



It may look deceptively simple, but the kale pesto pizza is a flavour bomb from the get-go.

# Plant-forward meals

With a passionate chef at the helm, this Klang Valley restaurant is capturing the zeitgeist and appetite for interesting plant-powered dishes.

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JUST a few years ago, the compulsion to consume vegan or vegetarian meals wasn't really foremost on most people's minds. If anything, veganism was treated with derision and a great deal of suspicion. The prevailing question seemed to be: how good could a plant-based meal really be?

But the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing ripple effect it generated has changed public perception – seemingly for good.

These days, interest in plant-based meals is at an all-time high, buoyed by captivating new meat analogues in the market that have caused a seismic shift in consumption patterns. This has had a trickle-down effect – in 2021, local gourmet supermarkets reported a 200% increase in sales of plant-based alternative proteins.

This pendulum swing has been particularly beneficial for eateries like Simply Good Food, a plant-based stalwart in Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur, that has been around for a few years now.

“Since we started getting the meat analogues in, we've sold a lot of that. Initially, I was very hesitant to use mock meat, but after seeing the ingredients and tasting the products, I realised it is actually pretty good. These days, the meals that incorporate these plant-based alternatives tend to be our

best-sellers,” says Brian Schnabel, the head chef of Simply Good Food.

“The meat analogues help get meat-eaters in the door and are a good stepping stone, because people will come here to order certain meals but when they realise vegan food can have flavour, it makes them want to come back for more,” he adds.

Schnabel is an American who has been in the restaurant industry since he was 13. He started out cleaning tables and has worked his way up over the years. He has been at the helm of Simply Good Food for over six years now and works hard to ensure that the vegan and vegetarian meals that he makes utilise high-quality, organic, fresh-from-the-farm ingredients – something that is a priority.

“Our main approach is doing a healthier take on normal, everyday food using better ingredients. So we visit many organic farms and suppliers to ensure quality control,” he says.

Schnabel is often inspired to create new meals after dining out at other restaurants. These eating escapades inevitably propel him to think of ways to replicate various meat-centric meals in a vegetable-focused format.

“I am actually still a meat-eater so when I go out and find meat-based dishes that I enjoy, I end up thinking of ways to recreate the same concepts in the plant-based



BEYOND MEAT

The truffle Beyond burger will satisfy all those cravings for a hefty meat substitute and then some. — Photos: SIMPLY GOOD FOOD



Vegetable-packed dumplings swimming in a tranquil, soothing broth.



The aglio olio is not bad, but the seasoning is a tad inconsistent.

space,” he admits.

Almost everything on the menu is made from scratch, from the sauces to the pesto. This helps Schnabel and his team to control what goes into each dish and ensure that it is completely vegan or vegetarian.

To test out the plant-based waters here, try the signature sweet and spicy mushrooms (RM22). You will discover crispy, crackly perfectly-battered mushrooms coated in a thick, sweet-spicy sauce reminiscent of the intoxicating sauce that is slathered over chilli crabs. This is a fried snack that is a little like a magic trick, because it disappears so quickly – that's how addictive it is!

For a deep dive into alternative proteins, opt for the truffle Beyond burger (RM48). The Beyond burger meat analogue patty has been hailed for its cunning ability to mimic actual beef patties. This duplicity is on full effect here, as you will discover a patty that is texturally solid with unbelievably meaty overtures.

The truffle cream house (made in-house) also gives this burger added dimension as it offers rich, opulent notes that accentuate all the other components of this dish. It may not be enough to dupe true carnivores, but for those looking for a stand-in figure, this will do nicely.

If you want to immerse your palate in soothing, tranquil waters, take a dip in the vegan dumpling soup (RM23). The dumplings are handmade and stuffed with seven different kinds of vegetables including turnip, carrots and French beans, with shiitake mushrooms and tofu.

Each rotund packet is plump and packed with flavour and this nurturing quality is extended in the form of the soup, which is light but well-balanced.

Although the pandemic was really brutal for the restaurant, Schnabel says things have picked up considerably since then and he is now looking forward to the future.

“During the first movement control order in March 2020, business almost completely stopped. There were days when we were like, ‘Why are we here?’

“But we just kept pressing on and since then, I have seen so many new faces coming into the restaurant,” he says delightedly.

**Order from Simply Good Food through Beep Delivery.**

GIVEN the boost that caffeine can inject in our daily lives, it is little surprise to learn that coffee consumption has never been higher than when the Covid-19 pandemic hit (admittedly a period when more coffee than ever has been required for sanity and survival).

According to Yip Leong Sum, the president of the Malaysian Specialty Coffee Association (MSCA), this incline in coffee interest means there are now an equal number of local coffee-drinkers as there are tea-drinkers.

“In the past, Malaysians used to drink more tea than coffee, but over the last two years, the data shows that there has been a rising demand for coffee and even roasted coffee beans,” says Yip.

All these new and existing coffee fans will find plenty to celebrate in the return of the annual Malaysia Coffee Week from March 3 to 6. Organised by MSCA, the event is designed to celebrate both the makers and

## Coffee culture

consumers of coffee.

After going digital last year, the event is back in a physical format this year at 1 Utama Shopping Centre in Petaling Jaya, with plenty to look forward to including over 80 exhibitors and brands and a first-of-its-kind “Specialty Coffee Village” where visitors can even get fresh coffee beans roasted on the spot.

Perhaps the most highly-anticipated aspect of this coffee fiesta is the return of the Malaysian Barista Team Challenge, which will see two teams of three baristas battling for the top spot and the chance to represent the nation at the Asean Barista Team Championship in Singapore later this year.

Baristas will have five minutes to prepare seven drinks, which will only be revealed to them once the challenge actually starts!



Yip says that more people have started drinking coffee; the number of coffee-drinkers is now on par with tea-drinkers. — MSCA

Yip says the resumption of the challenge is integral to boosting morale among baristas in the country, many of whom have experienced tough times during the pandemic.



Many baristas lost their job during the pandemic, which is why Yip believes that the barista challenge will boost morale and hone skills. — CHEVANON PHOTOGRAPHY/Pexels

“In the past two years, many baristas lost their jobs because so many cafes ended up closing. So this championship is aimed at giving them hope and brushing up

their skills. We want to make them feel like preparing a good cup of coffee is still the main reason for them to do their jobs well,” says Yip. — **Abirami Durai**