Chapter 1

Vegetarianism 101: Starting with the Basics

In This Chapter

- Defining different types of vegetarianism
- Explaining why meat-free makes sense
- Fixing meatless meals
- Adopting a new mind-set about food

Mention a vegetarian diet, and many people visualize a big hole in the center of your dinner plate. They think that to be a vegetarian, you have to like lettuce and carrot sticks — *a lot.* Just contemplating it leaves them gnawing on their knuckles.

Nothing could be further from the truth, however.

Vegetarian diets are diverse, with an abundance of fresh, colorful, and flavorful foods. For anyone who loves good food, vegetarian meals are a feast. That may be difficult for nonvegetarians to understand. Vegetarian diets are common in some parts of the world, but they're outside the culture and personal experience of many people.

That's why I start with the basics in this chapter. I tell you about the many forms a vegetarian diet can take and the reasons people choose to go meat-free. I give you a quick overview of what's involved in planning and fixing vegetarian meals, and I introduce some important considerations for making the transition to meat-free a little easier.

Vegetarian Label Lingo: Who's Who and What They Will and Won't Eat

Most of us are pretty good at describing a person in just a few words:

"He's a liberal Democrat."

"She's a Gen-Xer."

It's like the saying goes: "A picture (or label) paints (or says) a thousand words."

People use labels to describe vegetarians, with different terms corresponding to different sets of eating habits. A lacto ovo vegetarian eats differently than a vegan eats. In some cases, the term used to describe a type of vegetarian refers to a whole range of lifestyle preferences, rather than to just the diet alone. In general, though, the specific term used to describe a vegetarian has to do with the extent to which that person avoids foods of animal origin. Read on for a primer on vegetarian label lingo, an explanation of what I call the vegetarian continuum, and an introduction to vegetarian foods.

From vegan to flexitarian: Sorting out the types of vegetarianism

In 1992, *Vegetarian Times* magazine sponsored a survey of vegetarianism in the United States. The results showed that almost 7 percent of Americans considered themselves vegetarians.

However, a closer look at the eating habits of those "vegetarians" found that most of them were eating chicken and fish occasionally, and many were eating red meat at least a few times each month. Most vegetarian organizations don't consider occasional flesh-eaters to be vegetarians.

As a result, the nonprofit Vegetarian Resource Group (VRG) in 1994 began sponsoring national polls on the prevalence of vegetarianism, wording the interview questions in such a way as to determine the number of people who *never* eat meat, fish, poultry, or byproducts of these foods. (The organization continues to conduct periodic polls, and you can find the results online at `www.vrg.org`.) Over the years, the number of people who fit the VRG definition of vegetarian has remained relatively stable at between 2 and 3 percent of the adult population in the U.S.

The fact is, people interpret the term *vegetarian* in many different ways.

Many people use the term loosely to mean that they're consciously reducing their intake of meat. The word *vegetarian* has positive connotations, especially among those who know that vegetarian diets confer health benefits. But what about the true vegetarians? Who are they and what do they eat (or not eat)?

The definition of a vegetarian most widely accepted by vegetarian organizations is this: A vegetarian is a person who eats no meat, fish, or poultry.

Not "I eat turkey for Thanksgiving" or "I eat fish once in a while." A vegetarian consistently avoids all flesh foods, as well as byproducts of meat, fish, and poultry. A vegetarian avoids refried beans made with lard, soups made with meat stock, and foods made with gelatin, such as some kinds of candy and most marshmallows.

The big three: Lacto ovo vegetarian, lacto vegetarian, and vegan

Vegetarian diets vary in the extent to which they exclude animal products. Historically, the three major types of vegetarianism have been:

