

## Take small steps to arrive at a plant-based diet

Experts agree that other viruses are likely to follow COVID. Be prepared. Eat healthily, be physically active and strive to reach and maintain a healthy weight.



**KATHY KOLASA**

I hate the taste and texture of tofu. So, I guess I can't follow a plant-based diet. MJ, Greenville

I am getting questions about "going plant based." There is no single accepted definition of "plant-based." It surprises people when I point out that MyPlate, the DASH and Mediterranean diets are all "plant-based." About 6 of every 10 calories consumed by most people in the U.S. comes from plants. But most people think going plant-based means becoming a vegetarian or vegan. You might find Kaitlyn Townsend's journey of "going plant-based" interesting. She is a graduating Brody medical student, soon to become a Family Physician. Here is her story.

My journey to a plant-based diet started three years ago. I dreamed of becoming a yoga teacher and wanted to have an authentic, immersive experience. I found a school halfway around the world, in Bali, a small, beautiful island in

Indonesia, with three teachers who had backgrounds in Western and Eastern practices.

Throughout the training, we ate delicious vegetarian and vegan meals and studied the benefits of plant-based diets. I had been mostly vegetarian for health and ethical reasons but once home decided to go vegan: for the animals, for the environment and, of course, for my health. As a future doctor, I already knew the benefits of plant-based diets: lower risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, inflammation and cancer; a stronger immune system; more regular bowel movements; and maintenance of a healthy weight.

I'm so grateful I made the switch. I have more stable energy levels, regular digestion, and more fun in the kitchen! With any new diet or lifestyle change, it's difficult to know where to start. So, if you're wanting to incorporate more plant-based meals into your life, here are tips.

■ Start small. You don't



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need to go completely plant-based overnight. Make gradual changes to build new habits. Start with a couple plant-based meals per week.

■ Add more. Don't eliminate foods from your diet but add more plants into each meal. Add a tablespoon of ground flaxseed and berries to your morning oatmeal. Double the veggies or add an extra such as kale to soups or chili. Top salads with more veggies, fruit and a sprinkle of nuts or seeds. The extra fiber will help you feel full. The extra veggies will decrease your intake of saturated fats and added sugars.

■ Make simple swaps. You don't need to com-

pletely reinvent the wheel on your favorite meals. Swap your usual ingredients with plant-based alternatives. Substitute ground meat with soy crumbles or lentils. Reach for soy or oat milk instead of cow's milk or creamers.

■ Don't forget protein! As you cut back on meat, eggs and dairy, make sure you're still getting protein, an essential component of a healthy diet. It will keep you feeling full. My favorite choices are tempeh and tofu, beans and lentils, quinoa, hummus, nuts and seeds. Soy is my favorite non-dairy milk — it has the best protein quality of all plant milks. If you can't eliminate all animal prod-

ucts — it's ok. Try to stick with smaller portions of fish, lean meats and lower fat dairy.

■ Remember your alphabet soup: B12, EPA and DHA. Vitamin B12 is an essential vitamin found in animal products. People with plant-based diets are at increased risk of developing B12 deficiency. Use plant-based sources such as nutritional yeast or fortified non-dairy milks and cereals. Ask your doctor or registered dietitian nutritionist if you need a B12 supplement. Pay attention to the Omega 3s EPA and DHA, found in fish, seaweed and algae. Most people with vegan diets need algae supplements for adequate intake of EPA and DHA.

■ Upgrade your snack game. If you're hungry for cookies or chips, ask yourself what you're really craving. If it's something salty with a crunch, reach for veggies and hummus. If you want something sweet, try fruit with a small handful of nuts. Build a snack combining fruit or veggies with a protein or healthy fat to keep you feeling satisfied. Be mindful of your portion sizes, too!

■ Remember "plant-based" does not always

mean healthy! Be leery of processed "vegan alternatives" like vegan "meats," "cheese," and processed snacks. They may contain as much fat, calories, salt and sugar as their non-vegan counterparts. Check out the ingredients and Nutrition Facts label before you buy.

■ Try something new. Even in eastern North Carolina you can find produce, a unique grain like quinoa or an interesting protein like tempeh to try. You may find an unexpected favorite. Get inspiration from recipes in cookbooks or online. Prepare new recipes with a partner or a friend.

■ Find things you love. Plant-based diets are not one-size-fits-all. You don't have to love tofu to make it work for you! Find plant-based "staples" to lean on. I like oatmeal with fruit and peanut butter for breakfast! It's important to enjoy your food and love the lifestyle you create.

*Professor emeritus Kathy Kolasa, a registered dietitian nutritionist and Ph.D., is an affiliate professor in the Brody School of Medicine at ECU. Contact her at kolasaka@ecu.edu.*

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## Find a slice of life at Cucinella's Pizzeria and Italian Ice

BY CHRISTINA RUOTOLO  
Hot Dish

It's estimated that Americans eat 350 slices of pizza every second which breaks down to a whopping 30,240,000 slices per day. Pizza has been in existence since as early as the 18th century and originated in Naples, Italy, which just so happens to be where my ancestors came from. No wonder I love pizza so much.

