# Interview questions with Michael Natkin, author of Herbivoracious: A Flavor Revolution with 150 Vibrant and Original Vegetarian Recipes and blogger at Herbivoracious.com.

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1. **Why did you decide to follow a vegetarian lifestyle?**

My journey as a cook began when I was 18 years old. My mother was dying from breast cancer, and was trying a macrobiotic diet to see if it would help. A friend of mine was vegetarian, and a good cook who showed me the ropes so that I could cook for my family.

As soon as I tried being vegetarian, it took immediately. I went from eating at McDonald’s almost daily to meatless essentially overnight, and have never looked back. Of course eating vegetarian is good for our health, for the environment, and for animal welfare, but I think the reason it stuck for me is even more basic and visceral: I realized I could never kill an animal, heck I couldn’t even bait a worm on a fishhook as a kid, so why would I have someone else kill them for me?

I have a much more detailed article about this, with a **very** lively comment thread from readers, at <http://herbivoracious.com/2009/07/why-im-a-vegetarian-dammit.html> .

1. **Why vegetarian instead of vegan?**

This is a deep question. On one level, I certainly acknowledge that being vegan is a more consistent approach to animal welfare. On the other hand, I also know that human beings are in no danger of achieving perfection, and I’ve found that being lacto-ovo vegetarian is what I’m willing to commit to. Even vegans end up having their food be responsible for animal deaths – it is impossible to plow a field with a tractor without killing thousands of rodents and destroying their burrows. So my approach is to stop worrying about perfect consistency and focus on what you are willing and able to do, whether it is cutting out one meal of meat a week, going lacto-ovo vegetarian, or going vegan. And face it, if you eat in a way that you don’t find pleasurable, you aren’t going to stick to it anyhow.

1. **Do you find that your recipes are family friendly?**

Yes, but which ones really depend on your family! I’ve certainly got a bunch of dishes in there that are kid-friend out of the box, like potstickers, a baked penne with mild fontina cheese, or a giant “Dutch Baby” pancake with sautéed apples. Many of the others can easily be modified so that kids or picky eaters can have one version while everyone else gets the full experience. For example, if you are making my Sicilian Spaghetti with Pan Roasted Cauliflower, which is flavored with the classic combinaton of orange zest, pine nuts, currants, and capers, you can simply reserve some of the spaghetti and toss it with olive oil and parmesan for the kids, and serve them some plain cauliflower on the side.

1. **Where did the name Herbivoracious come from?**

Starting the blog was literally a snap decision. In July of 2007, I was sitting on my couch, lamenting the fact that I wanted to switch to a cooking as a career but not sure how to leave the software world, with its predictable paycheck and reasonable work hours. I had seen a few food blogs, and I thought “dammit, I cook as well as these folks, at least I can do this.” You can’t start a blog without a name, so I launched that same night as “The Vegetarian Foodie”, but I hated it immediately. Of course in the early days of a blog, you are only talking to friends and family, so I asked them for suggestions. One idea was “The Vegetarian Blowtorch”, because I was going through a phase of bruleeing everything in sight! One day a few weeks later, a friend texted me the single word: “Herbivoracious”, and I knew that was it. I think it captures both the idea of being vegetarian, and my insatiable, voracious appetite for everything related to food. I’m happy to spend every waking minute either looking for beautiful ingredients, reading about cooking, or cooking myself, or eating, so I think the moniker fits!

1. **You are a successful blogger, why now a book?**

I actually wrote the introduction and a few recipes for a cookbook at least 15 years ago, but I wasn’t ready to follow through at that point. My cooking needed more time and exposure to mature. I’ve always loved cookbooks. I read them the way normal people read novels. I think there is something about the permanence, physicality and even romance of a cookbook that is different than a blog. Also, of course I try to make the recipes on the blog as good as they can be, but often I’ve only made them once or twice, and no-one else has tested or edited them. With the book, I’ve had the opportunity to really dig in and refine each recipe, have it tested by multiple other folks and incorporate their feedback, and have several top-notch editors make sure the headnotes and instructions are perfectly clear.