- **Lacto ovo vegetarian:** A *lacto ovo vegetarian* diet excludes meat, fish, and poultry but includes dairy products and eggs. Most vegetarians in the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe fall into this category. Lacto ovo vegetarians eat such foods as cheese, ice cream, yogurt, milk, and eggs, as well as foods made with these ingredients.
- **Lacto vegetarian:** A *lacto vegetarian* diet excludes meat, fish, and poultry, as well as eggs and any foods containing eggs. So a lacto vegetarian, for instance, wouldn't eat the pancakes at most restaurants because they contain eggs. Some veggie burger patties are made with egg whites, and many brands of ice cream contain egg. A lacto vegetarian wouldn't eat these foods, either. A lacto vegetarian would, however, eat dairy products such as milk, yogurt, and cheese.
- **Vegan:** Technically, the term *vegan* (pronounced *vee*-gun) refers to more than just the diet alone. A vegan is a vegetarian who avoids eating or using all animal products, including meat, fish, poultry, eggs, dairy products, and any foods containing byproducts of these ingredients. Vegans also use no wool, silk, leather, and any nonfood items made with animal byproducts. Some vegans avoid honey, and some don't use refined white sugar, or wine that has been processed using bone char or other animal ingredients. Needless to say, vegans also don't eat their dinner on bone china. (For more details on veganism, see the nearby sidebar.)

In academic nutrition circles, *strict vegetarian* is the correct term to use to describe people who avoid all animal products but who don't necessarily carry animal product avoidance into other areas of their lives. In practice, however, the term vegan is usually used by both strict vegetarians and vegans, even among those in the know. In other words, technically, the term strict vegetarian refers to diet only. The term vegan encompasses both food and other products, including clothing, toiletries, and other supplies.

More than a diet: Veganism

Maintaining a vegan lifestyle in our culture can be difficult. Most vegans are strongly motivated by ethics, however, and rise to the challenge. A large part of maintaining a vegan lifestyle has to do with being aware of where animal products are used and knowing about alternatives. Vegetarian and animal rights organizations offer information and materials to help.

Sometimes vegans unwittingly use a product or eat a food that contains an animal byproduct. Knowing whether a product is free of all animal ingredients can be difficult at times. However, the intention is to strive for the vegan ideal.

So a vegan, for instance, wouldn't use hand lotion that contains lanolin, a byproduct of wool. A vegan wouldn't use margarine that contains casein, a milk protein. And a vegan wouldn't carry luggage trimmed in leather. Vegans (as well as many other vegetarians) also avoid products that have been tested on animals, such as many cosmetics and personal care products.

The list goes on: Semi-vegetarian, flexitarian, and others

Lacto ovo vegetarian, lacto vegetarian, and vegan are the three primary types of vegetarian diets, but there are more labels for vegetarians, including the following:

- A *semi-vegetarian* is someone who's cutting back on his intake of meat in general.
- A *pesco pollo vegetarian* avoids red meat but eats chicken and fish.
- A *pollo vegetarian* avoids red meat and fish but eats chicken.

These terms stretch the true definition of a vegetarian, and in practice, only the term *semi-vegetarian* is actually used with much frequency.

In recent years, another term has been introduced as well. A *flexitarian* is basically the same thing as a semi-vegetarian. It refers to someone who's generally cutting back on meat but who may eat meat from time to time, when it's more convenient or on a special occasion.

Don't leave out: Raw foods, fruitarian, and macrobiotic diets

The list actually goes even further. One adaptation of a vegetarian diet is a *raw foods diet,* which consists primarily of uncooked foods — fruits, vegetables, sprouted grains and beans, and vegetable oils. Though raw foodists never cook foods in an oven or on a stovetop, some of them eat ingredients that have been dehydrated in the sun.

In practice, most raw foodists in North America actually eat a *raw vegan* diet. The proportion of the diet that comes from raw foods is typically anywhere from 50 to 80 percent. Most raw foodists aim for a diet that's 100 percent raw, but what they can realistically adhere to still includes some amount of cooked food.

Another adaptation, the *fruitarian diet,* consists only of fruits, vegetables that are botanically classified as fruits (such as tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini, and avocados), and seeds and nuts. Planning a nutritionally adequate fruitarian diet is difficult, and I don't recommend the diet for children.

Macrobiotic diets are often lumped into the general category of vegetarian diets, even though they may include seafood. This diet excludes all other animal products, however, as well as refined sugars, tropical fruits, and "nightshade vegetables" (for example, potatoes, eggplant, and peppers). The diet is related to principles of Buddhism and is based on the Chinese principles of yin and yang. Therefore, macrobiotic diets include foods common to Asian culture, such as sea vegetables (including kelp, nori, and arame), root vegetables (such as daikon), and miso. Many people follow a macrobiotic diet as part of a life philosophy. Others follow the diet because they believe it to be effective in curing cancer and other illnesses, an idea that has little scientific support.

