



NEW AMERICAN VEGAN

VINCENT J. GUIHAN



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by Vincent Guihan
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Introduction:

How I Went Vegan, Why I Stay Vegan & Why the Food Is Central to My Life

I promise this will be a short introduction. I'm not an especially wordy person and I know you're buying this book for the recipes!

And yet, it all starts decades ago in a large Irish family in a very small town, Waterman, IL. My father was a janitor at Northern Illinois University (about twelve miles away in De Kalb). My back yard was our neighbor's cornfield. As a child, I thought De Kalb was huge. It had several fast food restaurants, a few grills, the works! My parents cooked only sporadically, even though the nearest fast-food restaurants were a twenty-minute car ride away. We moved to the southwest side of Chicago when I was eleven. Raised on TV dinners, burgers, pizza, and spaghetti, I spent much of my young adulthood nestled between the delicatessens, greasy spoons, and taquerias dotted around Cermak Road and Cicero Avenue, which helped to build my palate. Of course, I also made sure to provide my palate with serious depth by eating junk food in the bleachers at Cubs games (and the infrequent White Sox game, although I'm embarrassed to admit it) with father and my older brothers.

Today, I live in Ottawa, Canada—a city renowned (at least in Canada!) for its cosmopolitan flair in spite of its small size—where I eat a great number of things I can't even pronounce. Today, the two most common questions I get as a vegan are "Why are you vegan?" and "What do you eat?" This book answers both but with an emphasis on the latter, of course. I started becoming vegan when I was twenty-six by eliminating all animal products from my diet, and then over the next few months eliminating all of my leather, wool, silk, and all the unnecessary cleaning products I had that were tested on animals or used animal ingredients. So, in some respects it was overnight, but in others it was gradual. I had been a vegetarian, and a strict one (not a pescatarian or a "no red meat" vegetarian) for about a decade before that.

When I became vegetarian, there weren't a dozen brands of soy, hemp, or nut milk at my local grocery store, nor the few dozen vegan veggie burgers, hot dogs, and other products you can buy today. A lot has changed in the last two decades in terms of the availability of vegan products, and yet, remarkably little has changed for other animals. For the most part, the conditions of animal use have not changed. The number of animals being used is up. More and more vegetarians and vegans are turning back to eating meat, believing that humanely raised meat doesn't present us with a moral problem. I couldn't disagree more with this view, and it all relates to why I went vegan: a cat named Percy.

To be clear, Percy wasn't exactly my cat. He adopted me at the same time my first wife

and my stepchildren did. He came with the family and with three other cats: Sam, an enormous dark grey tom; Butch, a white cat; and Five Fingered Lou, a grey tabby with five fingers. Percy was the smallest of all of them. He was also the most resilient. He had been hit by a car twice (don't let your cats out, people!) and had lost a good part of his tail in the process. The vets generally agreed that he had probably suffered some brain damage as a result of his near-death scrapes.

When I met him, Percy had a low, monotone meow. He sang in a bass voice that would have been perfect for "Stepping over Jordan" or "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" if he had been a human being. Instead, his singing was more like something you'd expect in German electro music in the 1990s. But every time the kibble was poured out or the wet food was scooped out, Percy was there ready to eat. He made the best of the life that he had. The prospect that it would be in any way moral to take that life away when it suited me—no matter how well he was treated, no matter how much pleasure it might give me—seemed wrong. His life became a very important lesson to my own.

When we think of our own rights (what others owe us) and of our own well-being (what makes us happy and healthy), it's not that different from other animals. We're all unique. We're all individuals. We all have an interest in living our lives. We all have things that are objectively good for us (e.g., I go to the doctor and my cats go to the vet), even if they are sometimes uncomfortable or painful. It's not just a matter of whether or not other animals suffer when we use them, it's a question of whether it is right to use them at all. It was Percy who convinced me that it wasn't right to use other animals.

Over time, it dawned on me that if Percy had such an interest in his life (like I did), then surely other animals did as well. I started to do some research into animal ethology. Noninvasive ethology studies how animals behave themselves when they're left to themselves. It's an interesting field, and I still try to read up when I have the chance. The gist, however, is that it was clear upon even very basic study that, to paraphrase Gary L. Francione, animals were sentient, they could feel pain, they had an interest in avoiding it, and they had an interest in continuing their lives, just like I did and just like Percy.

