So Much Soul Food!

By Brenda Davis, RD

I can remember the first time I tasted plant-based “Soul Food”. The year was 2004, and I was speaking in Montgomery, Alabama. I had the distinct honor of visiting the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. served as pastor. I could hardly believe I was standing in the same place as the one person who stands out above all others when I think of justice, equality, and nonviolence. I was also privileged to visit the Rosa Parks Museum and the Civil Rights Memorial Center. The incredible day culminated at an incredible vegan soul food restaurant. What an experience!

Soul food is more than just a style of cooking; it’s a cultural expression of love, resilience, and history rooted in African American culinary traditions. While traditional soul food often features ingredients like fried chicken, pork, and butter-laden dishes, vegan soul food offers a healthier, plant-based spin without sacrificing the bold flavors and comforting essence that make it so beloved. In this article, we delve into the world of vegan soul food, where you'll discover how to recreate its rich, satisfying flavors with a compassionate and healthy twist. Enjoy!

The Evolution of Soul Food

Historically, soul food was born out of resourcefulness. Enslaved Africans in the United States had to make the most of limited ingredients, using seasonings and cooking techniques to create dishes that were both hearty and flavorful. Over time, soul food became a cornerstone of African American culture, and it was celebrated for its ability to bring people together in a way that nourished both the body and soul.



As plant-based eating gained popularity for health, environmental, and ethical reasons, vegan soul food emerged as a delicious and inclusive way to enjoy these cherished dishes. By swapping animal products for plant-based alternatives, vegan soul food retains its richness and cultural authenticity while aligning with modern dietary choices.

Staples of Vegan Soul Food

Vegan soul food relies on wholesome ingredients and creative cooking techniques to replicate the textures and flavors of traditional dishes. Key ingredients include legumes such as black-eyed peas, lentils, and red beans, other plant-based proteins such as tofu, tempeh, jackfruit, seitan, and veggie meats, vegetables such as collard greens, okra, sweet potatoes, and corn, grains such as grits, cornbread, and rice, and seasonings such as paprika (plain or smoked), garlic, cayenne, thyme, bay leaves, and black pepper.

As you can imagine, with ingredients such as these, vegan soul food can be incredibly nutritious. Let's consider some of the key nutritional attributes:

1. **High Nutrient-density**
   Soul food staples are packed with vitamins, minerals, and fiber, supporting overall health. For example, collard greens are an excellent source of calcium, vitamin K, and antioxidants, while sweet potatoes provide beta-carotene and potassium.

2. **Low in Saturated Fat**
   Traditional soul food recipes often use animal-based fats like butter, lard, or pork fat. Vegan adaptations replace these with heart-healthy fats from sources like olive or avocado oil. In some cases, oils are replaced with vegetable broth. This shift can reduce the risk of cardiovascular diseases associated with high saturated fat intake.

3. **High in Fiber**
   Legumes, whole grains, and vegetables are staples in vegan soul food. These ingredients are rich in dietary fiber, promoting digestive health, stabilizing blood sugar levels, and lowering cholesterol. For instance, black-eyed peas and lentils are not only fiber-rich but also excellent sources of plant-based protein.

4. **Cholesterol-Free**
   Since vegan soul food avoids animal products, it naturally eliminates dietary cholesterol. Instead, the dishes are often rich in unsaturated fats and plant sterols, which support cardiovascular health.

5. **Rich in Plant Protein**
   Classic protein sources like fried chicken or pork are replaced with beans, tofu, tempeh, and veggie sausage, all of which are high in protein and low in unhealthy

fats. These alternatives mimic the texture and flavor of traditional dishes while being lighter and healthier.

6. **Abundant in Phytochemicals and Antioxidants**
   Ingredients like collard greens, okra, and brightly colored vegetables are full of protective phytochemicals and antioxidants that help combat inflammation and oxidative stress, reducing the risk of chronic diseases. Spices commonly used in soul food, like paprika, garlic, and cayenne pepper, also provide anti-inflammatory benefits.

7. **Adaptable to Different Dietary Needs**
   Vegan soul food is naturally inclusive for those with dietary restrictions, such as lactose intolerance, which is common in many African American communities. Plant-based recipes make it easier to enjoy traditional flavors without compromising on health.



