

## Vegan pilgrimage to Philadelphia

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Around every corner, I smelled butter. I was walking toward Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square, and it was the first hour of my weekend commitment to avoid consuming any animal products. No mac and cheese, no tollhouse cookies, nary a drop of honey. So naturally, all I could think about was how much I wanted — baked, melted or spread — some Vitamin B.

I already eat a largely vegetarian diet, and since I have two good friends who are vegan, I've become curious about the lifestyle. When my sweet tooth heard about Vegan Treats, a Pennsylvania bakery that ships its award-winning desserts to restaurants up and down the East Coast, I decided that a vegan road trip was in order.



Mini cakes are only some of the choices at Vegan Treats.

So one Saturday last month, my vegan friends and I hit the streets of Philadelphia — where the Phillies claim the country's top-ranked vegetarian ballpark — intending to do no harm to animals, the environment and presumably our health. (At our first stop, Cafe Mocha, we did, however, sample vegan donuts and cookies, and a quick sugar high reminded me that “vegan” doesn't always equal “nutritious.”)

We headed to the South Street district for lunch at Blackbird, a vegan pizzeria with a chalkboard menu, a drab interior and space heaters. Blackbird's owner, Mark Mebus, is a Philly native and former chef at Horizons, the upscale restaurant that put vegan dining on the map here. He opened the pizzeria last fall.

Our slices were sprinkled with Daiya, a dairy-free cheese made from tapioca, arrowroot flour and oils, and cultured like real cheese (but somewhat sticky when melted). My favorite was the funghi, with mushrooms, fresh thyme, garlic butter and truffle oil. It was darn good pizza.

On our way out, we realized that we should have tried the vegan cheesesteak, so we grabbed one to go.

That afternoon, we stopped at the new Make-Up Bar, which offers a line of vegan products (including soy mascara) and Arcadia, where we eyed a \$130 vegan Matt & Nat handbag. By midafternoon, it was time to kick back for vegan, er, organic pedicures. Tierra Mia claims to be the nation's first organic nail spa, using only zero-fume products, including polish remover made from soy and corn ethanol.

As we talked to locals, our vegan restaurant list grew (vegan sushi, vegan dim sum, bars with vegan dogs), and we realized we wouldn't be able to hit them all. But we tried. We stopped at the year-old Sweet Freedom Bakery, which was on the Food Network's “Cupcake Wars” last year, and checked out the hot buffet at Govinda's



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

A sign at the year-old Sweet Freedom Bakery, which was featured last year on the Food Network's “Cupcake Wars,” spreads the word about the shop's vegan philosophy.



Vegan Treats, based in Bethlehem, Pa., supplies restaurants and shops in New York, Philadelphia, Washington and elsewhere.

Gourmet Vegetarian, which included delicious vegetable soups and grains. I'm not a fan of fake meat but was impressed that the mock salmon even had “skin” made of seaweed.

The next morning, we pulled the cheesesteak out of the minibar fridge in our room at the hip Le Meridien Hotel and divided it into thirds. We agreed that the bread — even a day later — was delicious and that the sandwich had a good flavor, but that a meat-eater wouldn't be thrilled with its contents.

Later, we drove south to Grindcore House, a vegan coffee shop in the Pennsport neighborhood where I picked up a business card for a vegan Realtor (“Sales commissions . . . will never be used to exploit non-human animals. No fur coats, fancy steak dinners, no Prada shoes.”) We loved Grindcore.

### Getting there

Philadelphia is about 135 miles from Washington. From Interstate 95 north, take Exit 17 in Philadelphia and make a left onto Lombard Street. Turn left onto South 15th Street and left onto South Street for the neighborhood where many of the vegan restaurants are located.

As I sipped my almond milk hot chocolate with coconut milk whipped cream, I scanned the bookshelf: “Vegan Europe,” “Bomb the Suburbs” and “Anarchism & Other Essays.” About a half-dozen customers walked in with their dogs, many of them rescued pit bulls. The fixin's bar included almond, rice, soy and coconut milks and agave nectar for sweetener. Like most other places we'd visited, Grindcore offered a broad assortment of Vegan Treats items: whoopee pies, cinnamon buns and cookies.

Then it was time to drive nearly 70 miles to the Vegan Treats mecca in Bethlehem. The little shop has a few pink diner stools, pink paint and “Eat Vegan Treats” undergarments and T-shirts strung along the wall. The menu includes beautiful French pastries, petit fours, doughnuts and countless cakes, some as pricey as \$45. After swooning for a while, we left with raspberry chocolate and red velvet mini cakes.

That night, we savored them in bed at the hotel, too tired from nonstop eating to venture out to a restaurant. It might have been the best mini cake I've ever eaten, vegan or otherwise. But by that point, I wasn't thinking about eggs or butter or saving the animals. I was thinking only that I couldn't wait to get home and resume non-eating activities. And if I ever felt hungry again, maybe I'd eat a small green salad. With goat cheese.

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### IF YOU GO

#### STAYING THERE

**Le Meridien Philadelphia**  
1421 Arch St.  
215-422-8200  
[www.starwoodhotels.com](http://www.starwoodhotels.com)  
The year-old hotel was originally a YMCA. Rooms start at \$169.

**The Independent**  
1234 Locust St.  
215-772-1440  
[www.theindependenthotel.com](http://www.theindependenthotel.com)  
A 24-room boutique hotel in the Midtown Village neighborhood. Rooms start at \$149.

#### EATING THERE

**Blackbird Pizzeria**  
507 S. Sixth St.  
215-625-6660  
[www.blackbirdpizzeria.com](http://www.blackbirdpizzeria.com)  
Philadelphia's first all-vegan pizzeria. Slices \$2.50-\$3.75, whole pies \$13-\$19.

**Grindcore House**  
1515 S. Fourth St.  
215-839-3333  
[www.grindcorehouse.com](http://www.grindcorehouse.com)  
Meatless sandwiches, dairy-free bagel spreads, vegan chocolate and desserts, and plenty of creamer substitutes. Sandwiches \$3 to \$6.

**Vegan Treats**  
1444 Linden St.  
Bethlehem, Pa.  
610-861-7660  
[www.vegantreats.com](http://www.vegantreats.com)  
The shop has a few seats, but most of its business is carry-out and East Coast restaurant delivery. Whoopie pies and brownies \$2.75; pies \$25; cakes \$37 to \$45.

#### VEGGING THERE

**Tierra Mia Organic Nail Spa**  
328 S. 17th St.  
215-735-7980  
[www.tierramiaorganicnailspa.com](http://www.tierramiaorganicnailspa.com)  
Nontoxic manicures \$20-\$30, pedicures \$42-\$60.