Everything I had done up until that point in my life with respect to nonhuman animals had been well-intended but misguided, except for caring for the animals in my personal immediate life. I realized that, in spite of my best intentions, being vegetarian for a decade had been mostly for naught. None of the other animals I wasn't eating had been given a get-out-of-jail-free card. They had just been sold to someone else.

The other animals I thought I was saving by only drinking their milk or eating their eggs were still being killed, as were many animals who were "unnecessary" to the profitability of animal agriculture. Male chicks who couldn't lay eggs were being killed. Male calves who couldn't produce milk were being raised for veal. I realized that I had been running up a debt my entire life taking from others what didn't belong to me. I

had a subjective, arational, and passive relationship to nonhumans. I didn't want that. I wanted a relationship with animals that was objective, rational, and active—most of all, fair and compassionate, like my relationship with Percy. The first and most meaningful step I could take was to go vegan, so I did.

Cows, chickens, sheep, pigs, bees, and other animals have nerves, memories, fears, wants, and interests just like cats and dogs—just like you and I do. As individuals, as persons, they should have the right not to be used as someone else's property—just like you and I do. It didn't seem logical for me to have a relationship with Percy as though he were a member of the family while eating, wearing, being entertained by or otherwise using other animals. Animal use isn't necessary for human health or for the environment. In fact, when I sat down and measured all of the scientific evidence available to me, I found that there were no good reasons for me to be using other animals at all. And so I went vegan.

A lot of people have different ideas on what it means to be vegan. In my view, vegans are people who should take the rights of animals not to be used seriously and so they don't use animals, whether for food, clothing, or entertainment. I'm not a philosopher, but that sounded right to me. Since going vegan, I've read a number of books about veganism. By the time you will be reading this book, I will have been vegan for more than a dozen years (go me!). The most important books I read, however, were Gary Francione's *Rain Without Thunder* and *Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or Your Dog?* And most recently, Robert Torres's *Making a Killing*. It would be difficult to summarize the effect these books have had on the way I think about my relationship to nonhuman persons. If you want to learn more about the abolitionist approach to animal rights, I recommend visiting www.abolitionistapproach.com.

Nonhuman persons? Of course! I live with several cats now. They're all individuals. They all have different personalities, different quirks, different behaviors and different ways of being that make them each who he or she is. Julius, a Russian Blue, likes to run out into the hall every time I open my front door and then roll around on the hall carpet. Thor, a longhaired white cat, trills in an elegant sing-song when he meows. Fred, my black cat who lost the tips of his ears to frostbite (again, keep your cats indoors!), likes to head-butt me and is one the most loving cats I've ever lived with. Jasmine, Thor's sister, hides from everyone, but occasionally likes to poke me with her paw when I'm talking at length and not paying attention to her and to bite my toes when she's hungry. Zella, a gentle but formidable female Maine Coon mix, is the smallest, but nevertheless, she's the boss of them all. And my surly, fierce, and sour tortie, my sweet Harriet, growls, hisses, and swats at everyone else except for her adoptive mother and father.

In a legal sense, in the sense of how the world is, they belong to me like other property. But in the moral sense, in the meaningful sense of how the world should be, they obviously shouldn't belong *to me* the way my books and CDs do. They belong *with me*

in the way my regular human children do, the way refugees would if I were caring for them, the way my parent might if they were still alive today and I were caring for them and so on. I believe unequivocally that all nonhuman animals deserve the same consideration for their interests, and I look forward and work toward the day when the human use of nonhuman animals is ended and their status as our property is abolished. Bigger cages and kinder treatment will never give them what we owe them: a recognition, embodied in a live daily practice, that they are ends in themselves and not a means to our ends. Veganism is the baseline to that practice.

So, why use animals if we don't have to? Change starts with us, individuals, not with donations to groups that propose more "humane" animal use, not with new regulations that keep the system in place and let us justify animal use to ourselves. By going vegan, we each have a unique opportunity to take a part in a struggle against injustice toward them, but also rewards us with opportunities for a more virtuous life for ourselves, a cleaner environment, better food distribution for other people, and most of all, food that's full of flavor! If you're not vegan, why not try it out? You could do it this Monday. Trade that milk in your cereal and coffee for soy milk (or rice milk or cashew cream or almond milk). Swap out that burger for the burger recipe in this book or any of the countless soy and nut burgers you can buy today. Tear up those tickets to the circus. Buy yourself some swank, nonleather shoes (go for co-op made!). Make a plan and phase out each animal product one by one if that's what it takes, but take animals seriously and go vegan. It's easier than you think.

