

50 STATES, 50 FIXES

From Oregon, a Chocolate Cake That Changes Hearts and Minds

The Portland area is a hot spot for vegans, who have the most environmentally friendly diets. It has also yielded a game-changing dessert.



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In Oregon, there's a through line from 19th century saints to 21st century sinners. They both sought salvation, of a sort, by eschewing meat.

It was in Portland, in the 1890s, that Seventh-day Adventists opened one of the first vegetarian restaurants in the country, in line with their belief that a Godly diet was one of fruit, vegetables, legumes and grains.

It was also in Portland, more than hundred years later, that Johnny Diablo Zukle opened a vegan strip club, now in its 18th year.

50 States, 50 Fixes is a [series about local solutions](#) to environmental problems. More to come this year.

Portland, highly praised for its food scene, is a hot spot for vegans, who don't eat dairy or meat. The maker of Tofurky, the vegan holiday roast, is headquartered nearby, as is Bob's Red Mill, global purveyor of artisanal whole grains.





Patrons eat at Mirisata, a vegan Sri Lankan restaurant in Portland. It serves dishes like Deviled "Pork" (marinated and breaded soy curls).

By one count, Portland has [the most vegan businesses per capita](#). The city is home to vegan tattoo parlors, where stencil paper and ink contain no animal products, vegan food trucks and loads of vegan-friendly restaurants.

Vegan diets are the most climate-friendly because they generate [far fewer greenhouse gas emissions and environmental harms](#) compared with diets that include animal products.

But about the cake

The region is also home to Nora Taylor, a mother of three and former nurse who lives outside Portland and runs a vegan food blog called Nora Cooks. In 2018, Ms. Taylor posted [a recipe for chocolate cake](#) that changed my life.

For her 35th birthday, Ms. Taylor decided to concoct the perfect vegan chocolate cake, having found other recipes too dry or too dense.

Her recipe included ingredients sure to confound egg and butter die-hards: Applesauce, nondairy milk, apple cider vinegar. But she had doubts about posting it online because it also called for sugar and vegan butter, and she'd been trying to keep her blog healthy. "I told my husband, 'Maybe I should try some avocado frosting.' And he was like, 'Can you just post the cake? Because it's incredible,'" Ms. Taylor said.

She did.





Nora Taylor, with the ingredients for her Vegan Chocolate Cake, at her home in Hillsboro, outside Portland.

Not long afterward, I was at a casual backyard wedding where someone brought Ms. Taylor's chocolate cake. It was a stunner, layered, dark and rich, and after one bite, I was in a swoon. "It's vegan," a server told me. "It can't be," I shot back.

At the time, I was a conflicted omnivore, [haunted by what humans put billions of animals through](#), yet unable to imagine a life without cheese or eggs. Ms. Taylor's cake opened up epicurean possibilities. A month after trying it, I committed to going plant-based.

Ms. Taylor, 41, gave up meat and dairy in her mid-twenties, as Portland's vegan scene was surging. The city's meatless leanings were amplified by hippies in the 1970s, followed by a vibrant punk scene that embraced animal rights and veganism as resistance to consumer capitalism.

Vegan business boom

In 2003, a young couple, Emiko Badillo and Chad Miller, opened a vegan grocery store called Food Fight! It became a community hub, hosting punk shows and events, including a cookie contest judged by onetime presidential candidate (and vegan) Dennis Kucinich. It also inspired other like-minded shops.

"Vegan businesses in general just started popping up everywhere, which was great," Ms. Badillo said. In 2006, Heman Bhojwani opened a vegan food distribution business, Earthly Gourmet, supplying hundreds of restaurants.



Food Fight! Grocery is an all-vegan grocery store in Portland. Beth Sullivan, at right, is the current owner and took over the business from founders Emiko Badillo and Chad Miller.

“People are very open-minded about vegan food here,” said Alex Felsinger, co-founder of Mirisata, a vegan Sri Lankan restaurant in Portland. “They’re used to seeing this food around. It’s not weird.”

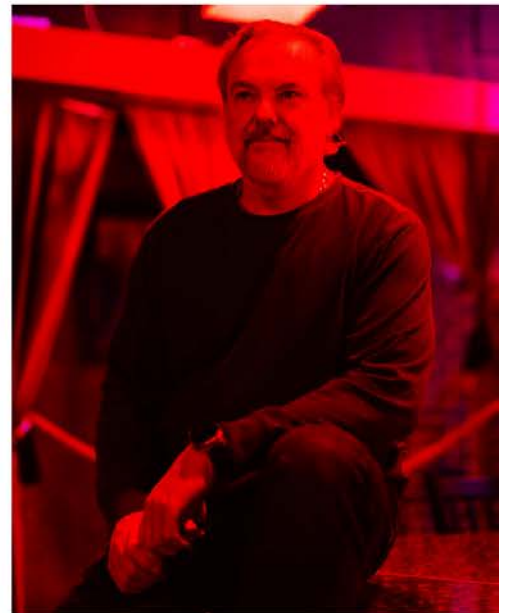
Mr. Zukle opened his vegan strip club, Casa Diablo, in 2008, after an earlier endeavor, a vegan family restaurant, foundered. Mr. Zukle, 61, gave up meat and dairy in his early 20s, initially for health reasons, and committed to it after learning about animal mistreatment. At his club, dancers aren’t allowed to wear fur, feathers or leather onstage and the most-ordered dish is the vegan crunch wrap.

“There’s different ways that we can make an impact,” Mr. Zukle said. “Every little bit helps.”

Still, across the country, the [popularity of plant-based foods has been wobbling](#). Mr. Bhojwani, the wholesale distributor, said that his sales had dipped 10 percent over the past two years, which he attributes to increased costs of labor, shipping and ingredients, and businesses closing as a result. There’s also been an upsurge in meat consumption, with sales hitting record highs and [a political moment that favors “carnibros.”](#)

Ms. Taylor has even seen a recent surge in anti-vegan attacks on the recipes she posts to Facebook. “Really disheartening,” she said.

But Eric Brent, founder of HappyCow, an app for vegan options worldwide, said that Portland’s strong vegan community made its plant-based food scene resilient. HappyCow found that the number of vegan businesses in the city held steady for much of 2024.



Dancers at Casa Diablo like Magic, left, don't wear leather or fur and the club serves an all-vegan menu. Mr. Zukle, the owner, gave up meat and dairy in his 20s.

And Ms. Taylor said the traffic to her website has grown 25 percent compared with a year ago and now averages 3 million page views a month.

“In reality, many folks continue to be interested in becoming plant-based, but we aren’t the loud ones right now,” Ms. Taylor said.

While she’s since added tons of other recipes, her chocolate cake was her breakthrough, with more than 1,900 five-star reviews. I’ve made it at least a dozen times, watching peoples’ eyes widen after they taste it, and again after learning it’s made without eggs or dairy.

Ms. Taylor said positive feedback to her recipes vastly outweighed the negative, with people thanking her for helping them go plant-based, or at the very least to cut down on meat.

“They say it made it possible for them to make this change,” Ms. Taylor said. “It makes it feel meaningful for me, like I’m doing my part for goodness in the world. For the animals, for the earth, for people.”

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