awards for K-12 schools.

Despite how well Mean Greens is being received, UNT’s goal isn’t to influence students to become vegans but simply to offer more healthful menu choices. “In dining services, we don’t want to change the way people think about eating,” Botts says. “We’re not trying to convert students to veganism; we’re just trying to create more opportunities and variety through our offerings.”

Not all students are sold on the idea, but most of them seem to like the additional choices, and Botts thinks student response is the best indicator of success. Ultimately, Mean Greens’ success will be measured by its staying power. In the meantime, Brown, who at first wasn’t sure why the university opened a vegan dining hall, is glad it did.

“I think it’s a really good thing,” Brown says. “I think it should definitely continue.”

— David Yeager is a freelance writer and editor based in Royersford, Pennsylvania.



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