But what about the food, yes? The food in this book represents what is mostly a ten-year journey toward building up recipes that I like. I know, always thinking of myself. But hopefully you'll like them as well. I wrote this book because I believe an increasing number of people are troubled by the way we use other animals and, at the same time, are interested in healthier, more environmentally friendly, vegetable-focused food. Still others are considering and adopting veganism and vegetarianism out of a deeply rooted concern for animals and a desire to be at peace with their consciences.

Some are interested in nonviolence and how other forms of social oppression—sexism, racism, ableism, and other forms of violence—relate to the harm we do to other animals. In short, a growing number of people are interested in veganism (often whether they know it or not), but one key hurdle to the adoption of veganism is knowing what to eat and, as important, how to cook it. Moreover, many vegan cookbooks don't address a range of skill levels and varying levels of knowledge about food chemistry and flavor theory, the availability of key ingredients and the palate of the average North American buyer. I wanted to write a book that would focus on building skills with and knowledge about food from a basic level on up, to achieve more complicated culinary work.

Further, as its title suggests, the book is also focused specifically on New American vegan cuisine: food that is relatively simple to prepare, relies where possible on local

ingredients, food that is (mostly!) healthy, and tastes and looks great to the eye, while also challenging the palate to grow outside of the standard fast-food diet. New American cooking has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in recent years, largely as fusion cooking has ebbed, in part because these styles of cooking, while they appeal to a cosmopolitan appetite (mine included!), do little to address what most nonvegans think of as eating well. There are obvious exceptions, of course. But because veganism has traditionally lent itself to fusion, and particularly Southeast Asian styles of cooking and dishes, cookbooks for vegans tend to be “special occasion” books today, providing a once-a-week, maybe a once-a-month recipe. I want folks to use this book more regularly, and more important, to help them to become better cooks for themselves.

Of course, there is hardly a dearth of cookbooks for vegans available today, but in this book I’ve tried to focus on foods that are easy to prepare and provide a way for cooks to develop their skills over time. In part, that’s what makes this book different from other books. People who like comfort food should like this book. People who aren’t sure about veganism, but are curious about it or interested in eating healthy but are reluctant to use ingredients that are hard to find, hard to judge and hard to predict will also like this book. People should also feel encouraged to give this book as a gift to anyone they know who likes to fiddle in the kitchen (hint hint!), and I hope it will be very useful for families with vegan young adults and children.

What I also wanted to write was a book that would not only provide good recipes but foster a unique cuisine and a community around that cuisine that can innovate, improvise, and claim these dishes “as their own.” For vegans, there are very few cooking shows and culinary schools. And not many cookbooks focus on educating would-be vegan chefs with respect to bringing out the best cuisine that a basis of roots, fruits, nuts, and shoots really has to offer. Some very good books include *The Mediterranean Vegan Kitchen*, *Vegan Vittles*, *Alternative Vegan*, *The Artful Vegan*, and *The Joy of Vegan Cookery*. Of course this is the short list, and there are many others. Even mainstream chefs—such as Charlie Trotter, who wrote the appropriately titled *Vegetables*—are looking more and more to the flavor, texture, and color that plant-based foods provide to a dynamic and contemporary cuisine. There’s still so much to be discovered with plant-based foods.

So, in the end, this book is different from most other cookbooks for vegans for a few reasons. First, it focuses on the American table from a vegan perspective. Many cookbooks for vegans draw on global fusion, and while that’s fine, I wanted to do something a little closer to home. Second, the more sophisticated of these cookbooks tend to feature recipes that are complicated with hard to find ingredients. There’s something to be said for just the right combination of ingredients and putting time into a plate. But I wanted a balance to my book of things that were simple and things that were more complicated, as well as some way for cooks to build skills. It shouldn’t require a couple of years of experience as a celebrity chef to cook more than few recipes in a given book! I wanted to write something simpler.

