

A Vegetarian Survivor's Tale:

How I Conquered the College Dining Hall Blues

By Jenn Abelson

"Jenn, what are you complaining about?" exclaimed my friend Rebecca, who was visiting me at Cornell for the weekend. "Look at all the food there is to choose from," she called from the other side of the dining hall, drooling over platters of chicken fingers and fried shrimp.

Food -- it is one of the basic necessities of life. Not only is it a necessity, but eating is also one of society's favorite pastimes. For example, who ever heard of seeing a movie without having a bag of popcorn propped on your lap and a diet coke at your feet? And what about the all-time favorite stop at the local diner for a late-night snack? And let's not forget our 24-7 craving for fro-yo!

Food and people go together like peanut butter and jelly, bread and butter, and Bert and Ernie. But what's a girl to do when there is basically no food to eat suited for a health-conscious vegetarian like myself?

I just could not seem to take as much joy as my friend Rebecca did from the dining hall's selection of roasted lamb and greasy grilled cheese sandwiches. I firmly believe that the food served at my dining hall, an undeserving title, prepares any vegetarian to survive and appreciate eating only sand if stranded on an island.

While that may sound harsh and unnecessarily cruel, I can honestly say that from my own experiences and those of fellow vegetarians, finding edible vegetarian food in college dining halls is virtually impossible. Without being

totally unfair; I must admit that one dining hall on campus did offer more veggies than the trademark frozen trio of peas, corn and carrots. But this haven was located on the complete opposite side of campus and it was up hill both ways, of course.

Though I do enjoy my veggies, my mega-busy life did not allow me to take the hour needed to get there, eat my meal and walk home. So, I became a prisoner of the closest dining hall to me, Jansens, and their meat-loving cooks.

Jansens, home of beef and broccoli and barbecue pork, is every protein-addict's dream. Time and time again, my friends stared at me as I stood in the middle of Jansens with an empty tray in hand, not knowing what to eat. My friends, sitting and chowing down their beef burritos, would offer sympathetic smiles for support. Feelings of frustration mushroomed inside as my stomach roared with hunger. "Eggplant!" I often screamed. "All I want is my mommy's eggplant."

But no, the chefs at Jansens do not like eggplant. They like steak and pasta with meat sauce. I concede that there usually was an unidentifiable liquidy red sauce next to the meat sauce, but who can really tell? And the "garden burgers" are downright scary! No matter how many tomatoes, onions and pickles I piled on the meatless patties, they still tasted like rubber band sandwiches.

My pounding headaches clearly indicated that I needed to eat. So, I turned to Captain Crunch cereal as my savior. Yes indeed, my breakfasts, lunches and dinners consisted only of a bowl of Captain Crunch and a banana for an entire month. These days, my stomach wrestles with nausea every time I see a box of the peanut-butter flavored corn pops.

Although it may appear that I am just a picky and hard-to-please person, I share my hatred for Jansens with fellow vegetarians. My best friend Komi, who is a vegan, often came up to me in the dining halls saying, "I haven't used a fork

or knife in two months. But I did use a spoon for my ice cream-and-pickles dinner last night."

Another one of my close friends, who wished to remain anonymous, revealed to me in the utmost of confidence that she stole 11 oranges from Jansens on several occasions in order to satisfy her "infinite hunger." Friend X explained that she ripped the lining of her jacket just so she could slip the oranges in without being caught by Jansens' employees as she broke the sacred one person/one fruit rule.

Well, my Captain Crunch plight did not last forever. I had suffered too many nights of falling asleep to the rumbling of my hungry stomach to let it go on any longer. So, I became, what some might say, a frugal gourmet. I will share a few handy tips that helped me survive my vegetarian nightmares.

- 1. French Bread Fantasy:** You can easily create your very own French bread pizza. First, gather French bread, or any bread of your choice, and mozzarella from the deli section. Then, head over to the pasta bar for -- you guessed it -- the liquidy marinara sauce. With the help of a toaster oven or microwave usually available in the dining area, you can warm up the pizza until the cheese gets good and gooey. I cultivated my pizza-making skills and soon my meat-eating friends began eyeing my dinner and begging if I could make them ones too.
- 2. Pita Power:** When I got bored of my French bread delight, I then turned to pita bread and stuffed it with items from the salad bar. Grab some crunchy carrots, leafy lettuce, sliced tomatoes, sprouts and just fill the pita to the brim with your raw veggies. Top with some light salad dressing for taste.
- 3. Menu Makeover:** Other suggestions? Well, my new bud Cecilia from the North American Vegetarian Society recommended tackling the problem head-on. Cecilia said the best way to have your voice heard and needs addressed is to meet with the director of the dining facilities and suggest veggie items you

would like to see on the menu.

4. Mini-fridge Relief: Most colleges offer the option of renting mini-fridges.

Cecilia advised renting, or even purchasing, one of these tiny ice boxes for your dorm room. Here you can store fruit, yogurt, raw veggies and nuts in order to conquer your hunger.

5. Ultimate Solution: Living in an apartment with available cooking facilities or borrowing your friends' space can make the difference toward improving your eating habits. Chopping raw veggies and tossing them in a wok with soy sauce will provide a hearty, yet simple dinner. Different vegetables can spice up your wokking possibilities and adding tofu is a great way to get that vital protein.

Despite the challenges of living in a meat-loving world, oh yes, we vegetarians will survive. □