The vegetarian continuum: Going vegetarian a little or a lot

Pop quiz: What would you call a person who avoids all flesh foods and only occasionally eats eggs and dairy products, usually as a minor ingredient in a baked good or dish, such as a muffin, cookie, or veggie burger?

Technically, the person is a lacto ovo vegetarian, right? But this diet seems as though it's leaning toward the vegan end of the spectrum.

As a nutritionist, I see this kind of variation — even within the same category of vegetarian diet — all the time. One lacto ovo vegetarian may eat heaping helpings of cheese and eggs and have a high intake of saturated fat and cholesterol as a result. In fact, this type of vegetarian may have a nutrient intake similar to the typical American's — not so good. Another lacto ovo vegetarian may use eggs and dairy products, but only in a very limited fashion — as condiments or minor ingredients in foods. This person's nutrient intake more closely resembles that of a vegan.

What am I getting at? That labels are only a starting point, and they have limitations. Even if you know generally what type of vegetarian a person is, you may see a lot of variation in the degree to which the person uses or avoids animal products.

Many new vegetarians find that their diets evolve over time. At the start, for example, many rely heavily on cheese and eggs to replace meat. Over time, they learn to cook with grains, beans, and vegetables, and they experiment with cuisines of other cultures. They decrease their reliance on foods of animal origin, and gradually, they consume fewer eggs and dairy products. Some eventually move to a mostly vegan (or strict vegetarian) diet.

You might say that vegetarian diets are on a continuum, stretching from the typical American, meat-centered diet on one end to veganism on the other (see Figure 1-1). Most vegetarians fall somewhere in between. Some may be content staying wherever they begin on the continuum, while others may progress along the spectrum as they hone their skills and develop new traditions, moving from semi-vegetarian, or lacto ovo vegetarian, closer to the vegan end of the spectrum.

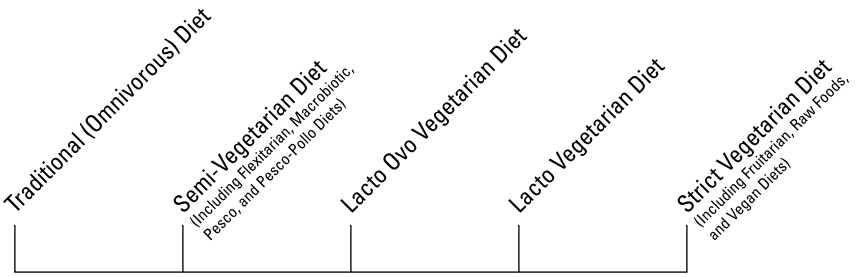

Figure 1-1: The vegetarian continuum.

Common foods that happen to be vegetarian: Beyond mac and cheese

Your eating style is a mind-set. For proof, ask someone what she's having for dinner tonight. Chances are good she'll say, "We're grilling steaks tonight," or, "I'm having fish." Ever notice how no one mentions the rice, potato, salad, vegetables, bread — or anything other than the meat?

Many vegetarians eat these common foods — side dishes to nonvegetarians — in larger quantities and call them a meal. Others combine them in new and delicious ways to create main courses that replace a burger or filet. Your skills at assembling appealing vegetarian meals will improve over time.

Until they do, going vegetarian doesn't have to mean a whole new menu. Many vegetarian foods are actually very familiar to nonvegetarians as well. Some examples include:

- Falafel
- Pasta primavera
- Salad
- Tofu
- Vegetable lasagna
- Vegetarian chili
- Vegetarian pizza
- Veggie burger

When meat-free isn't vegetarian: Bypassing meat byproducts

Living vegetarian means avoiding meat, fish, and poultry, and it includes eliminating ingredients made from those foods, too. Vegetarians don't eat soups that contain beef broth or chicken stock. They avoid meat flavoring in pasta sauces, Worcestershire sauce (which contains anchovies), and many stir-fry sauces, which contain oyster sauce. They don't eat marshmallows and some candies, which contain gelatin made from the cartilage and skins of animals. In Chapter 5, I cover all this in more detail, listing foods that may contain hidden animal products.

