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Vegetarians have some good local options

By Mark Nemeth
 Staff Reporter

I ride a bike around downtown Lincoln and when I get hungry, I try to figure out how the few dollars in my pocket will feed me.

If I ate meat, I'd probably go to ... I don't know. Where would I go? Someplace greasy.

But I don't like meat. Let me tell you why. It's not necessarily that raising animals for consumption is a waste of land, or that the companies that raise these animals are often wasteful and cruel, or that the lobbying these companies do keeps people misinformed about nutrition, or that eating animals just seems cruel, or that I've seen the movie "Parents" too many times, or that I've seen a meat locker once.

It is just that I like foods that aren't meats. I like being forced to eat creatively, and though it may be a little difficult in a city without a vegetarian restaurant, it is possible to do while being good for your body, your mind and your ability to live inexpensively.

Don't be turned off to avoiding meat: Just watch someone chew a steak.

Some vegetarians seem to apply their personal politics like intolerant fascism. Ugh. I just don't eat meat.

The following are some of the downtown places I like to go where one can find a cheap meatless meal.

The key cheap meatless meal in downtown Lincoln is the Tofu Tomato at the key cheap downtown restaurant, Vien Dong, at 1217 Q St.

Describing it means using the word tofu, which some people think they don't like. Try tofu the way Vien Dong prepares it. Along with "The Prisoner" television series, Matthew Sweet Records, politics and Jolly Ranchers, the tofu tomato at Vien Dong ranks high on my "Here, try this," list.

Vien Dong is just a great place to eat, to talk, and to sit; a basic unobtrusive, well-lit restaurant with windows that draws an unobtrusive, seemingly sophisticated, unpretentious diners seeking inexpensive Vietnamese food.

Though the wait isn't long, conversations always build in intensity after ordering, as taste buds romanticize the beginning of a new food relationship.

I often long for the taste of tofu rectangles in their miracle tomato sauce. Whatever the dish, the portions are large. Sharing any Vien Dong plate is easy. Each comes with the rice on a separate plate, along with a small deep bowl. Split a plate, and get a meatless eggroll,

or a bowl of tofu soup.

The man who often pours water is sweet. I wish I knew the names of those who work at Vien Dong, but I'm always unobtrusive there.

I know that not everyone goes there for the tofu tomato, so non-vegetarians must also enjoy Vien Dong.



Because so many Lincoln residents have moved to Minneapolis, and also as a role model for any vegetarian entrepreneurs, I must mention Riverside Cafe in Minneapolis, which offers both vegetarian and vegan meals and is owned cooperatively by its employees.

Its meal options are large, inexpensive, and filled with plenty of rice, lentil, tofu, falafel, vegetable and tempeh options. You want bean curd? They've got bean curd.

The restaurant's atmosphere is large and simple. Musicians often perform there, passing around a cup for donations.

Cafes, small restaurants and coffee shops with alternative magazines, books and good cheap meatless food: Lincoln needs more of them.

In Lincoln, we have the Mill, at 8th & P streets. Though the Mill, a coffee shop, is not a restaurant, it does offer an inexpensive vegetarian pita sandwich filled with cucumbers, avocados, sprouts, cream cheese and a dill sauce.

The Mill's combination of woody and windowy interior, plants, high ceilings, benched tables, coffee accessories, employees, magazines, newspapers and other interesting reading material make for the most likely place that I, my bicycle and a few pocketed dollars would go for drink and light food.

Did I say the Mill's coffee was rich and brewed beautifully? I'd rather simply eat a blueberry, banana nut or poppy seed muffin with a good cup of coffee, or a grapefruit Blue Sky in the Mill than anywhere in downtown Lincoln.

Closer to campus is the Hole Works, a nice little coffee and bagel shop at 1227 R St. If you want something, anything, on a bagel, or English muffin, or bread, just ask them. They'll make it and it won't be expensive.

Their vegetarian spread is good.

I usually get a wheat bagel with a tomato and maybe cheese if I'm feeling aggressive and non-vegan.

Its rounded bar makes for good cafe-wide conversation and helps make the Hole Works the best close-to-campus cheap meatless food option.

Open Harvest is a cooperatively owned food store at 1618 South St. Though not always cheap, Open Harvest does offer the best selection of vegetarian food products close to downtown. Try one of their prewrapped sandwiches, including one made with artichokes.

I used to fill my body many times with vegetarian sandwiches on wheat bread from Subway, at 1300 P St. They're cheap and tasty, but ever since a friend called them 'condiment sandwiches,' I've cut down on the Subway habit. I'll always have a place in my heart for the taste of lettuce, mustard, tomato, pepper, vinegar and oil on bread, though.

Highnooners, 1414 O St., offers the non-vegan a tasty cheese sandwich, and the owners used to co-own the Drumstick, so one might go buy a sandwich there in memory of Lincoln's bar/mecca for alternative bands.

Sometimes I've found myself at Amigos or Taco Inn. I like crispy bean burritos, and they're cheap. Amigos is all over the place and the Taco Inn closest to campus is at 1245 R St.

The best reward for not eating meat is the capability of creatively eating at home. Rices and grains are cheap. Go buy them; apples, oranges, tomatoes, avocados, mushrooms, onions, peppers, sprouts, cucumbers, tofu, tempeh, falafel, non-white rice, flour, yeast, cereals and milk for the non-vegan.

Then you will need paprika for sauteing, coriander for the tempeh, curry for rice, tortilla shells, beans, pitas, breads, oil and vinegar to mix with pepper and garlic salt for salads and vegetable sandwiches.

And of course there are croustons for salads, pesto for pasta and pasta for pesto. Make sandwiches and rice dishes. Foods are not necessarily difficult to make, don't take that much time and save you money.

In the not-cheap-but-necessary category is the occasional spree. One might try cut apples on baked brie cheese and bread, Breyers Vanilla Ice Cream, or any Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream.

Eating cheap and meatless in this downtown city of potential takes creativity, and the desire for creativity may be the cheapest and most creative way to eat meatless.

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Michael Weixel/DN