I'm always excited to showcase new pizza restaurants in the area, so let me introduce you to Cucinella's Pizzeria and Italian Ice at 4125 Old Tar Road, Suite L, in Winterville. They have been open since last spring and many people already know, love and frequent the business not only for their delectable pizza pies but also for Italian ice and more.

Cucinella's is a family affair. Owner, Jamie Cucinella, his wife, Linda, and their two sons, Jeremy and Andrew, run the Winterville store. They also have restaurants in Florida, Georgia and South Carolina. It all started in 1932 when Jamie's great uncle from Italy opened a bread bakery and also sold pizza. It carried on through the years and was passed down through family members.

Jamie opened his own health food bakery in 1985. The business made healthy sweets with orange blossom honey, as well as Sicilian pizzas and fresh-baked breads. A few years later, he opened their first of many Cucinella Pizzerias in Florida, where they lived at the time. Fast forward to 2021 and they opened the Win-



CHRISTINA RUOTOLO

Cucinella's Pizzeria and Italian Ice owner Jamie Cucinella shows off the hot-baked Italian grinder sandwich and the Pig and Fig pizza, also shown at right.

terville shop because their two sons moved here with their families.

The Cucinellas feel lucky to have been blessed with a thriving business and are excited to bring their family recipes, pizza and Italian ice to the community. In Italian, cucinella means ladybug, which are known for luck, so the luck is not only in their name but the amazing dough they make on a daily basis.

The restaurant features custom-made pizzas from 12-18 inches combining a variety of tasty toppings from traditional meats like pepperoni, salami and bacon; cheeses from mozzarella to ricotta; veggies like

roasted red peppers, hot cherry peppers or maybe fresh pineapple; and even drizzles such as balsamic glaze, hot honey, buffalo, garlic aioli or ranch.

There are specialty pies from the Aloha, with bacon, ham, fresh pineapple, mozzarella and marinara, to the Bianca White with garlic and olive oil, Parmesan, Romano, ricotta and mozzarella cheeses. There are even fun selections like the Flamethrower which packs lots of heat with hot cherry peppers, hot honey and red peppers on a traditional marinara base. Check their Facebook page to find out the special pie of the week.

They also have hot-



baked grinder sandwiches from Italian and chicken pesto to meatball as well as bountiful salads with fresh lettuces, veggies and handmade Balsamic and house Italian vinaigrette. Rounding out the lunch and dinner menu, you will find calzones, strombolis and garlic, cheesy or topped knots served with a house-made marinara sauce.

The Cucinellas come from a line of bread makers, so you know their New York-style bread and pizza dough is going to be awesome. They use unbleached high-gluten flour, a little bit of sugar, olive oil and filtered water for the perfect crust. The dough is cold fermented for three to five days. Cold fermentation slows down yeast growth to allow more complex flavors to build. It also creates a chewy, bubbly and airy crust. Cucinella's pizza crust when baked has those big, beautiful bubbles on the outer crust while the

middle is higher and more open-textured. It has a nice chew and a touch of sweetness. This keeps the toppings from seeping into the crust that would make it mushy or weak. It's airy, light, and tasty.

I went for the Pig and Fig pizza featuring a base sauce of garlic and olive oil with Parmesan, Romano and mozzarella cheeses, prosciutto, dried organic figs, arugula, and a drizzle of balsamic glaze. It comes out colorful like an Italian rainbow. You can taste a little saltiness from the prosciutto, some nutty earthiness from the cheeses, the slightest peppery spice from the fresh arugula, a twang of garlic oil and a vibrant balsamic glaze, all rounded out by the sweet, chewy figs that are almost like candy in your mouth. All this goodness atop the chewy, airy pizza dough was on point. Every ingredient complimented the others beautifully.



I also sampled the Italian hot-baked grinder sandwich. It starts with salami, thinly sliced ham, pepperoni, provolone, mayo, house Italian vinaigrette, shredded lettuce, and Roma tomatoes. The sub is baked so the meats warm up, melting the mayo and cheese into the bread. The bread is crispy on the outside and snaps and pops when you take a bite. It was delicious!

To round out the meal, Cucinella's offers hand-made dairy-free Italian ice developed by Jeremy and his wife, Kylie. Flavors include strawberry, mango, lemon, cherry, pineapple, blueberry, blackberry, peanut butter, and cookies and cream. For their homemade gelato, they have chocolate and vanilla. Gelato is the Italian version of ice cream, made with high-quality cream, milk and sugar. I tried a cherry Italian ice mixed with vanilla gelato, called a gelati. It was creamy, luscious and melted on the tongue. You can also add two scoops of gelato and pour your favorite soda over it for a special treat.

Cucinella's Pizzeria and Italian Ice is open from 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and 3-8 p.m. Sunday. For more information, or to place your order, call 252-751-0411. You can also follow them on Facebook, or visit their website, [www.cucinellas.com](http://www.cucinellas.com).

# CUCINELLA'S

Pizzeria and Italian Ice

(252) 751-0411

4125 OLD TAR ROAD SUITE L • WINTERVILLE, NC 28590  
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