Going Vegetarian Is Good for Everyone

Some people go vegetarian for the simple reason that they don't like meat. They chew and chew, and they still have a glob of aesthetically unpleasant flesh in their mouth. Some people just like vegetables better.

Others go vegetarian because they recognize the link between diet and health, the health of ecosystems on our planet, the welfare of animals, or the ability of nations to feed hungry people. Whichever issue first grabs your attention, the other advantages may reinforce your resolve.

Eating for health

Many people view their health (or lack thereof) as something that just sort of happens to them. Their bad habits catch up with them, or they have bad genes. Their doctor just gave them a clean bill of health, and then they had a heart attack out of the blue. (Well, we all have to die of *something*.) Who could have foreseen it? They lived reasonably — everything in moderation, right? What more could they have done?

A lot, most likely. You may be surprised to discover how much power you wield with your knife and fork. The fact is that vegetarians generally enjoy better health and longer lives than nonvegetarians.

In comparison with nonvegetarians, vegetarians are at lower risk for many chronic, degenerative diseases and conditions. That's because a diet composed primarily of plant matter has protective qualities. I cover the diet and health connection in more detail in Chapter 2.

Protecting our planet

A disproportionate amount of the earth's natural resources is used to produce meat and other animal products. For example:

- It takes about 25 gallons of water to grow 1 pound of wheat, but it takes about 390 gallons of water to produce 1 pound of beef.
- A steer has to eat 7 pounds of grain or soybeans to produce 1 pound of beef.

Animal agriculture — the production of meat, eggs, and dairy products — places heavy demands on our land, water, and fuel supplies, and in some cases, it contributes substantially to problems with pollution. You should understand how your food choices affect the well-being of our planet. I discuss the issues further in Chapter 2.

Compassionate food choices

Many people consider a vegetarian diet the right thing to do. Their sense of ethics drives them to make very conscious decisions based on the effects of their food choices on others. You may feel the same way.

In Chapter 2, I describe more fully the rationale for considering the feelings and welfare of animals used for their flesh, eggs, or milk. I also discuss the implications of food choices for world hunger. A strong argument can be made for living vegetarian as the humane choice — not just in terms of the effect on animals, but also because of what it means for people, too.

Meatless Meals Made Easy

Making vegetarian meals doesn't have to be time-consuming or difficult. Despite all the gourmet cooking magazines and high-end kitchen supply stores around, you and most other people probably don't anticipate spending much of your free time fixing meals.

Not to worry. You can make the best vegetarian meals quickly, using basic ingredients with simple techniques and recipes.

Mastering meal planning and prep

After nearly 30 years of counseling individuals on many types of diets, I've found one thing to be universally true: Nobody follows a structured meal plan for very long. Though it may be helpful for some to see a sample meal plan, following rigid diet plans doesn't work well for most people. That's because you, like me, probably juggle a busy schedule that requires a fair amount of flexibility in meal planning.

You find a good deal of advice in this book that pertains to planning and preparing meatless meals in the most efficient way possible. In general, though, your meals should follow the guidelines I present in Chapter 7.

The best way to prepare meals with a minimum of fuss is to remember the key word — simple.

You need very little equipment and only basic cooking skills — boiling, baking, chopping, and peeling — to prepare most vegetarian foods. The best recipes include familiar, easy-to-find ingredients and have short ingredient lists.

The recipes I include in this book in Part III are a great place to start. You may also find, as you dig a little further into living vegetarian, that you don't have to rely on recipes at all to fix great meals. My hope for you is that you gain confidence in your ability to put ingredients together in simple and pleasing ways so that you can quickly and easily assemble delicious, nutritious vegetarian meals.

Shopping strategies

Grocery shopping doesn't take exceptional skills, but smart shopping habits can help ensure that you have the ingredients you need on hand when you need them. Because you probably don't have lots of free time to spend roaming the supermarket, you want to shop efficiently, too.

