



“Meat”

without Meat by So Lok-sin

Dish by dish, a waiter put down the fried pork chop, sashimi, sweet and sour ribs, curry chicken and roasted eel. With a pleasant smell of food lingering in the air, you might think this was a meat feast. In fact, it was a feast of soybeans.

Nowadays, people pay greater attention to their health, and more of them choose vegetarian food because they think it is healthier. At the same time, some vegetarian restaurants have added new elements to their



recipes to attract more people to try vegetarian food.

“I am stunned, the imitation beef tastes almost like the real thing,” said Lam Cheuk-Ho, a customer at Perfect Vegetarian Foods who was trying his first vegetarian meal. “My concept of vegetarian food was that it is supposed to be only vegetables, bean curd and mushrooms.”

Vegetarians can also have beef, pork, lamb, all kinds of poultry and seafood in their meals, thanks to the countless choices offered by “artificial” imitation food. They are usually made of soybean fiber, flour and konjac (a starchy vegetable) jelly with preservatives and flavour-enhancing additives.

May Wu owns a vegetarian restaurant in Causeway Bay. Seventy



per cent of the dishes offered in her restaurant include artificial food and the rest are the traditional vegetarian dishes which only have vegetables. Ms Wu uses artificial food to enrich the variety of the dishes.

“It is difficult to lure customers back if every dish is made from vegetables. People will find vegetarian dishes less monotonous if there is artificial food added to them,” said the 45-year-old restaurateur.

Aware there may be chemicals added to mass-produced artificial



The artificial roasted eel looks like the real meat.

food, Ms Wu substitutes commercial products with some homemade artificial creations. She does this to ensure freshness, health benefits and for business concerns. For example, her vegetarian eels are made from bean curd sheets and seaweed. "It (homemade artificial food) is a specialty of our restaurant. Packaged artificial food can be bought easily in the market, so we cannot simply put all of them in our dishes," she said.

"People can first be vegetarians of the 'mouth' but not of the 'heart,'" said 35-year-old Ng Hing-wing who currently owns four vegetarian restaurants in Hong Kong. Ng aims to promote vegetarianism in Hong Kong, and he regards artificial food as an enticement to attract people to the vegetarian lifestyle. "People who have steaks and sashimi every day will surely be resistant if you ask them to switch to vegetables and tofu all of a sudden," said Mr Ng.

In his Causeway Bay restaurant, vegetarian sushi and sashimi are very popular and come highly recommended by Mr Ng. "They have been a huge success among young people as Japanese food is marketable in Hong Kong. There are more young consumers coming," he said.

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Asked about the Monosodium Glutamate (MSG) in the artificial food, Mr Ng confirmed its presence. "Major ingredients like soybean fiber are full of protein and high in nutritional value, but are almost tasteless in their raw state," he explained. "MSG is



Israeli tourists Oren and Kfir enjoy eating artificial food.

almost inevitable when you dine out. As it is in the processed food already, our cooks will not add any chemical flavour-enhancer."

Mr Ng suggested that the manufacturers had been adding value to the food to satisfy market needs. "People want them to taste like and look like the real ones and at the same time want them to be healthy. In the past, artificial colourants were used. Now natural ones like carrot juice and beet juice are replacing them," he said.

Despite the downsides of artificial meat products, such as chemical preservatives and additives, it still has its supporters.

"Although I'm not a big fan of artificial food, it is a first step to attract more people to eat vegetarian food and promote a healthy diet," said Fonda Chan Fau-fong, a vegetarian for over 20 years.

Chan said artificial meat has also brought convenience to her daily life. "It used to be difficult to convince my non-vegetarian friends to go to the vegetarian restaurant with me," said Mrs Fong. "For them, the use of artificial meat adds appeal to vegetarian

food and most of them like it very much. They really appreciate the fact that vegetarian food can have so much variation, and taste good."

Artificial meat products are also a good way of introducing a healthier diet and vegetarian food to Hong Kong families since they provide more choice of dishes.

"My son used to hate vegetarian food since there are only vegetables, and the taste is very dull," said Leung Wai-Ling, a customer of Perfect Vegetarian Foods. "But now my son likes it very much because the additives in the artificial food make it taste more like regular food."

Mrs Leung said her family now dines in the vegetarian restaurant at least once a week and their health is obviously better.

"The taste and textures are not like meat but it is easier to eat. Sometimes meat is heavy so this can be a light meal."

But despite its popularity in parts of Asia, vegetarian artificial food is not as common in countries outside of the region. Israeli tourists Oren and Kfir are first-time visitors to Hong Kong. As a vegan, Oren does not consume animal products of any kind, including eggs and milk because of his concern about animal rights. "It takes an effort to make it taste like meat. I do not like it because it makes me feel I am eating meat," he said.

"(In Israel) There is no stuff like that at all, not even in Chinese restaurants," he added. Oren's main diet in his home country is Asian food and tofu products.

On the other hand, non-vegetarian Kfir enjoys eating the artificial food. "The taste and textures are not like meat but it is easier to eat. Sometimes meat is heavy so this can be a light meal," he said.

Vegetarians Pankaj and Chandra, respectively from Italy and the UK, have also noticed a cultural difference



Vegetarians Pankaj (left) and Chandra (right) notice a cultural difference between the vegetarianism in Asia and Europe.

between vegetarianism in Asia and Europe. "There is a lot of them (artificial food) in Asia. I do not find it necessary to eat something that tastes like meat," said 32-year-old Chandra. Her diet mainly consists of plain tofu and salads.

Pankaj, who is 54, takes a more positive view, "I do not like all of them, but most of them. It is a good source of protein and the texture is chewy. Though the taste is not the same, it kind of reminds me (of eating meat)," he said.

Chandra added that in the West, they also had vegetarian bacon, sausage and cheese, but there is less variety and they are not as popular as in Asia. She pointed out the major ideological difference between East and West,

"In Asia, people find substitutes for meat. In the West, people just eliminate it from their diet." 

