

Finding Vegetarian Refuge in an Omnivorous World

I am lucky to have been born and raised in California. As a vegetarian, my options were plentiful.

The food was affordable, healthy, and never lacking in options for my non-meat-eating self. Then I moved to Williams, where dining hall food restricted my yearning appetite for a good vegetarian meal. It was in this state, as I was navigating the

dining halls of Williams and looking forward to my semester abroad, I thought back to the last time I had been in France. There had been so few options in my ten-day high school trip through the country, that I had survived mainly off of omelettes, baguettes, and pizza—not quite the French cuisine experience I had dreamed about. With a few months to go before I



A picture of me on the Nice pebble beaches

was scheduled to touch down in France, the Friedberg stipend breathed life into the questions I had about vegetarianism in France, with the possibility of diving deeper into my ponderings. I set out to France equipped to explore the following questions: (1) How is a plant-based diet perceived in a culinary culture passionate about meat and cheese? (2) Do vegetarian/vegan restaurants in France innovate to create French-inspired vegetarian dishes? (3) Is there ethnic diversity seen in the foods offered at these vegetarian restaurants? (4) How do these offerings differ based on their geography in France?

Through the Wellesley-in-Aix study away program, I was able to live in a homestay for my semester. The program orientation packet made it clear that not all who requested homestays would be able to get hosts, especially those with dietary restrictions such as vegetarianism. They emphasized the cheese and meat-heavy culture of a typical French family's meals. Despite my plant-

based restrictions, my French family welcomed me with open-arms. It turned out that my host-mother was a vegetarian herself, so I was able to gather insight into being a vegetarian in France from a personal point of view. She decided to go vegetarian about six years ago and mentioned how much France has been evolving in that respect. It is now a lot easier to find options than when she had first made the transition. From what I experienced and heard, there appears to be limited education concerning environmental impact, or possibilities about switching to a plant-based diet in France. The individual feeling of responsibility for the planet was less culturally implemented into French life when compared to the individualistic mindset seen in American culture. The lack of attention on these subjects gives me an understanding as to why there is limited acceptance of plant-based diets in France; with a culture proud of the cuisine they have built up, I sensed a fear when they thought of the possibility of a diet where meat (and cheese if we go completely vegan) is removed, threatening a large part of the flavor that makes up their famed cuisine. While she felt that she was one of the first in the movement many years ago, now there are groups emerging that are pulling support for this kind of a diet in France. One of her friends runs a Facebook groups for vegetarians in Aix, where every week they get together at a restaurant, taking over the storefront, to eat a wonderful plant-based meal. I had not expected this support and community that surrounds the vegetarian culture in France. However, this community is only found if you seek it out. As my host father made clear, the classic French dishes are not vegetarian: foie gras, croque monsieur, escargot, etc. These culinary creations depend upon the meats that are at the heart of their name. This, of course, shapes the experience of being a vegetarian in France despite the support of others following a similar diet.

Using my Friedberg funds, I was able to explore the vegetarian lifestyle outside of the comfort of my homestay meals and Facebook groups. This exploration began when I took a cooking class with a local French chef. My teacher had difficulty thinking of a good example of French vegetarian cuisine. Her trouble with finding a traditional dish that suited my plant-based needs resulted in her settling for a non-French recipe: curry. While the curry was fantastic—as were the caramelized pears—it was interesting to hear a professional chef discuss the struggles of integrating vegetarianism into French cuisine.



Curry and rice, prepared during my cooking class with a professional French chef in Aix-en-Provence

My funding allowed me to explore vegetarianism in five French cities and in Switzerland. While there were always vegetarian dishes in these regions, my options at non-vegetarian establishments usually consisted of a caprese or a margarita mix of mozzarella, basil, pesto, and tomato—which is inaccessible to vegans. The restaurants followed the typical French restaurant rules: their dinner and lunch hours were typical for France, 12:00 to 14:00, 19:00 to 22:00, and rarely open on Sundays. In Switzerland, I had the chance to eat at a well-known vegetarian restaurant chain. The place was packed full of both vegetarians, vegans, and typical omnivores. This created an inviting atmosphere, where the buffet-style food satisfied everyone. However, outside of this particular vegetarian chain, there were few other restaurant choices.

