

How to Host a Vegan Cookbook Club for Meat-Eaters, Vegans, and Everyone Else

By Bonnie Ambrosi and Alicia Peterson

A promotional flyer posted outside the main door of the Mount Royal branch of the Duluth Public Library reads, "Do you want to eat more plant-based meals because . . . it's good for your health? It's good for the environment? It's good for animals? It's delicious? Your son or daughter is vegan and you have no idea what to feed them? Whatever your reasons, come to the Vegan Cookbook Club to share great recipes and meet new friends."

On the first Thursday of every month, the staff at Mount Royal arrange chairs in the group meeting area, anticipating a room full of enthusiastic people "all very passionate about life and good food," as senior technician Paul Griffin observes.

Attendance at these monthly meetings varies from 15 to 25, and the numbers have been gradually rising ever since the first meeting in December 2016.

A Diverse Group

At every meeting there is a mixture of regulars, recent additions, and new faces; men and women. Some are veteran vegans who have followed a plant-based diet for many years. Others are new to plant-based eating or are what one attendee calls "aspiring vegans" who still eat some animal products.

An informal survey of members reveals that their ages range from 29 to 74. Education ranges from some college to PhD. Self-reported political bent covers the entire spectrum: conservative, liberal, independent, green and progressive. Religious affiliation is likewise quite varied, as are their jobs. They come with a variety of motivations: health, environmental concerns, animal welfare, spirituality, and social justice.

And every first Thursday, they all sit down together at Mount Royal Library for an hour of mutual education and inspiration that keeps people engaged and coming back, month after month, and bringing their friends.

Promoting Library Goals

The goals of the Vegan Cookbook Club coincide with several important library goals, such as:

1. Creating community. Few gathering places could attract such a multifarious group, and new friendships are being made here.
2. Supporting community needs through partnership. Community members provide the leadership and focus for each meeting, and the good attendance each month reflects a local need for programs and services around health, in this case through supporting a plant-based diet.
3. Promoting use of the library's collections. The Duluth Public Library has an excellent collection of vegan cookbooks that group members are encouraged to explore.

A Simple Model

The immediate and continued success of The Vegan Cookbook Club is based on a very simple model. Attendees share vegan recipes they have tried, review cookbooks, share tips and new discoveries, ask for advice, and talk about their dietary journeys, including inspiring stories of reclaimed health. Everyone here is both a teacher and a student. Everyone gets to speak; everyone gets to learn. We think this model could easily be replicated in other libraries. With that in mind, here are the basic elements of how the club got started and how it works:

Getting Started

Local wellness teacher Bonnie Ambrosi initiated the project, acted as the organizer for the group, and planned the dates with the Duluth Public Library; DPL created a poster for the group and reserved a meeting space. The first two meetings were promoted in the activities listing of local newspapers as well as by posting the flyer on the bulletin board of Mount Royal Library. There was no pre-existing group. We were starting from zero. The first meeting attracted seven people and the numbers have been steadily rising since then, with no publicity except the poster, occasional flyers, and DPL's online calendar.

Meeting Plan

The plan for the monthly meetings couldn't be simpler. A meeting host greets everyone at the beginning and makes any short announcements. The discussion then proceeds around the circle, giving each person an opportunity to share.

On one occasion we had a guest speaker -- a local doctor who is a trained nutritionist and prescribes whole-food plant-based diet for many of his patients. In future, we may have other special guests, but the beauty of this group is that the organizer is not under constant pressure to come up with speakers and program ideas. In the Vegan Cookbook Club, the attendees *are* the speakers; their experiences, questions, and wisdom *are* the program!

Why It Works

1. It meets a need. Interest in plant-based diet is growing very quickly nationwide. People are looking for information, encouragement, and a sense of community with others who are exploring a vegan diet.
2. It is inclusive. It is a vegan **cookbook** club, not a vegan club. Our flyers make it clear that anyone with an interest in plant-based diet is welcome, even if they've never cooked a vegan meal in their lives! The club is very welcoming to people who are curious about vegan diet for various reasons, as well as to those who are new to plant-based diet and also those who have been vegans for years. It is an essential aspect of the club that one need not be vegan to attend and to contribute. We have been complimented many times on how open, accepting and happy our group is.
3. Short and simple, and no food. A meeting that only lasts an hour is easy to join, and the fact that we're not allowed to have food in the library actually helps keep things simple. A meeting model that included a vegan potluck each time would be a much bigger time commitment, and because it would involve bringing food, some people who weren't able to participate in that way might not come. Nothing against vegan potlucks, but our club thrives in part because we *don't* have that element.

Created and Sustained by Partnership: a note from the librarian

The library's part in creating this program was mostly just saying "yes." *Sure, we can host a Vegan Cookbook Club. ...What does that mean, exactly?* Logistically speaking, it means we provide the space, the print and online promotion, and the collection. Bonnie and other leaders spread the word more broadly than we could alone, and facilitate the monthly meetings. They also maintain an optional email list for sharing announcements and meeting minutes, and they expand their impact through things like tabling at a local wellness fair and writing articles about plant-based diet for the local paper.

We would not have thought to host this club without their input. Even if we had, the welcoming atmosphere, growing numbers, and laughter we hear through the meeting room door every month is all their own doing, and we are delighted to partner with them. If hosting a vegan cookbook club has never crossed your mind (it certainly hadn't crossed mine before), it's a great example of interest-based programming that, like Anime Club for teens, can bring diverse people together around a common theme and become more than the sum of its meetings.

Contact Us

If you would like to start a Vegan Cookbook Club at your library, please contact us with questions or for encouragement! Bonnie Ambrosi at bonnieambrosi@gmail.com or Alicia Peterson at ampeterson@duluthmn.gov.