

“Eat Less Meat.” For a cook accustomed to basing family meals around meat, this is a daunting request. It requires looking at food and menus differently, and changing your family’s expectation of what dinner looks like. In this first of an occasional series, I hope to help you work towards less meat while keeping the family fed and happy.

First task: Enlist the family members’ support. Or, in some cases, enlist the cook’s support. Tackle changes together.

Second task: Have some meatless menus and recipes ready to use two or three times a week. You probably already have some that you use anyway. Look through cookbooks and recipe files for casseroles you’ve forgotten or that have been a side dish but could be the main dish instead.

When I started cooking for myself, I had already given up meat and I was tired of filling the gap in traditional meals with starch and cottage cheese. I realized that most family cooks chose the main dish – chicken, hamburger, fish, ham – and added sides. I tended to fix one-pot meals – soup or casserole – and add a few adornments. This is still my pattern, so that’s where I’ll start. There are lots of meatless recipes on the internet (although you need to look at them with a moderately critical eye – not all are well-tested), and I’ll put out some of my favorites in the coming months.

Get your family’s feedback (no pun intended – really!) – some meals will go over better than others. Some will be great hits (remember those!) and some – let’s face it – will not. Especially with the failures, do an evaluation – is the problem that no one likes eggplant, no matter how you fix it? Was the dish under- or over-cooked? How could it be better? Cooks, don’t take it personally – and diners, be adventurous and appreciative.

When you don’t eat meat (and even when you do), it’s important to look at the nutritional value of everything you eat. Whole-grain bread and pasta, brown rice, peanut butter without the sugar and stabilizers, fresh fruits and vegetables whenever possible, plain yogurt with fresh fruit rather than the sugar-filled small cartons will all increase the value of the calories you consume. Tofu, once you acquire a taste for it, is very useful and can go in spaghetti sauce and salads.

Some meatless menus:

1. Plain old spaghetti – or whatever shape pasta you want – try easing into whole-grain pasta with a good commercial sauce. I like Prego, but that’s just personal preference. Ideally we’d all make and can our own sauce when the tomatoes are ripe, but we can’t all be Mother Earth. Serve it with whole-grain bread and salad. If you’ve made the leap to tofu, add some to the sauce.
2. Lentil and split pea soup. Both of these are flavorful and need no meat, do not require soaking, and can be ready in under an hour. Recipes abound. Make a lot and get more than one meal from a potful. Make it the night before if you have more time after dinner than before.
3. Eggs – remember eggs? They are a great source of protein, so much so that many nutritionists say the benefit outweighs the cholesterol concerns (especially when you have cut down on the amount of meat in your diet). Scrambled eggs (a little pesto is a nice touch) with bread, fruit, and the remains of a previous night’s casserole fill the

supper niche nicely (at least in my house!). At the end of this article I've included a recipe for Huevos Rancheros – a popular and flexible Mexican dish.

4. Cheese strata – dry-ish bread with eggs and milk poured over it, baked for about half an hour – serve with a vegetable and/or salad. Recipes are easy to find.
5. Meatless chili. Look for recipes, use canned beans and tomatoes, serve with cheese and over Fritos if that's what your family likes.

A few words about some of the ingredients I've mentioned:

- Brown rice – You'll find it in bulk at Whole Foods or packaged at the grocery store. It takes 35-45 minutes to cook, so if you start it when you first start dinner it will be ready and waiting for you.
- Lentils and split peas – also packaged at the grocery store as well as bulk where bulk exists.
- Peanut butter – I really like Smucker's, but there are several brands that are just peanuts and a little salt. Heinen's grinds it at the store. You can always offer some to someone who's still hungry.
- You can also offer, in addition to pb, cottage cheese, yogurt or tofu to fill the gaps. It's easy to fill up on bread, but sometimes the added protein is what a hungry kid is craving.

**Recipe: Huevas Rancheros (a very flexible Mexican egg dish)**

Plan on at least 2 eggs per person, depending on what else you're serving and who is eating. They go nicely with brown rice – start that before you do anything else, or put leftover rice in the oven to warm.

For each egg you need:

1 egg, 1 or 2 corn tortillas (depending on whether you want openface or with a top), a few spoonfuls of salsa, and ¼ cup, +/-, of refried beans.

Usually I make 2 or 3 per person

Turn the oven to 325. Spread beans and salsa on corn tortillas, openface on a cookie sheet, and put in the oven to warm. If you want a 2<sup>nd</sup> layer of tortillas, wrap them in foil and put them in the oven as well. Plan on 10-15 minutes to warm them; more is ok but you might want to turn the temperature down after 15 mins.

If you're cooking rice, wait till it's nearly done to cook the eggs. (The rice will wait, the eggs won't).

Fry or scramble the eggs according to each person's (or the cook's) taste. Add some salsa as they cook (not too much – they'll get too watery).

When the eggs are done, get the tortillas out of the oven, put them on plates, put the eggs on top. Add salsa and another tortilla if you want.

My son says he fixes this for breakfast, lunch or dinner.