



Plant-Based Menu Development for Catering Teams

“When looking for vegetarian-specific training suitable for a catering team, the Vegetarian Society Cookery School seemed to fit our needs perfectly.

The highlight of the training was the trainers’ skill in engaging every staff member, even those initially resistant to vegetarian and vegan options.

There was a fantastic energy and positivity to the training.

Staff also really enjoyed trying the dishes.”

St John’s School, Northwood

Visit our website to find out more:

www.vegsoc.org/cook

Or contact: cookery@vegsoc.org

Creating Plant-Based Menus That Work in Real Kitchens

Developing a successful plant-based menu isn’t about removing meat or following trends. It’s about creating dishes that work in real kitchens, day after day, within the constraints of your team, your equipment and your service. This guide brings together the principles we use in our training to help catering teams build plant-based menus that are practical, consistent and well received.

What Makes a Plant-Based Menu Successful?

In real catering environments, menus need to deliver against multiple priorities at once:

- Customer satisfaction and repeat choice
- Cost control and waste reduction
- Staffing levels and skill mix
- Equipment and service constraints
- Nutritional balance

Plant-based menus are no different, but they often fail when these factors aren’t considered together.

Start with Structure, Not Substitutes

One of the most common challenges in plant-based menu development is relying on substitutions, simply replacing meat with an alternative. Instead, start with structure. Strong dishes are built around:

- ✓ **A clear protein base**
Lentils, beans, tofu or other plant-based proteins that give the dish substance
- ✓ **A carbohydrate base**
Rice, pasta, potatoes or grains that provide energy and familiarity
- ✓ **Vegetables**
For flavour, texture and visual appeal
- ✓ **Fats and seasoning**
To bring the dish together and deliver on taste
When this structure is in place, dishes feel complete, not like a compromise.

Design for Real Kitchens

Menus don't exist on paper, they exist in service. When developing plant-based dishes, consider:

- How they will be prepped and cooked at scale
- Whether they fit your existing equipment
- The skill level of your team
- How well they hold during service

Simple, well-structured dishes will always outperform complex recipes that are difficult to deliver consistently.

Common Plant-Based Menu Development Challenges

From our work with catering teams, the same issues come up again and again.

Meals feel too light

What happens:

Vegetable-led or carbohydrate-heavy dishes lack substance.

Impact:

Customers try them once but don't choose them again.

What works:

Start with a strong protein base and build the dish around it.

Too much reliance on carbohydrates

What happens:

Meals are centred on pasta, rice or potatoes.

Impact:

Lack of balance and limited appeal.

What works:

Introduce protein and varied textures to create more complete dishes.

Dishes are too complex to deliver

What happens:

Recipes look good on paper but are difficult to execute in service.

Impact:

Inconsistency, pressure on staff and reduced quality.

What works:

Keep dishes simple, repeatable and suited to your kitchen setup.

Plant-based options feel like an afterthought

What happens:

A single "token" option is added to the menu.

Impact:

Low uptake and limited customer confidence.

What works:

Offer a small range of well-designed dishes that feel integral to the menu.

What Works in Practice

Across different catering settings, successful plant-based menus tend to follow similar patterns:

- Familiar formats outperform unfamiliar ones
- Flavour drives repeat choice
- Simplicity scales better than complexity
- Consistency matters more than variety

These principles apply whether you're working in a school, hospital or hospitality setting.

Getting Started: A Practical Approach

If you're looking to develop your plant-based menu, start with:

1. Review your current menu

Identify where plant-based options already exist and where gaps are.

2. Focus on a small number of dishes

Develop a few strong, reliable options rather than trying to change everything at once.

3. Test and refine

Monitor uptake, gather feedback and adjust dishes based on what works in practice.

Turning Principles into Practice

Plant-based menu development is not about one-off changes. It's about building the skills and confidence to deliver consistently, across different teams, sites and services. Our catering training programmes help teams apply these principles in their own kitchens, creating menus that work in real-world conditions.



If you'd like to discuss how we can help
your team, please get in touch:

cook@vegsoc.org

Or visit our website to find out more:

www.vegsoc.org/cook

COOK!
with the Vegetarian Society