

# PLANT





# FOOD

All over the world people are embracing vegan diets – but nowhere more so than in Tel Aviv. We went to join the revolution

Words / Isabel Putinja → Photography / Jonas Opperskalski

et's talk about animal rights," says the Hebrew sign that's propped up on a table full of vegan treats and dishes. It makes an incongruous sight, sitting slap bang in the middle of elegant, tree-lined Rothschild Boulevard, but that's not put off the crowds. A gaggle gathers around the buffet, happy to graze on the free, healthy dishes, while a young man entices other walkers and cyclists to stop and help themselves: "Would you like to try some vegan food?"

For those who would, there are few better places to be than Tel Aviv right now. While veganism is on the rise all over – Google searches for the term are up 500% over the past 10 years, and reports have declared it the leading food trend of 2018 – Israel is a special case, with 5% of the population identifying as vegans: the highest per-capita rate in the world.

In Tel Aviv, its most cosmopolitan city, there are over 400 vegan-friendly restaurants (14 opened

**"There are hundreds of vegan restaurants... you can even munch on a Domino's Pizza with vegan cheese"**

their doors in the last year alone) – leading many people to describe it as the vegan capital of the world. Visiting herbivores don't have to struggle to find food options; they can simply look out for a sticker at outlets that have been certified by the local Vegan Friendly project; find non-dairy ice cream sold at popular chains like Vaniglia and Anita; even munch on a Domino's pizza topped with vegan cheese – a global first.

In many ways it's unsurprising that this kind of diet should put down roots here. The home of that vegan favourite, the chickpea, Israel is fertile ground for a movement based on plant-based cuisine thanks to its Mediterranean diet, featuring meat-, dairy- and egg-free staples such as falafel, hummus and tahini.

Produce grown here is abundant and varied – a bounty that gives meat-free chefs plenty of inspiration. Visitors to Tel Aviv's Shuk Ha'Carmel (Carmel Market) can marvel at the baskets of cherry tomatoes of every hue of red, orange and purple, giant olives, oversized avocados, and radishes the size of small apples.»

# 416

Open since January 2017, 416 has a 100% plant-based kitchen and a craft cocktail bar set in a space with an urban-design vibe juxtaposed with plenty of natural wood and hanging plants. Twin brothers Ben and El Rachmani from New York are co-owners along with chef David Sinay Barzilay.

"We only buy flour, fruit, vegetables, spices and alcohol," says Ben. "We make all the rest in-house: vegan cheese, bread, cream, chocolate, lemonade, ice tea, even carbonated drinks. And we grow all our herbs in a hydroponic garden. When we opened we had mostly vegan customers but now 50% are non-vegans."

The restaurant's biggest seller is the Steak Special, made from wheat protein seitan. "It's a process that took me months to develop", says Barzilay. "Ours is aged and grilled to give it a smoky flavour. Non-vegans feel it's a lot like meat: both in texture and taste, and people come from all over Israel to try it." [416.co.il](http://416.co.il)





**“We want to give plant-based food sex appeal... to eat healthy without feeling like you have to make sacrifices”**

It's only recently, however, that locals have been eschewing meat products on a grand scale. In 2010, for example, only 2.5% of Israelis were even vegetarian (compared with around 10% today), never mind vegan.

“Before 2011 people didn't know what vegan was,” says Ben Rachmani, co-owner of 416, one of the city's best plant-based restaurants. “I had to say I was vegetarian and allergic to dairy and eggs. There were few menu options for vegans.” Tal Bright, a social activist and vegan travel blogger at Bright Nomad, agrees: “A decade ago it was considered radical and there were few places to eat out.”

A sign that something revolutionary was happening came in 2012 when Ori Shavit, a restaurant critic for »

# Bana

Chefs Dan Arvatz and Chanoch Shechter met 10 years ago when they worked in the kitchen of Eyal Shani, Israel's most celebrated chef. Today they're co-owners of Bana, one of the most talked-about openings of 2017.

This light-filled eatery has an informal vibe with fruits and vegetables piled high on shelves and a long granite counter-top, like you're dining in a grocery store. On the menu is a *masabacha* (hummus-like dip) of green beans and caramelised spinach, cauliflower and broccoli bruschetta, and broiled mushrooms with chopped walnuts and chestnut cream.

“Our concept is plant-based healthy corrupted food,” explains Arvatz. “This doesn't really translate well into English but in Hebrew it's just perfect. We want to give plant-based and health food some sex appeal because these are terms that don't sound very appealing to many people.

“The concept is to eat very good food in a healthy way without feeling you have to make any sacrifices.”

[facebook.com/banachmani](https://facebook.com/banachmani)





Israel's best-known food magazine *On the Table*, announced she was going vegan, sending shockwaves through the foodie community. Even more significant was the news two years later that Nanuchka, one of the city's most popular eateries, was abandoning its meat-heavy menu of traditional Georgian cuisine for a produce-focused offering.

Delving deeper into these conversions, it seems the surprising catalyst for Israel's vegan transformation was a video of a speech by an American animal rights activist, titled "The Best Speech You Will Ever Hear" on YouTube. When local activists subtitled this video into Hebrew in 2011, it quickly went viral, clocking up more than one million views – a significant figure in this country of just 8.5 million people.

Something in that video's description of the meat and dairy industries seems to have touched a chord with Israelis. Many embraced the vegan lifestyle almost overnight. When Israeli animal rights activist Tal Gilboa won the 2014 season of Israeli *Big Brother*, the movement attracted even more attention.

