

**May / June Article**  
**Catersource**  
**The Vegetarian Guest**

For years I have heard the anxious angry cries of chefs while wielding dinner at “plate up time” denouncing the vegetarian request. It goes something like this. “Chef, I have a vegetarian guest at table six what do we have for her?” “No one told me there was a &#%#@)\* Vegetarian guest tonight”, screams the Chef. “Give them the veggies from the Crudités display... damn Vegetarians”, he resolves the issue.

If this sounds familiar to you, then you may want to take a look at the facts and remember that we are in this business to cater to all our guests needs. Here are a few facts about Vegetarians. According to “The Vegetarian Journal”: *In this year’s poll, 2.3 percent of adults aged 18 years or older say they never eat meat, fish, or fowl and, thus, are vegetarian. Furthermore, 6.7 percent of the total say they never eat meat. 1.5% are Vegans and do not eat any animal products with the possible exception of Honey.*

That translates into 6 guests at each 100 person event that are going to be happier with a vegetarian or fish entrée than a meat entrée. That is a much greater number than what we Chefs are experiencing, because some people just won’t eat the meal. That means we are shunning 6% of our guests. Of course the tricky part is that 14% do not eat fish. So what are we to do?

As professional Chefs it is time to become creative and exciting about how we treat this silent minority. Not because it is politically correct, but because it is just good business. You never know when the assistant to the President of that major corporation you have been trying to woo for years for some catering business may be at your next dinner and hoping for, but not requesting a Vegetarian option.

Now I hate when people come to me and say “we have an opportunity” and what they really mean is “we have a problem”. My response is normally that I would prefer I am told that we have problem so we can fix it. But in this case, I really feel we have an opportunity and here are three steps on how to handle this opportunity.

**Step One:** Develop and create Vegetarian menu items for first courses and entrees. In our repertoire, we have many dishes that are very easy for us to prepare and possess a very elegant and exciting appeal to any guest.

Our soup and salad concept seems to always be a winner. In any season of the year, we are able to create wonderfully enticing soups such as, Roasted Tomato Fennel, Green Apple Gazpacho, Roasted Beet and Onion or Summer Peach. Serve the Soup in a small rice bowl or a demi tasse cup and the pair it with a salad

that is also creatively displayed in either a small plum tomato, a roasted Apple or even tied in a bundle. The key to this presentation is that less is more. First course starters do not need to be huge, just delicious and appealing to the eye. The more plate you see, the better you have done to restrain yourself from making the course look crowded.

Other interesting ideas for first courses are ethnic choices such as Rice paper Summer Rolls with a Thai Dipping Sauce, Grilled Romaine Lettuce Draped in a Thin Slice of Buffalo Mozzarella accented by a Chipotle Caesar Dressing or a Provencal Roasted Tomato Brulee in a Buttery Tart Shell accompanied by a Small Frisse Slaw

To be a bit more traditional, you could assemble a Vegetable and Cheese Napoleon. These take some time to assemble at prep time, but are especially effective and very easy to serve on site, as they can be plated before dinner service begins, without any negative affect on the quality of the dish.

**Step Two:** Have the conversation with the client during the initial meeting. Many clients will not think of the needs there Vegetarian or non red meat eating guests have. In many cases the estimated number of Vegetarians will be severely underestimated by the client. Using the 5-6 percent estimation will save you many headaches and will also allow you to become a hero at the dinner.

By initiating the conversation on vegetarians, you also show diversity and detail to your prospective client. This creates a separation between you and your competition. If you have a written menu of choices or a photo journal of your vegetarian choices to show your clients, you will impress them even further.

**Step Three:** Instill a change in attitude throughout your culinary and Service. Lead by example by showing how colorful, delicious and dynamic a vegetarian dinner can be. When your team achieves an open mind and acceptance of this way of eating, they will shine in a new light. Train your service staff to ask if anyone is interested in a Vegetarian or Non Red meat course. Teach them to observe guests that are not eating their meal and have them inquire if they would prefer a different choice. You will be amazed at how far that good will can go. It almost always gets back to the host or hostess if special attention has been given to one of the guests.

Lift your team to new levels by opening their minds and letting them create new Vegetarian or Non Red Meat dishes that will show a small percentage of your clients that care about all of your guests and believe that everyone's meal should be created with equal effort and flair.