Finally, I wanted to address what I really believe is at stake with veganism and what the real opportunities for it are. As we become more and more dissociated from our food as ingredients, and, worse perhaps, as we lose a refined understanding of how to prepare and share our meals, we lose the opportunity to build strong families and communities through a shared kitchen and a shared table. Veganism is a lived ethical practice focused on community and what we owe to others. A cuisine that is the natural corollary of this practice offers us a way to stem this growing depersonalization.

So, you'll notice that aside from one or two catchy titles, this book is mostly and modestly focused on recipes that build skill with, and knowledge of, food required to produce superior finished dishes, with room and encouragement to innovate and improvise. Be creative. I openly challenge everyone who uses this book to go past its recipes! Of course, theory and technique are unusual elements in many cookbooks, but these are really indispensable to building a cuisine. In fact, this growing divergence between how to prepare food (the mechanics) and why to prepare it in particular ways (the theory, and all the knowledge that theory embodies) is increasingly common.

This coincides with a general and growing divergence between us and our food over the last few decades especially in North America. Nowhere is this often more apparent than in the vegan community, where there are few long-standing traditions of food preparation, time-honored dishes or even culinary diplomas for chefs to draw on as they reinvent standard American cuisine. Even with all of those challenges, we're going to be successful if we work thoughtfully, if we work diligently, and if we work together.



Chapter 1:

Terms, Techniques & Tools: A Brief Field Guide to What You Need & What You Need to Know

This book is organized mostly around building complete meals with a main dish and a couple of sides. The recipes will be useful for coursed dinners or when you just want some salad, a bowl of soup, or some breakfast, but the main focus is on building successful meals with a complete set of flavors. To that end, you'll notice that each of the recipes is coded for its level of difficulty, its time to prepare and the overall time it will take to complete, and what the major flavors are.

Flavor and texture

Theories of flavor vary a bit, but for the purposes of this book I've used eight terms to describe the flavors of the dishes: sweet, sour, salty, green, rich or fatty, savory, spicy, and fermented. You have taste buds that can distinguish the first four. There is reasonable debate about and scientific evidence to support the view that people can also distinguish the next two, fatty and savory, as they eat. The last two, spicy and fermented, are really just shorthands to help you understand what a dish will taste like before you cook it. Nevertheless, you may still be surprised by how some of the flavors of these dishes are described. And so I've provided a couple of explanatory notes.

What is a sweet flavor? Sweet is that delicious flavor that makes you feel relaxed and comforted. That's your blood sugar spiking! Carrots, other vegetables, and definitely fruits, are typically sweet, although some are both sweet and sour in combination. I could have split out starchy flavors separately, but I think eight flavors is enough. So, starchy flavors are listed as sweet in this book (e.g., potatoes, wheat bread, and other carbohydrates). In part, this is a matter more of chemistry than of flavor specifically. Mono- and disaccharides are simple sugars. They taste sweet immediately. But when you chew a complex sugar molecule (e.g., a polysaccharide or oligosaccharide) you break it up into mono- and disaccharides. You can establish this by chewing a cracker for a minute or two. It will become sweeter in your mouth. In short, polysaccharides and oligosaccharides don't necessarily taste sweet, but they are in terms of their chemistry.

What is a sour flavor? Sour is that wonderful flavor that makes your tongue contract and your face to pucker up! Pomegranate, lemon juice, vinegar, and other acidic ingredients are typically sour.

What is a salty flavor? Almost every dish in this book has a slightly salty flavor, in part because salt is added to most of the dishes. I doubt there will be very much debate

about what is salty. As a flavor, salt is hard to describe, but you know it when you taste it. If you're interested in learning more about the food chemistry of salt, read the note on salt on page 10.

What is a green flavor? Green refers to the wonderful bitter taste of coffee and a number of green vegetables that you can taste toward the back of your tongue. Sometimes you'll see this flavor referred to as pungent. I've never liked the use of "pungent" to describe these flavors, since pungent is abstract. Green is pretty straightforward. Not everything green in color has a green flavor, of course, and some things that aren't green in color are bitter. No term is perfect, but to keep it simple, green refers to bitter flavors in this book.