Of course, vegan soul food isn't just about healthy eating; it's about honoring tradition while embracing a more sustainable and compassionate way of living. By reimagining beloved soul food dishes, we can celebrate the rich history of soul food while creating meals that are nourishing for young and old. Whether you are plant-based or plant-curious, these three recipes are sure to bring joy to your table. If you'd like to explore vegan soul food further, my favorite soul food superstar is Jenné Claiborne. Check out her wonderful Sweet Potato Soul cookbook, website, podcast, and YouTube channel.



Smoky Collard Greens

Collard greens are a quintessential staple in soul food cuisine, symbolizing resilience and tradition. Historically, they were cultivated in Southern gardens and prepared as a flavorful side dish, often simmered with smoked meat. This vegan version retains the characteristic smoky flavor using smoked paprika and smoked tempeh or tofu. In the photo below, I used smoked fava bean tofu. You can replace the smoked tempeh or tofu with cremini or other mushrooms if desired. You can sauté the vegetables in a tablespoon of olive oil if preferred. Feel free to add other seasonings such as cumin, Cajun, or your favorite soul food seasoning blend.

Ingredients:

1 large bunch (about 10 large leaves) collard greens, stems removed, leaves sliced into thin ribbons

3 tablespoons vegetable broth

1 medium onion, diced

3 cloves garlic, minced

1 cup smoked tempeh or tofu, cubed

1 teaspoon smoked paprika

½ teaspoon red pepper flakes (optional)

1 cup vegetable broth

1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar

Salt and black pepper to taste

Instructions:

1. Heat the vegetable broth in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the diced onion and sauté until translucent, about 5 minutes.
2. Add the garlic and smoked tempeh. Cook for another 3 minutes.
3. Stir in the smoked paprika, and red pepper flakes, cooking for 30 seconds.

4. Add the collard greens in batches, stirring to wilt. Pour in the vegetable broth and cornstarch mixture. Cover and let simmer for 10-15 minutes, stirring occasionally.
5. Stir in the apple cider vinegar and season with salt and black pepper to taste. Serve as a side dish.



Sweet Potato and Black-Eyed Pea Stew

Black-eyed peas and sweet potatoes hold deep cultural roots in soul food, symbolizing luck and prosperity. This stew highlights the comforting, earthy flavors of these ingredients while offering a wholesome, plant-based twist that honors tradition and health. Add ½ cup coconut milk just before serving, if desired.

Ingredients:

3 tablespoons vegetable broth

1 large, sweet potato, cut into ½-¾ inch cubes (peel, if desired)(about 2 cups)

1 medium onion, diced

3 cloves garlic, minced

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon smoked paprika

½ teaspoon cayenne pepper (or to taste)

2 cups cooked black-eyed peas (or one 19-ounce can, rinsed and drained)

2 tomatoes, diced (about 1½ cups)

2 cups vegetable broth

2 cups chopped kale, collards, or spinach

2 teaspoons cornstarch mixed with 2 tablespoons water

Juice of 1 lemon (optional)

Salt and black pepper to taste

Instructions:

1. Heat the 3 tablespoons of vegetable broth in a large pot over medium heat. Add the onion and sauté for 5 minutes until softened. Add more broth if needed to prevent sticking.
2. Add the garlic, cumin, smoked paprika, and cayenne pepper. Stir for 1 minute until fragrant.

3. Add the sweet potato, diced tomatoes, and vegetable broth. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for 15 minutes.
4. Add the black-eyed peas and cook another 10 minutes.
5. Stir in the kale, collards, or spinach and cook for an additional 5 minutes until wilted. Add cornstarch mixture and cook another 2-3 minutes to thicken the gravy. Add salt and pepper to taste.
6. Finish with a squeeze of lemon juice. Serve hot, optionally with cornbread, rice, or quinoa.



Creamy Cajun-Spiced Red Beans

Red beans and rice tie soul food to Creole and Cajun cuisines of Louisiana. This version celebrates the dish's creamy, spiced essence while incorporating coconut milk and brown rice for a modern, vegan-friendly take. If you prefer, you can replace coconut milk with cashew cream.