A few tips to keep in mind:

- **Keep a list.** Post on your refrigerator a running list of ingredients you need to pick up the next time you're at the store. You'll be less likely to forget a key item, and you'll be less likely to spend impulsively, too.
- **Shop for locally grown, seasonal foods.** Stop at your local farmer's market or roadside vegetable stand. Fruits and vegetables grown near your home taste better and retain more nutrients than foods that spend days on a truck being shipped across the country after being picked.
- **Mix it up.** Visit different grocery stores from time to time to take advantage of new food items and varied selections across stores. Ethnic markets and specialty shops can give you good ideas and offer some interesting new products to try.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I describe various commonly used vegetarian ingredients, and I give advice about shopping and stocking your vegetarian kitchen.

Mixing in some kitchen wisdom

If the idea of fixing meatless meals is new to you, harboring some concerns about your ability to plan and prepare good-tasting meals is understandable. Until you've had some experience, you may mistakenly believe that living vegetarian means buying lots of specialty products or spending hours slaving over the stove.

Not true. Going vegetarian — done well — will simplify your life in many ways. You'll have fewer greasy pans to wash, and your stove and oven should stay cleaner longer. Foods that contain fewer animal ingredients are likely to be less of a food safety concern than those that contain meat, eggs, and dairy products.

And living vegetarian costs less.

Of course, you can spend as much time and money as you want to on your meals. Living vegetarian, though, is all about basic foods prepared simply. The staples — fruits, vegetables, grains, and beans — are generally inexpensive and easy to use.

Cooking creatively

Vegetarian meals invite creativity.

After you're free of the idea that a meal has to be built around a slab of meat, the variety really begins. After all, you can put together plant ingredients to make a meal in an almost endless number of ways. Plant ingredients come in varied colors, textures, and flavors. The sampling of recipes I include in this book (see Part III for these recipes) are an introduction to what's possible. Don't hesitate to experiment with these — add a favorite herb or substitute Swiss chard for kale.

You'll soon be spoiled by the variety and quality of vegetarian meals. After you've practiced living vegetarian for a while, you'll find that you don't have space on your plate for meat anymore, even if you still eat it! The vegetarian foods are so much more interesting and appealing.

Embracing a Meat-Free Lifestyle

At this point, you may be distracted by such thoughts as, "I need a degree in nutrition to get this right," or, "I wonder whether I'll be vegetarian enough." Your mind may be leaping ahead to such concerns as, "Will my family go along with this?" In this section, I help you put issues like these into perspective.

Taking charge of your plate

You have no reason to be afraid to stop eating meat. I haven't touched a hamburger in more than 35 years, and I'm alive and well.

In the opening of his book *Baby and Child Care,* Dr. Benjamin Spock wrote these famous words: "Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do." You may not have studied the Krebs cycle or be able to calculate your caloric needs, but if you're reading this book, you probably have enough gumption to get your diet mostly right.

Mostly right is usually good enough.

The science of nutrition is complicated, but being well nourished is a fairly simple matter. It may sound strange coming from a nutritionist, but you really have no need to worry about nutrition on a vegetarian diet. Vegetarian diets aren't lacking in necessary nutrients.

Poor nutrition is a function of lifestyle — vegetarian or not. The greatest threats? Junk foods and a lack of time to fix the foods you need most to support health — particularly fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes.

Your public persona: Affirming your choice

Vegetarianism has become mainstream in many places in recent years. If you live in an urban setting or near a college town, chances are good that a number of your friends or coworkers are vegetarians of one sort or another.

Other people aren't so lucky. If you find yourself feeling isolated because you're the only vegetarian you know, keep a few points in mind:

- You're 1 in 40, more or less — only about 2 to 3 percent of the population is truly vegetarian. If you feel a little different, it's because you are. You'd fit right in if you lived in India or any other culture in which vegetarianism has been a tradition for thousands of years.
- You alone decide what to eat. You may be different from most people, but you should feel confident in your decision to live a vegetarian lifestyle. It's better for your health and the environment, and it's a nonviolent choice. A vegetarian diet is the thinking person's diet.
- You owe no one an explanation. Stand tall and take comfort in knowing that you're on the cutting edge of the nutritional curve.

Cohabitating harmoniously

The most important things to do if you want your partner, children, parents — or anybody else you live with — to be happy in a vegetarian household are:

- **Take a low-key approach.** Arguing, chastising, and cajoling are seldom effective in gaining buy-in from other people. In fact, being pushy is likely to give you the opposite result. Explain your rationale to adults and older children, and then let them decide for themselves what they will or won't eat.
- **Model the preferred behavior.** The choices you make and the way in which you live send the most compelling — and noticeable — message.

