



Area Chefs Helping Vegans Get Their Seats at the Table

by Dan Aubrey

‘Since the beginning we were thinking about vegetarian,” chef Reggie Hallett tells me about providing vegan dishes for his restaurant with the very non-vegan name, the 1911 Smokehouse, on Front Street in downtown Trenton.

“We” includes Hallett’s brother, Maurice, who founded the downtown barbecue restaurant in 2015.

They are also part of a larger trend of restaurants hungry to cater to a non-carnivorous clientele.

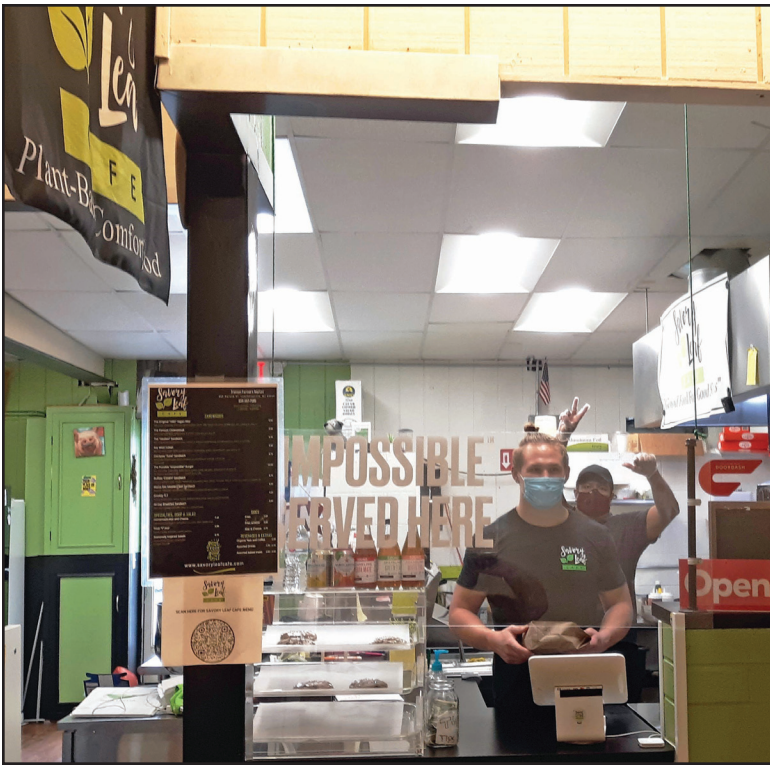
Reggie Hallett continues to tell me that reaching that market was on his mind from opening day when he started offering meat-free collard greens and baked beans.

He says having vegan and vegetarian items on the menu makes sense because it makes cents.

To make his point, Hallett sits back in his chair at a table out front of the former Tony Kall’s café — a place where politicians would chew the beef and exchanged the bull — and draws an imaginary pie with an ever-growing slice of vegan and vegetarian diners.

“From my experience in the restaurant industry, salads are usually the vegetarian or vegan dish,” he says, adding that it took him a while to come up with some more creative offerings.

He then lists offerings to make it clear the Smokehouse is more than its “you can’t beat our meat” slogan.



There are black bean empanadas for vegetarians, the vegan empanadas — made with a plant-based “vegan beef” — fried avocados, vegan sausage, and vegan wings — the latter being battered mushrooms tossed in one of the restaurants spicy sauces.

“I want to play around with tofu, but I haven’t had a chance yet,” he says.

That’s because he has assumed both chef and management duties after his brother moved out

of the region, though he still checks in remotely and makes monthly visits.

“I am basically running the business,” says Hallett, mentioning attempts to expand the restaurant on the family-owned property.

He says his recipe for approaching vegan cooking is based on his general approach to cooking — learning, experimenting, fine-tuning, and then taste testing.