In France, I started in my hometown of Aix-en-Provence. There were only two truly vegan/vegetarian restaurants. Their offerings were not “French” but rather Americanized cuisine, offering dishes like stews, avocado toast, and quinoa bowls. I spoke with some people in the stores and noted that there was a tighter-knit community that surrounded their establishments, despite



“Buddha bowl” at Copper Branch in Nice, France

having less customers. The bigger cities had more offerings, but less of a community feel. In Paris, the vegetarian restaurants were located in the downtown area. Despite being in the center of the city, these restaurants were never on the main roads, meaning that only those who were seeking the vegetarian/vegan experiences would find them.

Again, the menus of these restaurants reflected a

broad range of ethnic cuisines, including some typical

French dishes. In Nice, the experience was similar. The restaurant I visited was downtown, crowded, and served a wide mix of culinary options. I opted for the “Buddha Bowl” and was happily met with a colorful and seasoned array of vegetables. Despite its proximity to Italy, the cuisine options did not seem to be influenced by their neighbors.

The other cities I visited gave me a bit more difficulty. When I visited Lyon, there were no vegetarian restaurants that were open before 19:00, and with my train leaving at 20:00, this left me with limited options. The vegetarian restaurants here were also not open for Saturday lunches. With my constrained travel schedule, this left me to explore my options at restaurants outside of the plant-based limiting factor. In Bordeaux, while there were many options, my travel there had me arriving late on Saturday evening, leaving Sunday as my day for exploration. Not yet being fully adjusted to the French way of life, I hadn’t even thought of the possibility of restaurants being closed for this day of rest. Left with limited options, the ones that were open required reservations that were typically booked weeks in advance. Despite my disappointment in not being able to eat their food, I was surprised and happy to hear about the successes these vegetarian restaurants were having. My last trip took me to Strasbourg in December. I was able to roam their Christmas markets, in search of what the options for non-meat-eaters might be. There, I saw the influence of geographic diversity as

most of the dishes were heavily tied to German cuisine. The vegetarian options consisted of pretzels, vegan hot dogs, and potato pancakes. The vegan restaurant that I found was outside of the city center. Their menu was the only cuisine I noted in my adventures to be French. I was able to enjoy a “Faux-gras”, raclette made with “Faux-mage”, and a tartiflette végane. These options allowed me to taste many of the culinary dishes that my host father had wished I could experience. This restaurant gave me hope for a future in Europe where typical French cuisine can still be enjoyed, even on a more restrictive plant-based diet.



“Faux-gras”, a vegan take on the traditional French dish, foie gras (Vélicious, Strasbourg, France)

These travel opportunities that my Friedberg Fellowship allowed opened my eyes to life as a vegetarian in France. I used to think that it was a widely known and accepted dietary option, especially in a country that famously values their cuisine. However, my time in France made me realize that it isn't as well-known as I would have thought. They have made a lot of progress since my first time visiting back in 10th grade. Nonetheless, there is a lack of individual push for environmental impact and issues, hindering discussions around plant-based diets. Talking with French vegetarians made me see that the diet forms much more of a community in France than it does in the US. This may be partly due to the wider acceptance in the US, where a community is less needed. Despite the scarcity of this diet that I saw in Europe, the population of plant-based eaters seems to be growing, as does acceptance for this lifestyle. As the movement grows, so does my hope for a future that will incorporate more options into non-plant-based restaurants and bring popularity to the vegan restaurants that already exist. From the people that I met to the restaurants where I ate, this future is an attainable one, and one that I hope to see the next time I'm in France.