1. **Are any of your recipes designed to be made quickly or for the chef on the run?**

Absolutely! The book really has a range of dishes, from those that can easily be thrown together for a weeknight supper, to more involved projects that would be more appropriate for the weekend or a dinner party. Some of my favorites for a quick dinner are Chirashi Sushi (where the ingredients are simply scattered on vinegared sushi rice instead of requiring any rolling), Sichuan Green Beans and Tofu, and a Chickpea and Green Olive Tagine that comes together in 20 minutes. The appetizer chapter also has a bunch of small plates that are ridiculously easy to make for an impromptu get-together, like the Caramelized Apple and Blue Cheese Crostini, or Chevre with Sauteed Grapes.

1. **Do all of the recipes in the book also appear on the blog?**

Nope. Approximately half of the recipes have appeared in some form on the blog, but each of those has been thoroughly retested, edited, and often modified to be better than the original. The ones that moved from the blog to the book are the very best – the ones that have been most loved by my readers. The other half of the recipes are brand new, never before seen. I can’t wait for everyone to get their hands on them, as the feedback from testers has been fantastic!

1. **Tell us how you went about developing the recipes for the book.**

The way I develop recipes is simple: I cook like a madman. My wife will tell you, it is just shocking how many times a day I destroy the kitchen and clean it again! It isn’t unusual for me to wander into the kitchen at 11 PM, ostensibly just to grab a snack before bed and end up inventing a brand new dish. Of course, many of these dishes are only ok, nothing worth sharing. But some percentage of them make me really happy. My standard is that I don’t put anything on the blog unless I just love it. I have to want to eat every bite and wish there were more. For the book, the bar was even higher!

Other than that, of course with the book we wanted to have a good balance of soups, salads, appetizers, entrees, side dishes, breakfasts and desserts, as well as a range of cuisines, difficulty levels, and preparation times, so I took those into account in determining what to create.

1. **What's new about your cooking and the world of vegetarian cooking?**

This is an exciting time to be involved with vegetarian food, whether you don’t eat meat at all or are just trying to eat a bit less of it. We’ve moved way beyond the bad old days of heavy, ugly lentil-mushroom loaves covered in melted cheese and soggy plates of steamed vegetables. I remember a hippie diner I used to go to that sold a sandwich with yams, hummus, roasted red peppers, pesto, and heaven knows what else on it. Diners these days are too sophisticated to settle for these kinds of mixed up flavors. All over the world there are beginning to be vegetarian restaurants that keep up with the latest trends and cater to serious food lovers, and omnivorous restaurants increasingly take their meatless menu options seriously.

I think what sets my cooking apart is that I’m deeply involved with the world of professional chefs first, and apply that in a vegetarian context second. Great food starts with great ingredients, but you have to have a deep understanding of the right techniques to coax the best flavors, textures and visual appearance out of those ingredients. And you have to have a sense of the rules that apply within each cuisine before you can successfully break them to create something new. My recipes aim to be satisfying but lighter than the old ways, beautiful to look at, and packed with flavor.

1. **Are there ingredients that are especially useful in a vegetarian kitchen?**

Yes. When you cook with meat, you’ve automatically got a big flavor anchoring a meal. With vegetarian cooking, you’ll get the best results by incorporating ingredients that pack a punch. For example, dried shiitake mushrooms are a source of umami (the so-called 5th flavor of “savoriness”). For smoky flavors, I often use Spanish smoked paprika. And of course you’ll want to have really good olive oil, vinegars, soy sauce and so forth.

Also, great vegetarian cooking tends to be pretty international. You don’t need to learn to cook every cuisine at once, but when trying a new one, you’ll have the opportunity to add a few new staples. For example, when you first start making Indian food you’ll need small amounts of several spices… cardamom, cumin seed, black mustard seed, turmeric and so forth. If you haven’t used them before, this is exciting stuff!

Most of the ingredients I call for in the book won’t be hard to find in any good-sized city. Even chain grocery stores often have decent “gourmet” and international aisles now. Personally, I love to learn about and support smaller producers and stores in my area, which often have a more interesting selection and better quality. And no matter where you live, the Internet has become an incredible resource. Small businesses like ChefShop.com curate incredible ingredients from around the world, and large sites like Amazon offer just about anything you could ever need.

1. **Is there food from one region you favor over another or do you find that they all have their own unique culinary treasures?**

I find that I go through phases. I might read a Diana Kennedy book and just fall so much in love with Mexican cuisine that I don’t want to cook anything else for weeks. Then maybe I’ll find a really beautiful fresh ricotta at the grocery and the next thing you know it is all Italian, all the time! Recently I’ve really enjoyed learning about Korean cooking.