He says he always liked cooking but got serious after working as a social worker in New York City, with special attention to situations



The Savory Leaf Cafe, left, is one of two fully vegan establishments at the Trenton Farmers Market. Reggie Hallett, above, has added numerous vegan and vegetarian options to the menu at the 1911 Smokehouse in Trenton.

at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. A 1981 graduate of Ewing High School with several years study at

St. Peter’s College in Jersey City, Hallett says one day he decided he wanted to cook and “like a con-

DAVID BRADLEY

CHOCOLATE FACTORY



SPOOK-TACULAR FAMILY FUN!



struction worker I bought some tools,” chef’s knives in his case, and pounded New York City pavements looking to start.

E.U. Restaurant executive chef Sara Ochs evidently liked his moxie and gave him his start shucking oysters and managing the salad stations.

Over the next several years he worked in a variety of New York City restaurants and earned his salt as a cook.

Things changed when a couple of out of town fans lured him to Steubenville, Ohio, to be the chef at their Froehlich Classic Corner. He was there for eight years.

“I came back to my father’s funeral, and my brother asked to if I’d be a cook if he bought a restaurant,” he says about getting into Trenton’s restaurant game.

Although their main focus was on ribs, wings, and brisket, Hallett says he knew the value of providing options for vegetarians. “It was unfair that all (vegetarians and vegans) could order was a salad. I wanted to do something and played around in the kitchen.”

He also talked to people who practiced the no-animal-product lifestyle.

“The vegan wings?” he says. “They’re called Ariana vegan wings. She was a state worker who was a vegan. She gave me the idea, so we named them after her.”

Trade shows also help. “That’s where I discovered the vegan beef. That’s where ideas come from as well.”

But taste is king, says Hallett. “There’s no magic. I taste it and say, ‘Okay, it needs to be on the menu.’”

The result is he says he is seeing more vegans and vegetarians showing up. “They are surprised that a barbecue place has vegan food, and they say now they have a place they can go, too. Some say, ‘My husband comes here, and now I can come too.’”

To evaluate Hallett’s claims, I decide to do a taste test of my own and order the black bean empanada, vegan empanada, and the vegan wings to go.

I also contact Steve Fenster, founder of the New Jersey vegetarian and vegan group NJveg, to get his thoughts on vegan dining.

“Some restaurants you wouldn’t

expect are having vegan menus. It is making it a lot easier for vegans,” the Pemberton Borough resident tells me resident during a telephone interview.

Asked to explain the difference between vegetarians and vegans, Fenster says, “It is straight forward. Vegetarians won’t eat flesh productions. Vegans will not eat animal products whatsoever — no eggs, dairy, or even honey.

A vegan for nearly a decade, the Parsippany-raised Fenster says he was a vegetarian before that.

He says most people make the

‘It was unfair that all (vegetarians and vegans) could order was a salad,’ says Reggie Hallett of how 1911 Smokehouse expanded its meat-free offerings. ‘I wanted to do something and played around in the kitchen.’

choice to ditch meat for three reasons. “The most obvious is that it’s ethical — people don’t like to kill animals to eat and the way we treat them before they are killed is cruel,” he says.

The second is environmental and animal agriculture’s impact on land use and pollution.

And third is health. “There is a lot of research being done on how a plant-based diet can reduce diabetes/heart disease, and more,” Fenster says.

“My interest in going vegetarian was more a gradual awareness than anything sudden,” he tells me about going vegetarian in 2000. “I always had pets growing up and loved all animals. But I didn’t make the connection between the meat on my plate and killing an animal until many years later.

“In college (at Rutgers in New Brunswick) I took an ecology course and started becoming more aware of the environmental impact of animal agriculture. I was on the path when I met my wife, who had already been vegetarian for years. That didn’t pressure me but raised my awareness further.

“About 10 years ago I decided to give up the few remaining animal products I consumed and go vegan — after realizing that the dairy and egg industries killed and harmed countless animals.”

Asked if he missed any foods, he says, “I was never a big dairy person. The big problem was ice cream and pizza. And now many stores carry a dairy-free ice cream and many pizza shops have vegan pizza.”

Fenster, who works as a systems engineer at Lockheed Martin in Moorestown, says he founded the small, all-volunteer nonprofit NJveg, which uses a PO Box address in Columbus.

But, he adds, it grew from a former central New Jersey vegetarian group. “The woman who started it wasn’t able to do it anymore, so we picked it up from there,” he says.