What is a fatty flavor? There is some evidence that people can differentiate the amount of fat in a given dish, which has led some food scientists to argue that there is a fatty flavor. More commonly, what you'll read is that fat add to the "mouth feel" of a given dish. This seems pretty true. If you swallow a tablespoon of olive oil and then a half tablespoon of olive oil mixed with water, you can really tell the difference and it's not purely in the way that the tablespoon of liquid tastes. Sometimes you're in the mood for something rich and heavy and sometimes you're not, so I've identified fatty flavors.

What is a savory flavor? For the purposes of this book, savory specifically refers to umami, a Japanese term for the flavor of protein that is distinguishable from fatty and salty. It's actually not clear scientifically how well human beings can taste proteins. Certainly, they can't taste amino acids with the same expertise that the average household cat can. But savory has long a common concept in Asian theories of flavor, and an increasingly accepted concept in Western cooking. Moreover, I think it's a useful way to understand a lot of the flavors that are common to the American table.

What is a spicy flavor? Spicy describes a number of possibilities in terms of food chemistry. The most common kind of spicy flavor is when the sour element of a dish is really high (e.g., jalapeño peppers has an acidity that is similar in kind but different in degree to lemon juice and other sour flavors). But some spicy flavors (e.g., wasabi, horseradish, and to a certain degree, ginger) affect your mouth differently. This kind of spicy typically goes straight up through your nose. Some people like it hot, and others not so much, so I've identified spicy flavors.

What is a fermented flavor? For the purposes of this book, I've identified foods that specifically have a fermented flavor. Fermented is usually a combination of sweet, salty, and sour but it's also a flavor of bacteria. I've separated it out in part because, although almost all cultures have fermented foods, they're usually very much acquired tastes. It's usually not a big deal to eat adapt your palette to the sweet, sour, spicy, savory (umami), fatty, or green (bitter) flavors of another culture's cuisine, but if you grow up eating cheese and you try miso or natto (or vice versa), you'll probably experience some culinary culture shock.

Preparing your ingredients

Most of these recipes call for *mirepoix* (diced vegetables, typically carrot, celery, and onion), as well as garlic, ginger, peppers, other vegetables, rice, and legumes. If you're not familiar with how to prepare these vegetables, some simple instructions are below for common ingredients. Specific recipes may have specific instructions, however. Always remember to wash your fruits and vegetables (and your hands!) thoroughly first. Sensibilities about how to pick and prepare a given ingredient may vary quite a bit across locale and tradition. You may be accustomed to preparing a vegetable in a particular way, and that's fine. The points below are simplifications for people not used to working with the ingredients listed.

Two additional notes, however, are appropriate. First, always try to use fresh, whole food once you get the hang of and taste for a particular recipe. Go to your local health food store (HFS) and get your peanut butter fresh ground before your eyes. If you can, don't use a single dried herb. Buy fresh and do the conversions. Buy dried beans instead of canned. Why? Fresh foods typically have better nutritional value and, frankly, they taste better. Second, keep in mind that you may not like the taste of a given ingredient the first time around. In fact, new foods often take six or eight tries before we develop a taste for them. If you're a new vegan, it will take about six to eight weeks for your body and tastes to adjust. But broadening your palette is like any other kind of education. There may be a little culinary culture shock, but that's good for your palette. Having said that, don't force yourself to eat things you really don't like. What's most important about the dietary elements of veganism is that you eat foods you like that provide you with the right nutritional balance for you. Consult a physician or a nutritionist to find out what the right nutritional balance for you is.

But the great thing about veganism from a food perspective is that you have an incredible variety of foods from which to choose, all with different flavors, textures and colors, which also vary further by the style of preparation and in combinations with other foods. In fact, it's these plant-based ingredients and techniques of preparation that make most animal-focused foods taste good. But we already know this intuitively. Most meat (and most animal products in general) provides a basically a bland, often colorless palette and some texture (a dead body, after all), that is recreated into a "meal" by the skill of the cook, with the addition of many plant-based flavors.

It's the bun, catsup, pickles, salt, fat, fermentation, onions, mustard, sliced tomato, crisp lettuce, and all of the other plant-based foods, as well as the skill with and knowledge of preparation techniques (is it cooked over charcoal, propane, or wood, grilled, fried, or broiled?) that makes the burger great, not the animal who died to make it. Of course, some ingredients do taste better than others, but when we make the meal about individual ingredients and not the skills of the chef, we surfeit, if only unintentionally, the dedication of people who devote their lives to cooking.

