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## Where's the tofu?

### Belmar, LBI chefs show that bean curd is nothing to be scared of

STORY BY SUSAN BLOOM • PHOTOGRAPHY BY TANYA BREEN AND MARY FRANK • JANUARY 20, 2012

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If the last thing you want to do with the spongy, light-colored substance known as tofu is eat it, take heed. Though this protein-packed powerhouse, first discovered in China in 200 B.C., was often perceived as just the bland bedrock of a vegetarian diet, it's turning the taste buds of healthy eaters everywhere – vegetarian and nonvegetarian alike – based on its user-friendliness and ability to assume any one of a number of leading roles in the broad culinary theater.

Available in varieties from soft to firm and plain to seasoned and able to hold its own in everything from stir-frys and sandwiches to salad dressings and desserts, tofu – soybean curd made by curdling soy milk with a coagulant – is perhaps the food game's most versatile player. Following, two area chefs share the virtues of tofu and explain why this clever chameleon is worth exploring.

#### Kaya's Kitchen

1000 Main St. (corner of 10th and Main)  
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Because it's high in protein and low in fat, Kaya's Kitchen owner and chef Omer Basatemur acknowledges that tofu has traditionally been an important part of the vegetarian diet, but its extreme versatility has since earned it the well-deserved attention of discerning diners everywhere. "Tofu takes on the flavors of everything you combine it with and works in so many different ways," Basatemur says. "For instance, you can make tofu 'scrambled eggs,' barbecued tofu, tofu 'cheese,' and tofu-based salad dressings and desserts, and you can alter its texture by freezing and then thawing it to make it chewier. In the end, tofu blows away chicken, meat and even other meat substitutes in terms of what you can do with it."

At Kaya's, which has been a mecca for vegetarian and health-conscious eaters in Monmouth County ever since it opened seven years ago, popular tofu dishes include tofu teriyaki, tofu crab cakes, grilled barbecue tofu (which Basatemur describes as "an all-American preparation that helps bridge the distance for meat eaters



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Chickenless salad TLT. from Living on the Veg. (Mary Frank)



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Tofu eggless salad from Living on the Veg. (Mary Frank)



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and men") and Thai tofu salad, which is raw tofu marinated in coconut peanut dressing served over a bed of greens with cucumbers, tomatoes and carrots. Of his tofu Buffalo wings, Basatemur raves, "People can't believe how crispy and how much like 'the real thing' they are." With wife and resident baker Jenn whipping up desserts such as tofu cheesecake and tofu chocolate pudding, this soybean-based staple truly covers the gamut.

"Tofu is really easy to work with, and you can get pretty creative with it by keeping it simple," Basatemur confirms. "We hope people will keep an open mind about this healthy and highly versatile

ingredient."

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### Living On The Veg

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For co-owners Robert and Lauren Ramos, opening Living on the Veg on LBI in 2005 was a way to help make health foods like tofu "more interesting and accessible to people." Understanding that tofu can be intimidating to some people, "we try to work it into a variety of salads and sandwiches to make it more familiar," Robert says.

Among the signature tofu items served at the restaurant – the majority of whose clientele, interestingly enough, is not vegetarian – are its tofu vegetable wrap, Buffalo Caesar salad and mock chicken salad sandwich, which combines the meaty texture of thawed, steamed tofu with a mixture of red onions, celery, nutritional yeast and vegan mayonnaise. According to Robert, the tofu burrito, which blends tofu with brown rice, black beans, chickpeas, cabbage, tomatoes and avocado in a hot sauce, "has a crunch from the cabbage, a spiciness from the sauce, and a range of other different textures and flavors for a delicious and healthy alternative to the traditional Mexican classic." Using a silken form of tofu combined with dill, salt, pepper and parsley, the restaurant also serves up a creative and tangy vegan ranch dressing for salads.

"People should embrace the versatility of tofu and not be afraid of it," Robert says. "In all of its various preparations, tofu offers an ideal substitute for many other things without sacrificing flavor or texture."

### Recipes

#### Tofu Crab Cakes with Steamed Asparagus, Brown Rice and Citrus Sauce

2 blocks extra-firm tofu  
2 stalks celery, diced  
1 medium Spanish onion, diced  
1 bell pepper, diced  
3 tablespoons Old Bay seasoning  
2 tablespoons granulated garlic  
2 tablespoons granulated onion  
1/3 cup vegetable or canola oil  
1 cup bread crumbs  
1/2 cup unbleached white flour  
Salt and pepper to taste

Sauté diced celery, bell pepper and onion in a pan with a little oil on medium heat until translucent.

Add all seasonings and set aside to cool to room temperature. In a bowl, crumble tofu, then add cooled-down, sautéed veggies, bread crumbs and flour. Using wet hands, begin to form the mixture into patties (approximately 4 to 6 ounces each).

Heat remaining oil in medium sauté pan and cook crab cakes until crispy on each side.

Citrus Sauce

Omer Basatemur, executive chef and owner of Kaya's Kitchen, prepares tofu crab cakes. (Tanya Breen)



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Tofu crab cakes with steamed asparagus and citrus sauce  
Kaya's Kitchen, Belmar. (Tanya Breen)



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Tofu Buffalo wings from Kaya's Kitchen. (Tanya Breen)



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Robert and Lauren Ramos, co-owners of Living on the Veg  
Beach Haven Terrace. (Mary Frank)

½ cup orange juice  
 1/3 cup lemon juice  
 Fresh ginger to taste  
 Fresh garlic to taste  
 Old Bay seasoning to taste  
 ½ cup vegetable stock  
 2 tablespoons arrowroot (or corn) starch

Heat all ingredients, except starch, in a sauce pan. Bring to a boil, add starch slurry, reduce heat to simmer for a few minutes, then let cool (sauce will thicken). Serve over steamed asparagus and brown rice.

Courtesy of Omer Basatemur, Kaya's Kitchen, Belmar

#### Tofu-Based Ranch Dressing

Makes approximately 2 cups  
 1 12-ounce package silken tofu  
 1 cup vegan mayonnaise  
 1 tablespoon onion powder  
 1 tablespoon garlic powder  
 1 teaspoon sea salt  
 2 teaspoons black pepper  
 1 tablespoon parsley  
 ½ teaspoon dill

In a food processor, process all the ingredients together and puree until smooth. Place in an airtight container and refrigerate until ready to serve.

Courtesy of Robert and Lauren Ramos, Living on the Veg, Beach Haven Terrace



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Tofu chickenless salad from Living on the Veg. (Mary Fran)

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