

TODAY

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82°/64°

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CELEBRATING WITH FOOD

A very veggie Thanksgiving

It wasn't the typical Thanksgiving fare, but the atmosphere was certainly festive when Evelisse Capo and 30-some guests gathered for an annual vegetarian potluck dinner this week. Her guests served up all kinds of salads as well as yams and sweet potato casseroles. Capo provided several dishes, including rice and pigeon peas from her native Puerto Rico.

"Food is such a cultural thing," Capo said. "Coming together is a way to share the love we have for food. We enjoy food and we enjoy getting together to talk about how much we enjoy that food." **Read the full story on Page A2.**



Marty Hall, center, of Sarasota enjoys a meatless potluck dinner during a Thanksgiving meal hosted by Evelisse Capo of Sarasota. About 30 people attended Capo's annual potluck this year. From left: Sebastian Hernandez, Hall, and Kathleen Marie Hall. STAFF PHOTO / THOMAS BENDER

NEWS

HOLIDAY

A very veggie Thanksgiving

Every dish tells a story at potluck dinner

By Thomas Becnel
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SARASOTA — For an early Thanksgiving feast — a vegetarian potluck dinner — Megan Jones made stuffed acorn squash.

She wanted her dish to stand out in the buffet line.

"It's pretty," Jones said. "That's the main thing. When the rice goes in, it's visually appealing."

Jones has been a vegan for two years. She saw a documentary called "Forks Over Knives." That's all it took.

"It really opened my eyes," she said. "We went vegetarian that day. I went to the grocery store that day."

On Sunday in Sarasota, Don Blackowiak and his wife made a lentil loaf with chickpeas and cranberries.

"It's something new for us," he said. "We said, 'Oh, let's try it.'"

Blackowiak, 44, leads the VegSarasota group at the MeetUp online site. It's a community of people who share the same interests and experiences.

For them, vegetarian potluck is a comfort zone.

"It's wonderful to be at an event where I know I can eat everything," Blackowiak said. "I know a lot of people who dread going to family dinners for Thanksgiving. They're offended, you know?"

Animal rights is part of his interest in veganism. The book that influenced him was "The World Peace Diet." Yet he tries to avoid the strident tone of a political approach.

Much better to emphasize the healthy lifestyle enjoyed by vegetarians.

"It doesn't scare people," Blackowiak said, laughing. "Everybody gives people health advice, right?"

Judy Zivic, a vegetarian for nearly 20 years, made a mock tuna salad on Sunday. Ingredients included tempeh, celery, scallions, red pepper, stone-ground mustard and a tofu mayonnaise.

"It's easy," she said. "Just chopping. Just chopping and mixing."

Zivic and her husband Jerry — a "flexitarian" — are more casual about different kinds of food. Her friends and family eat meat. She doesn't mind having it in her house.

On Thanksgiving Day, Jerry and his son plan on grilling thick T-bone steaks.

"Shhh," Judy joked. "Don't say that out loud here."



Puerto Rican rice and pigeon peas, stuffed acorn squash, a lentil loaf with chickpeas and cranberries and a mock tuna salad — celery, tempeh, scallions and red pepper — are a few of the dishes on the table when Evelisse Capo hosts her annual potluck dinner as a way of giving thanks. STAFF PHOTOS / THOMAS BENDER

Food for life

The host of Sunday's dinner, Evelisse Capo, is a Sarasota pharmacist and vegetarian who runs a business called the Food Pharmacy. She teaches Food For Life classes and preaches healthy cooking and eating.

Her annual potluck dinner is a way of giving thanks.

"Food is such a cultural thing," Capo said. "Coming together is a way to share the love we have for food. We enjoy food and we enjoy getting together to talk about how much we enjoy that food."

Her 30 guests served up all kinds of salads — lettuce, beet and fruit — along with everything from yams to sweet potato casseroles.

There was an array of desserts, too. Several chocolate



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cakes, along with apple crisps, banana bread and coconut bites with macadamia nuts.

Drinks include a blend of kombucha and hibiscus tea.

Capo provided several dishes. Rice and pigeon peas are a traditional holiday dish from her native Puerto Rico. A soy "ham" with apricot glaze took a little more explaining.

"This is one of the few occasions where we would do something like that," she said. "Some of the people here are still adjusting to a plant-based diet and they



A variety of vegetarian holiday foods.

like that texture of foods that they're used to."

Several years ago, after a health scare during a pregnancy, Capo decided to become a vegetarian. It wasn't easy to change her shopping, cooking and eating habits. It took her two tries.

"I didn't know how to do it at first, so I just gave up," she said. "That's why community support is so important."

Husbands and wives

For the potluck dinner, Don and Betty Taylor brought a casserole dish of sliced potatoes and onions with cashew cream.

They became vegetarians after Don, 71, suffered from congestive heart failure. Betty took a Food For Life class and said they were going to change their diet.

"I was drug into it," Don said, while carving a soy ham. "But I tried it and I haven't turned back."

Marty Hall, who brought banana bread and an apple crisp, told a similar story.

His wife Kathleen asked him to try a vegetarian diet for 12 weeks. So he did. Halfway through, he called his daughter and told her to come get all the meat out of his freezer.

Hall, a 57-year-old with a handlebar moustache, is a heavy equipment operator in Sarasota. On construction sites, there aren't a lot of vegetarians wearing hard hats and safety vests.

"The guys, these tease me every day," he says, laughing. "They say, 'Don't you want some? Don't you want some of this chicken or ribs.'"

"And I say, 'No, not at all.'"