A note on salt: Salt is both a flavoring and a catalyst in terms of food chemistry, and this note will cover both aspects of this ubiquitous condiment.

In terms of its chemistry, salt (as in sodium chloride) does a number of things. First, it helps preserve food by slowing the oxidization process. It also has antibacterial properties, and in part that's why salt is often used as part of a preservative process historically. Second, and more important to this book, salt also helps to cook food by chewing up the proteins in the cell walls of plants. What that means, in effect, is that the moment you add salt to anything, a cooking process of sorts has begun. The result is that cell walls burst, and typically that releases the ingredient's internal water. Almost all foods have some sort of water. Of course, that water isn't just plain water. It's water that has important chemical additive from the food itself. Frequently it's what ends up as juice if you juice a fruit or a vegetable, which means that it's water with a lot of flavor and often sugars. It's the release of those flavors and the sugars that bring the flavor out of the fruit or vegetable you're cooking out into the pan where it can mix with other flavors, while also allowing flavors to mix and penetrate the other ingredients of the pan. Imagine a number of floodgates to different reservoirs being opened all at once and all the resulting waters mingling. That's the chemical magic of salt. You will not be able to achieve similar results with equally salty but chemically different additives. As a process, cooking involves the heating and, frequently, the release of that water and the denaturation (the breaking apart) of protein chains, although that's not always the case. For example, you're typically adding water to grains, dried beans, etc. But in any case, salt is an important part of the cooking process. In part, this is why salt has been an important part of virtually all cuisines for a long, long time.

Having said all of that, salt is also an important flavor, one of the four basic flavors that you have taste buds built in to taste. Some people like their food saltier than others, and some foods taste fine without added salt. As a flavor, there are both a number of salts with distinct flavors (e.g., grey salt, fleur de sel, and so on), and there are number of salty foods that don't have sodium chloride (e.g., potassium chloride, Bragg's liquid aminos, herb blends sold as salt alternatives, and so on). You'll notice as you work through the recipes in this book that you start with a little salt (1/4 teaspoon) and then add salt at the end of the cooking process. In part, this is because I'm encouraging you to think about salt as both the chemical agent and the flavoring separately.

With that in mind, if you want to finish your dish with something other than fine-grained sea salt, go for it. In fact, I encourage you to experiment with other salty flavors. You can start by using coarse-grained sea salt as a finishing salt. Instead of adding another pinch of fine-grained sea salt to your dish, grind a pinch of coarse-grained salt between your fingers and sprinkle. You'll find coarse-grained salt increases the burst of salty flavor (something lots of people like) while also decreasing the overall amount that you need to use. In short, however, most cooking involves some kind of salt at some point. Use it sparingly. Unlike soups, where you can usually get away with

adding a little water, if you add too much salt to sauces, salads and other dishes, especially dressings, they tend to be less forgiving. Start with 1/4 teaspoon of fine sea salt with these dishes and add more at the end. Going slow with salt is rarely a bad idea. Many dishes can be rescued if they're too sour, too sweet, or too spicy, but too salty is hard to salvage.

A quick note on oils: I've recommended vegetable oil in many cases in this book. You should use the vegetable oil you like. I use a blend of flax oil and extra virgin olive oil, or canola, for most of my sauté, often a little toasted sesame oil for flavor, and only very infrequently peanut oil (for high-temperature frying, which I almost never do). My preference, when I need to add fat, is to use a nut butter, olives, or avocados instead. The process by which oil is made subtracts most of the nutrition of the whole food. The nut butter, the mashed avocado, the minced olives, etc., retain a good portion of its taste and nutrition. However, like salt, oil is also a chemical agent in your dish. It functions in two ways. First, it creates a water barrier. A number of the recipes involving dough suggest that you brush your crusts with a little oil. In part, that's to keep the extra moisture of a sauce or even whole ingredients that produce a lot of moisture when heated from saturating your dough. Second, it conducts the heat, for lack of a better way to put it, that melts and caramelizes the sugars in certain foods when you sauté, most commonly, or when you roast or grill them. Unlike salt, it can be difficult to add fats at the end of the cooking process rather than at the beginning, but that shouldn't keep you from swapping out oils for whole foods where the former are not being used as a chemical agent as part of the cooking process.