Shavit was one of the overnight converts. "I met a guy who was vegan and he told me about the video," recounts the restaurant critic turned vegan influencer. "As a food journalist this was very new »



**"There's no need for vegan groups in Tel Aviv anymore because vegans don't feel isolated"**

This page  
Food writer and campaigner  
Ori Shavit; fruit at Carmel Market;  
on Be Tel Aviv's TLVEG tour

From left:  
Dishes at south Tel Aviv's  
Ethiopian Tenat restaurant,  
including *injera* bread



for me. I felt I had to understand so I watched it, approaching it as research. When it was over I realised I couldn't erase what I'd learned. So here I was: a food writer who didn't know everything about food. And it was scary because it was my whole life."

With this epiphany, Shavit decided to ditch her job and start her blog Vegans On Top, quickly gaining a wide readership and tens of thousands of followers. She agrees that times have changed and vegans are no longer on the fringes: "There's no need for vegan groups anymore here because vegans don't feel isolated."

In just a few years, the meat-free revolution in Israel has swept from the fringes of Tel Aviv's fine-dining hierarchy into every area of local life... and beyond. The success of the 22-day Vegan Challenge, run by Israeli charity Anonymous for Animal Rights, prompted them to launch an international version (even Beyoncé gave it a go). Local start-up SuperMeat, run by animal rights activist Koby Barak, is working on exporting a lab-grown chicken meat that will be both kosher and vegan-friendly.

The Ministry of Tourism video now hails Tel Aviv as the "world's best vegan destination" and actively promotes this new image. But, of course, you don't have to be vegan to take advantage of the botanic bounty on offer. The uninitiated can take one of several dedicated tours, like the wildly popular TLVEG, led by Eviatar Gover, owner of Be Tel Aviv Tours. »



**“Everything you need is in plants: protein, calcium, iron. So why shouldn’t we choose life?”**

# Tenat

Located in the Florentin neighbourhood of south Tel Aviv is Tenat, an Ethiopian eatery owned and run by Rachel and Yitzhak Hizkiyah, members of Israel's 140,000-strong Ethiopian community.

Open since 2013, the restaurant has been vegan from the start. “I watched a video in 2012 and realised how people eat animals with no mercy,” says Yitzhak. “Everything you need is in plants: protein, calcium, iron. So why shouldn’t we choose life?”

Staples of Ethiopian cuisine are served up prepared with lentils, root vegetables, spicy chickpeas and beetroot leaves on beds of soft *injera* bread. Also on the menu are a few of Yitzhak's specially created dishes.

“One of our most popular is the sizzling forest mushrooms, which replaces a meat dish we call *tibs*,” he elaborates. Another of the chef's vegan innovations is *kita fit-fit*: pitta bread cut into pieces and covered with vegan butter made in-house out of sunflower seeds, garlic, ginger and spices, topped with oregano and tomato sauce.

[facebook.com/tenatvegan](https://facebook.com/tenatvegan)



# Nanuchka

This place is a long-time favourite with locals for its Georgian cuisine as well as its lively bar – so drastically changing the former when owner Nana Schrier went vegan four years ago was a big risk. “I was afraid of losing business but felt like I didn’t have a choice,” says Georgia-born Schrier, who moved to Israel as a child with her parents. “I wanted to show that if a popular Georgian restaurant can go vegan, anyone can. Of course, I lost customers (as well as the chef I had for seven years), but I gained new ones.”

Schrier set about revamping the meat-heavy menu into a 100% plant-based one without losing its Georgian flavour. Popular with diners are the *khinkali*, handmade dumplings filled with mushrooms and truffles, and *imeruli khachapuri*, a type of bread filled with spinach, vegan cheese or tofu. The restaurant hasn’t lost its mojo either: *Time Out Israel* named Nanuchka the city’s most loved vegan restaurant in 2017.

[nanuchka.co.il](http://nanuchka.co.il)



“Some 80–90% of people who join our tours are non-vegans,” says Gover. “Most of them are foodies who are curious and want to explore the scene.”

This statement pays out on one Thursday afternoon tour. Of the 17 participants at the first stop – Zakaim, a popular eatery with a Persian-inspired menu and quirky flea-market décor – just a handful are tourists; and there are only two vegans and two vegetarians.

Given this level of curiosity from meat-eating locals, it’s hardly surprising that animal activists are out on the streets, aiming to up that 5% figure for Israeli vegans further. Certainly, those who invite passersby to help themselves to meatless shawarma, vegan brownies and dairy-free chocolate on Rothschild Boulevard are hopeful of recruiting to their cause.

“We still get a few guys who laugh and yell, ‘I love meat!’” says Anton Ovchinnikov, a member of Anonymous for Animal Rights. “But veganism is a big part of the future for many reasons: animals, health, the environment. Tel Aviv may be the world’s best vegan city but my hope is that Israel will become the world’s first vegan nation.”

[vegansontop.co.il](http://vegansontop.co.il), [betelavivtours.com](http://betelavivtours.com)

*Norwegian flies to Tel Aviv from Copenhagen, Stockholm and Barcelona. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at [Norwegian.com](http://Norwegian.com)*

## Other top plant-based dinners



### Lucky Leek Berlin

Located in trendy Prenzlauer Berg, Lucky Leek is a vegan fine-dining experience. Chef Josita Hartanto’s tasting menus have earned a Bib Gourmand. Open for dinner only. [lucky-leek.com](http://lucky-leek.com)



### Peacefood Café New York

With two venues, this is a firm favourite for its diverse menu of salads, soups, sandwiches and sushi but also focaccia, pizza, tamales and award-winning chickpea fries. [peacefoodcafe.com](http://peacefoodcafe.com)



### Piadina Genuina London

This simple Italian eatery has gluten-free lasagna and fresh, handmade pasta. Vegan kebabs and sausage are served in a “piadina” flatbread. [piadinagenuina.co.uk](http://piadinagenuina.co.uk)