The group’s approximately 100 members — mainly from central and southern New Jersey — pay a \$20 membership fee to support outreach projects, such as street fair tables, and social events, like hikes, social gatherings, and volunteering to assist animal shelters and other projects. Members also get a discount on special outings and events.

Asked where he and his vegan wife go to eat, Fenster says, “For us, it’s slim pickings. We go to Properly Fuel (in Bordentown). It’s one of the most vegan-friendly places.

“Then we do things with the group. Since most of our members are more north, we go to places in Mercer or Middlesex County.”

Getting specific, he says, “Our favorite place is in the Trenton Farmers Market, the Lady and the Shallot. It’s all vegan. There are actually two vegan restaurants in the Trenton Farmers Market. The other is Savory Leaf Café.”

Listing a few other places near the U.S. 1 corridor, he mentions Arlee’s Raw Blends in Princeton and Trenton, Salad and Smoothie Market in Princeton, Veganized and Seed Burger in New Brunswick, and the Moth Coffeehouse in Allentown, which offers a discount to NJveg members.

But what about ordering a meal when he needs to go to a business or family function at a mainstream restaurant?

“When I started 20 years ago, it was hard to find at least a vegetari-

Left, an animal-product-free dinner gathering with members of NJveg at the Trenton Farmers Market. Above, Steve Fenster of NJveg working with injured animals.

an dish,” he says. “Now most restaurants have at least one vegan option that makes it easy.”

As proof, he mentions the South Jersey-based Red Lion Diner that added a vegan menu. “That’s just an example of how many restaurants are doing that.”

To test his claim I call several regional hot spots for meat and asked about vegan options.

For some, it’s still on the back burner.

The hostess at Toscano steakhouse in Bordentown said they generally offer pasta dishes. A representative of beefy Witherspoon Grill in Princeton listed salads. And the hostess at Rat’s restaurant at Grounds For Sculpture in Hamilton says they’ll work with people with a variety of food concerns and suggests calling ahead to alert the chef.

But for others, it’s sizzling. Take The Pig + The Pit in Pennington. Although rooted in Southern barbecue cooking, the eatery gives more than a nod to vegans and vegetarians and serves up blackeyed bean burgers, barbecued jackfruit

Members of the vegetarian and vegan nonprofit volunteer group NJveg have gravitated to the Trenton Farmers Market, which features two vegan restaurants: The Lady and the Shallot and Savory Leaf Cafe.

and tofu, and portabella mushroom dinners.

It also seems to reflect another reason for people developing a taste for vegetarian food. That’s the taste itself, thanks to improved products and techniques.

As Fenster says, “The first time I took tofu I thought, ‘How could you eat this?’ A lot of chefs and cooks are specifically thinking about it and are making it much tastier.”

Nevertheless, he says vegan and vegetarian practices are becoming more mainstream, and families are practicing “Meat Free Mondays.”

They are also showing up at the group’s dinner, such as a five-course vegan gourmet luncheon and fundraiser at the Lady and the Shallot.

“We had 40 people and raised \$200 for an animal sanctuary,” he says, adding that attendance for restaurant gatherings is open to the general public, but members get a discount.

Another restaurant event is organized with Rowan University at Burlington County’s culinary school in Mount Holly. “We typically have over 30 people. Students make a vegan a meal and after they listen to me about why it is important to have vegan meals we give them a free vegan cookbooks.

“We are active on Facebook and Instagram and we’re always willing to help people who are curious and trying to get started. We’re always interested in helping.”

Meanwhile, back at the 1911 Smokehouse (with the 1911 connected to the founding of Maurice’s college fraternity), Hallett and two cooks scramble about the boxy kitchen to tackle a growing list of mainly non-barbecue take-out requests.

Soon I have mine, and in short order I am at home with the empanadas and the vegan wings lined up cafeteria-style on my kitchen counter and invite my wife and son to pig out.

And voila! In moments, the spicy tastes, pleasing textures, and enticing aroma take us to hog heaven — but without the hog.

1911 Smokehouse, 11 West Front Street, Trenton, 609-695-1911 or www.1911bbq.com.

For more on NJveg, visit www.njveg.org.