

Mindful Plant-based Potlucks

When we met for our first Mindful Cooking potluck we never imagined we were starting a practice that would continue for nine years and beyond. Apparently we have evolved a format that meets a need and keeps people coming.

We began as a small group of sangha members who were inspired by Thay's 2007 call to move to a plant-based diet for the sake of the Earth. After several months of emailing recipes to each other, we met for a potluck in my garden. We gathered around the food table and read the Five Contemplations together. When our plates were filled, we settled ourselves in a circle and took turns telling our food stories, going around the circle, being sure to hear from everyone. The result was a fascinating, surprisingly deep conversation. We realized how important food is to us and how emotional we are about it. Each of us has a story to tell, a story that begins at our family table and progresses to adulthood, often with vivid turning points along the way.

We discovered how much food connects us to our families and friends. Our food choices connect us also to the larger community, to issues of hunger and fairness, and ultimately to the needs of all species. We were speaking of our roots and our deepest concerns, but we also shared a happy awareness of the simple joy of eating, a source of joy that comes to us every day.

We decided to meet again and eventually settled on a pattern of potlucks four times a year, once in each season. Each time, once we are settled, we go around the circle to hear from each person as we update our food stories or simply tell what's on our mind about food. The conversation is structured but loose at the same time, as others chime in with questions or connections. We enjoy some lively give and take, but then get back on track and hear from the next person. It's always a rich and varied discussion. Food turns out to be a multi-dimensional subject that takes us all over from how to make tofu crispy to the social complications that come with changing one's diet to shopping on a budget, GMO's, allergies, restaurants, cookbooks, factory farming, the problem of cooking for one, and on and on. We have found ourselves at times talking of war and peace, livestock and global warming, and connections with other cultures. Somehow we always end up with joyous appreciation of the food in front of us and the time we are having together.

Our group is always changing. We have a few regulars but also many people who only come once or a few times or who drop in and out over the years. Though we started in a sangha context, we have always included spouses and friends who do not have a sangha connection. To keep it comfortable for them, our only ritual element is the reading of the Five Contemplations, which connects us to the origins of our project and reminds us to look thoughtfully at our relationship with food.

We meet in homes, typically as a group of 10 or 12. We have been potlucking for 9 years now. Looking back over my notes, I discovered that 79 people have taken part so far. A few of us are consistently vegan; others are curious about the possibilities. We make no assumptions about far anyone will go with plant-based cooking. Our potlucks are simply a chance to experience a plant-based meal and talk with others about food.

We stimulate and inspire each other by sharing our recipes and ideas, and have even had a couple of cooking demos. When I asked the group to let me know what brings them to the potlucks, I learned that one attraction is the diversity of the food. People living alone are particularly grateful to taste many more dishes than they would be likely to make at home. All of us broaden our awareness of the

range of possibilities with plant-based cooking. All kinds of dishes are welcome, but cooking is not required. If someone is at a loss for what to bring, we suggest picking up a loaf of good bread or some fruit.

People also come for the chance to connect with each other. One of our quieter friends appreciates the tradition of going around the circle, since it means she can count on a time to talk without the challenge of “jumping in”. Another also mentioned the benefits of “the structured conversation/sharing. It is good to have a chance to listen to everyone and not just the person sitting right by me. I do learn a lot and get reinforced in my vegan habits.”

As I reflect on the 29 potlucks we've had so far, I realize that we are offering something that doesn't occur elsewhere. Though food is present at most social gatherings, we usually talk of other things, as if food were simply mundane. Our potlucks are a rare chance to get in touch with how much our food matters to us and how important our food choices really are. Our long-running Mindful Cooking potluck tradition fills a need to come together and think about food, especially now, when our world is changing so fast. At our potlucks we are facing change together, learning from each other and strengthening our resolve to adapt to these new times.

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