Ingredients:

3 tablespoons vegetable broth or 1 tablespoon olive oil

1 medium red bell pepper, diced

1 medium onion, diced

3 cloves garlic, minced

2 teaspoons Cajun seasoning (or homemade blend with paprika, oregano, thyme, cayenne, garlic powder, and onion powder)

2 cups cooked red kidney beans (or one 19-ounce can, rinsed and drained)

1/2 cup unsweetened coconut milk (light or regular)

1 cup vegetable broth

1½ teaspoons cornstarch mixed with 1½ tablespoons water

1 tablespoon nutritional yeast (optional)

Salt and black pepper to taste

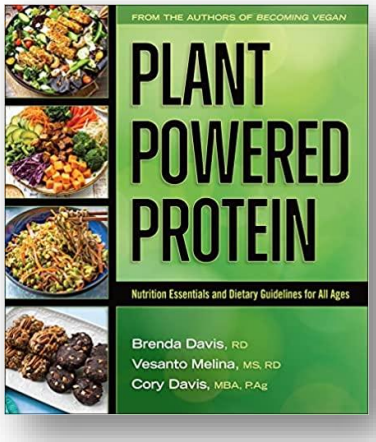
Chopped parsley and green onions for garnish (optional)

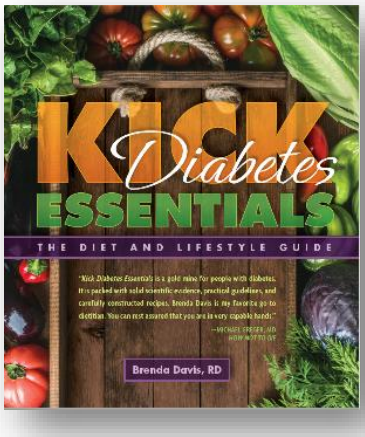
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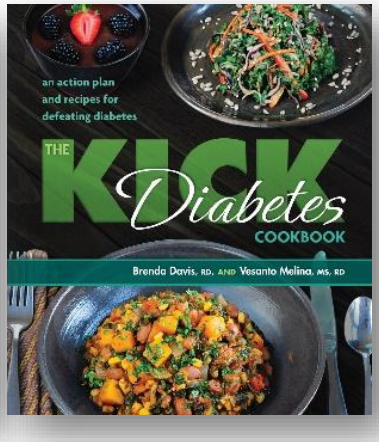
1. Heat the 3 tablespoons of vegetable broth or one tablespoon of olive oil in a skillet over medium heat. Add the bell pepper, and onion, and sauté for 5-7 minutes, until softened.
2. Add the garlic and Cajun seasoning, stirring for 1 minute until fragrant.
3. Stir in the red kidney beans and vegetable broth. Let the mixture simmer for 10-12 minutes, allowing the flavors to meld and the sauce to thicken slightly.

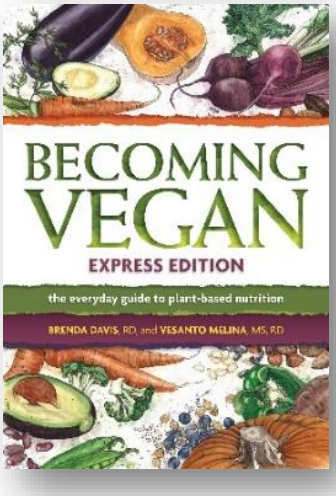
4. Mix in the coconut milk and nutritional yeast, if using. Season with salt and black pepper to taste.
5. Garnish with fresh parsley and sliced green onions. Serve with brown rice or quinoa and a side dish of collard greens or okra.

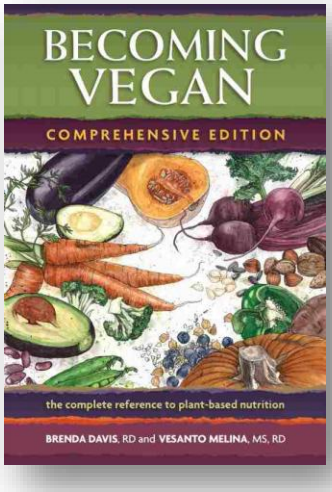


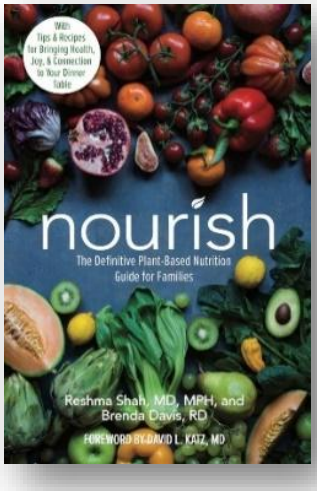












This article was originally written for So Many Cooks in the Kitchen. Brenda Davis, RD is a plant-based pioneer and author/co-author of 13 books on plant-based diets. She is the author/co-author of Plant-Powered Protein, Nourish, Becoming Vegan: Comprehensive and Express Editions, Kick Diabetes Essentials, and The Kick Diabetes Cookbook. www.brendadavisrd.com