A very quick note on sugars and agave nectar: There are increasing numbers of artificial sweeteners on the market, and stevia (an herbal sweetener) is becoming more popular in North America. Added sugars are typically a flavoring ingredient, but there are times when it is also a chemical agent, in which case it either caramelizes (as in crème brûlée) or it is used as food for bacteria (in some slaws, in fermented foods, and in yeast dough, for example). In particular, the agave nectar in this book is often used to avoid cooking a simple syrup (which involves boiling water and sugar together), which is both a pain and because a lot of sugar is processed with animal bone char, I've kept it simple and built the recipes around agave. It's not difficult to find conversions, but not all of the recipes will work with regular granulated sugar.

Basil (and other green herbs): Fresh basil and other herbs come in various ways—and some health food sorts and organic farmers include the plant all the way down to the roots. If the stems of your herb are hard and inflexible (usually the case), remove the leaves and use the leaves only. If your stems are soft, a little stem is good for you. To tell if a stem is soft enough, it should be bendable like the leaf and very thin. If it's thicker than a coffee stirrer, no need to put that in your dish. Try to avoid using ground dried green herbs—rub the larger dried herbs between your thumb and forefinger when you add them to your dish.

Beans (and other legumes): Beans vary quite a bit in flavor, texture, color, taste, and their preparation. All the beans in this book call for dried legumes. You can use canned in a pinch or if you're just trying out a recipe, but working with dried beans is better because you have more control over the preparation and there will be less salt (virtually all canned foods have added salt that they don't tell you about on the ingredients label). You can also use jarred beans if you can find them. If you have a slow cooker, it's strongly recommended you use that to prepare your legumes (except for yellow split peas and red lentils, since these dissolve with cooking, at least in the recipes for this book). A slow cooker is a dead simple way to make the best, softest, and nicest beans. Just adjust the cook times as appropriate depending on the type of legume involved.

When preparing legumes, carefully wash and pick through them looking for and removing anything that looks a stone (or anything that doesn't look like a legume for that matter). For the long cooking ones (chickpeas, red beans, etc.), if you can, soak the beans overnight in a covered bowl with enough water to cover them 1 inch or so. Drain the water the following day, about 1 1/2 hours before you'd like to serve. Bring 2 cups water and 2/3 cup beans (3:1 ratio) to a low simmer in a medium-sized pot on medium heat. Cover the pot with the appropriate, tight-fitting lid and reduce to low. Simmer for the appropriate amount of time depending on your legume. Cooking times will vary depending on if and how long you've soaked and the original conditions of the beans—if you didn't presoak, plan on 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 hours of cook time for the bigger legumes. The beans will be done when they are soft (but not like mashed potatoes). To test, pull one out, allow it to cool, and eat it. If it tastes done, it is done! If all the water is absorbed before the beans are done, just add more. Once the beans are done, remove from heat. Drain them in a colander when they're done.

Cantaloupe, honeydew, and other melons: Melons can be a little difficult to pick and prepare. Most groceries have them already cut and ready to eat. You can get your feet wet with melons by using precut. To pick a good melon, you're looking at a number of factors, typically including: is the color vibrant or it is discolored? When you thump it with a thumb, does it sound solid (usually still ripening) or does it sound a little hollow (usually ripe, but possibly overripe)? For the most part, you don't want the rind and you don't want the seeds. To prep your cantaloupe or honeydew, cut the melon in half and remove the seeds and any seriously discolored, overripe flesh. Cut into quarters (or eighths for larger melons) and carefully remove the rind with a sharp knife. The best way for you to do this (if you're not accustomed to this kind of knife work) is to lay the slice on your cutting board and slice the rind off this way.

Carrots: Remove the top and bottom inch or so of the carrot. Cut in half lengthwise. Place the flat part of the half-carrot onto the cutting board. Slice across the length of the carrot again. Cut across the width of the carrot in 1/4- to 1/2-inch chunks. For sliced carrots, cut in half length-wide and then slice the carrot width-wide at a 45-degree angle into slices about 1/8-inch wide. Once you have the 1/8-inch slices, you