

FOR VEGETARIANS, A WILD FESTIVAL

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Author(s): Anneliese Doyle, Globe Correspondent **Date:** October 23, 2002 **Page:** E2 **Section:** Food

If a vegetarian life is one based on the consideration of others, then such guiding principles bow under the pressure of free parking, free admission, and free food.

"Expect mobs," Chris Durkin of Harvest Co-op Markets warned last week when asked what the seventh annual Boston Vegetarian Food Festival would be like. "Have a very light breakfast," he said, "and try our vegan chocolate peanut butter brownies." In a more serious disposition he explained that the festival's goal was to promote vegetarian and earth-friendly eating.

Harvest was one of 10 principal sponsors at Saturday's festival, organized by the Boston Vegetarian Society. Eighty booths filled the gym at the Reggie Lewis Track and Athletic Center, with food, educational materials, and presentations.

About 8,000 people packed in.

"There is an electricity in the air," said Evelyn Kimber of the Boston Vegetarian Society, "some kind of energy at this event."

Chaos, too, it seemed. Visitors bobbed down the aisles with overstuffed canvas totes, waiting in line for tastes, casting dirty looks to whoever grabbed the last of the soy cheesecake or the hemp-sprouted bread. This was all while balancing chocolate soy milk in one hand and a dairy-free grilled "Chreese" in the other.

Festival organizers encouraged those businesses easing their way into the vegetarian market, such as Jae's Organic Food. The owner, Jae Sullivan, was spreading homemade apricot-ginger chutney on crackers, which won folks over.

The Vermont-meets-Dorchester-meets-New York City crowd was akin to what you might find at any local health food market. Whether vegetarian or not, the gathering represented a rising group of health-conscious consumers.

In 2002, the Vegetarian Resource Group reported that 6.5 million vegetarian and vegan adults live in the United States. (This does not account for people who are inclined toward a meatless dinner a few nights per week.)

This explains why the festival seems to have outgrown the Reggie Lewis Center.

Even more than soy products, the highlight this year was on simple, natural products like The Switch, a carbonated fruit juice (orange tangerine is like a mimosa without the kick) and Sweet Pepitas, or spiced organically grown pumpkin seeds. And like products elsewhere in the food industry, some offered "just-add-water" convenience.

Cavi-Art, made of seaweed, retains the popping texture of caviar and was a hit. Texture often determines success in a vegetarian product.

Sugar-free treats sweetened with pear juice, maple syrup, or honey were an overall safe bet, but savory dishes were hit and miss, although everything is relative.

If you're not a fan of sauerkraut, you probably won't like the all-natural onion version. As I looked for a place to discard fermented onions, someone behind me said: "Not bad. Not bad at all!"

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