I find that virtually every region of the world has a repertoire of dishes that are vegetarian, or easily modified to be so without losing their essential character. I like to learn how to make these classics in as traditional a way as possible, and then extrapolate on them, by bringing them to a modern vernacular, adapting to ingredients that are fresh and local to where I live, or sometimes just taking the flavor concepts or techniques and using them in a completely different context.

That said, I would say that that I might specialize a bit in recipes from the Mediterranean and East and Southeast Asia. In the past, the deeper flavors of those areas might have been a bit neglected by vegetarian cookbooks compared to, say, Indian or Mexican cuisine. Living in Seattle, it is natural to be influenced by access to tremendous Asian restaurants and markets in particular. So I’m excited to share my ideas on how to make great meatless dishes using the ingredients and food sensibilities of those regions.

1. **What are your favorite recipes?**

Ah, that’s an impossible question! If I had to pick a few entrees from the book that are staples in our house, I might choose Mujadara (a Middle Eastern pilaf with rice, lentils and caramelized onions that is satisfying out of all proportion to its simplicity), Vietnamese Vermicelli (Bun) with Ginger Grapefruit Sauce, and Pozole Rojo de Frijol, which is a hearty Mexican stew with hominy and pinto beans. For small plates, I love the Chanterelle Banh Mi Bites, which are like a Vietnamese crostini, and the salad of Persimmon, Parsley and Olives for the surprising combination of flavors. Then again, I’m a sucker for Brown Butter Cornbread. Oh, and then there is a recipe for Huevos Ahogados (eggs poached directly in salsa verde) that will blow your mind. Like I said, it is hard to choose!

1. **I love your photographs! Why do you think food photography has become so popular and what are some easy tips you can give the amateur food photographer?**

The old adage among chefs is that people eat with their eyes first. I know that is true for myself. If I look in a cookbook or on a website and the picture of a recipe looks sloppy, I'm not at all inclined to try it. On the other hand, a beautiful plate of food immediately draws me in and makes me want to know more. The web has been great for food photography because it frees us from the cost constraints of printing lots of photos. In fact, when Harvard Common Press and I first discussed the book, the top thing I insisted on is that it have a photo as many recipes as possible.

As far as tips go, the easiest things that anyone can do to greatly improve their photography are: (1) Stabilize your camera to avoid blurry shots. That doesn't have to mean a tripod, you can brace it against a wall or even use a glass as a makeshift monopod. (2) Learn how to white balance your camera to avoid unpleasant color casts (check the manual) (3) get in close to the food (4) when possible, move the plate to get good light, like near a window (5) take lots of shots, then select the good ones later. Professionals think nothing of taking 50 shots of one plate of food.

1. **What sets your blog apart from all the others out there?**

There are lots of great blogs out there. I think what sets mine apart a little bit is that, although I'm a vegetarian, I put flavor and pleasure first. There is no "health food" mentality and no preaching. Along the same lines, I believe in authenticity when cooking food from around the world, and I'm not afraid to use modernist ingredients and techniques like hydrocolloids or pressure infusion to create exciting dishes.

1. **I’m so thrilled that I found your website. What is your inspiration?**

You are too kind! For me, the food itself is endless inspiration. Whether it is learning about a spice I’ve never tried before, experimenting with molecular gastronomy, eating at an amazing restaurant, or just the plain simple thrill of tasting a dish and thinking: HECK YEAH, I just find food endlessly fascinating. And I love to share that excitement with anyone around me who makes the mistake of showing the slightest passing interest.

1. **I'd like to eat more tofu, but have trouble using it. Any tips?**

Yes, I’m a tofu lover, and I’ve got a few suggestions for you. First of all, for stir-fries you want to always use a firm or preferably extra-firm tofu. Anything softer is surely going to break up on you. Second, pat the outside dry before frying, so that it is will brown instead of steam. Third, be sure and buy a quality brand of tofu that has been made recently. Tofu naturally deteriorates and gets spongy/crumbly as it sits in the refrigerator. If you live in a good sized city, there may well be a local tofu-maker right under your nose, where you can get product that was made that very day. Not only will it be less crumbly, it will taste incomparably better.