Vegetarian diets are a great idea for kids. Establishing health-supporting eating habits early in life can help your children maintain good eating habits into adulthood. I include detailed information about managing the nutritional aspects of vegetarian diets for kids of all ages in Part V.

Setting realistic expectations

Making any lifestyle change requires you to master new skills and change longstanding habits, and that takes time. Don't be too hard on yourself if you experience a few occasional setbacks.

Experiment with new recipes, try vegetarian foods in restaurants, and invite friends to your house for meals. Read all you can about meal planning and vegetarian nutrition. With practice and time, you'll gain confidence and get comfortable with your new lifestyle. Think of this as a long-term goal — it took me several years before I felt like an expert at it.

Educating yourself with reliable information

This book gives you a solid introduction to all things vegetarian, but don't stop here. It's helpful to hear (or read, or view) the same subject matter presented differently by different sources. It takes most people several rounds before they absorb and understand a new subject well.

I mention good resources throughout this book, but I also list several of the best all-around resources for vegetarians of any skill level in the upcoming sections.

The Vegetarian Resource Group

The Vegetarian Resource Group (VRG) is a U.S. nonprofit organization that educates the public about the interrelated issues of health, nutrition, ecology, ethics, and world hunger. The group publishes the bimonthly *Vegetarian Journal* and provides numerous other printed materials for consumers and health professionals. The organization provides the materials free of charge or at a modest cost in bulk, and many are available in Spanish. VRG's health and nutrition materials are peer-reviewed by registered dietitians and physicians. VRG also advocates for progressive changes in U.S. food and nutrition policy. (Full disclosure: I've served as a nutrition adviser to VRG for about 25 years.)

You can reach VRG at P.O. Box 1463, Baltimore, MD 21203; phone 410-366-8343, fax 410-366-8803; e-mail `vrg@vrg.org`, Web site `www.vrg.org`. From VRG's Web site you can download and order materials, including handouts, reprints of articles, recipes, and more.

The North American Vegetarian Society

The North American Vegetarian Society (NAVS) is best known for its annual vegetarian conference, Summerfest, which is often held in Johnstown, Pennsylvania in July. This casual, family-oriented conference draws an international crowd of 400 to 600 people with diverse interests. Nonvegetarians are welcome. Summerfest is an excellent opportunity to sample fabulous vegetarian foods, meet other vegetarians, attend lectures, and pick up materials from a variety of vegetarian organizations. The group also publishes *The Vegetarian Voice,* a newsletter for members.

You can contact NAVS at P.O. Box 72, Dolgeville, NY 13329; phone 518-568-7970; e-mail navs@telenet.net, Web site www.navs-online.org.

Vegetarian Nutrition, a Dietetic Practice Group of the American Dietetic Association

The Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group (VNDPG) is a subgroup within the American Dietetic Association (ADA) for dietitians with a special interest in vegetarian diets. The group publishes a quarterly newsletter, and other consumer nutrition educational materials are available online at www.vegetariannutrition.net. (Full disclosure: I was VNDPG's founding chair in 1992 and have been a member ever since.)

The ADA also offers a referral service for people who need individual nutrition counseling. To find the name and contact information of a registered dietitian in your area with expertise in vegetarian diets, go online to www.eatright.org/cps/rde/xchg/ada/hs.xsl/home_4875_ENU_HTML.htm.

Other great resources

If you're looking for even more information on the vegetarian lifestyle, consider the following:

- **Vegetarian Nutrition** at www.vegetarian-nutrition.info. This Web site is devoted to information about vegetarian diets and healthful lifestyles.
- **A Dietitian's Guide to Vegetarian Diets** at www.vegnutrition.com. This site includes basic information for newcomers to the vegetarian lifestyle.
- **VeganHealth.org.** This is a project of the nonprofit Vegan Outreach. The Web site provides information about diet and health aspects of vegetarian lifestyles.
- **Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine** at www.pcrm.org. PCRM is a nonprofit organization of physicians and others who advocate for compassionate and effective medical practices, research, and health promotion, including vegetarian diets.