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Chef Spotlight: Ann Gentry

Name: Ann Gentry

Age: "My mother taught me that well-brought-up ladies never tell their age."

Restaurant: **Real Food Daily**
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Chef Ann Gentry is the visionary behind Los Angeles' Real Food Daily (RFD), a vegan haven that serves only 100 percent vegan, locally grown, organic food. In 1988, Chef Gentry began RFD as a thriving home meal delivery service in the L.A. area. Since then, RFD has grown into L.A.'s "most progressive and highly lauded gourmet vegan eatery," with two locations—one in Santa Monica and the other in West Hollywood.

Combining her Southern background with macrobiotic cooking techniques, Chef Gentry creates comforting, nutritious, and flavor-packed dishes that live up to RFD's mission to "WOW every guest every time." House favorites include "Tac-o' the Town" tacos, lentil-walnut pâté, and a mystery-meat-free "TV dinner"—complete with a baked tempeh loaf, fresh seasonal veggies, and mashed potatoes and gravy.

Chef Gentry's unique approach to vegan cooking has earned her many credits, including appearing as a guest chef at the Canyon Ranch in Arizona, the Pritikin Longevity Center, the Robert Mondavi Wine Center, and The Natural Foods Expo in Anaheim, California, as well as several appearances on the Food Network.

Do you have companion animals? If so, can you describe them?

My family got our first dog from a local rescue group, a 2-year-old terrier mix whose name is Milo. Sweet, loyal, playful, good-natured, sad-eyed, frisky. Milo likes to play tug-of-war with a rope with my 3-year-old son, Walker, who can imitate a dog to perfection. In fact, we've given Walker the name Waldo when he is acting like our second dog.

How long have you been a chef?

Seventeen years.

What type of cuisine do you focus on?

RFD's New World Vegan Cuisine is delicious, balanced, organic, and animal-free—made fresh daily to provide food-loving and health-conscious individuals with an eating experience they can trust and feel good about.

Have you or has your restaurant received any awards?

RFD has been voted number one by many Web sites, such as AOL, Tribe, and CitySearch, to name a few. At RFD in Santa Monica, we won a Sustainability Award from the city of Santa Monica.

Do you have a specialty?

People come from miles for our tacos, club sandwich, daily specials, and specialty desserts like our chocolate-coconut moon pies, tiramisu, and German chocolate



**Grilled 'Chicken' With
'Honey' Lime and Chipotle
Sauce**

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cake.

What are the most important elements in cooking great vegetarian cuisine?

As I mentioned in *The Real Food Daily Cookbook*: purchasing regional foods grown in season, equipping your kitchen no matter what your budget so that you have the tools to support you to enjoy cooking, confidence, a good attitude, timing, and intuition.

What is the key to getting meat-eaters to enjoy vegetarian food?

One of the tenets of RFD is that we never make people "wrong" for their food choices; we invite people in and offer them great-tasting, healthy food. This has allowed RFD to move into the mainstream with an organic vegan cuisine and to reach out to many more people than we could have had we'd been busy prophesizing about the good and evil of today's food politics. We've made vegan cuisine attractive by making it nonthreatening to nonvegans. When I do have to say something, I choose words that invite people to it—like "plant-based" as opposed to mentioning what my cooking does not have in it. At RFD, we make an enticing presentation on the plate, different colors and textures. We offer childhood favorites—comfort foods always appeal to people. People feel the love when they eat foods or even smell foods that remind them of their mom or grandmother cooking for them.

What, in your opinion, does the future of plant-based cuisine hold?

One hundred years from now, children will be studying American history and some bright child will raise her hand and ask, "You mean they knew their food was killing them, but they ate it anyway?"

Do you have a favorite cooking method?

I love to bake anything! I don't own a microwave, so my quick method at home is tossing seasonal vegetables in olive oil and sea salt and a few fresh herbs, and then baking them in the oven. While they are cooking, I can get the rest of my meal together.

Where did you train to become a chef?

For five years I ran my home delivery service, which involved cooking five days a week, planning menus, taking orders, shopping, and wearing every hat an independent business owner has to don—*now* that was school!

What are your favorite ingredients to work with?

Any just-picked organic produce inspires me to want to put a great, simple meal together.

In your opinion, what vegetarian dish or type of food is most frequently poorly prepared, and why?

The soy products—tofu and tempeh. So many people prepare tofu or tempeh in a dish without cooking them first. It is important to marinate these and cook them, even if you just par-simmer them in a pot of water for a few minutes. It is important to do this so that the soybeans can be better assimilated when you do eat it. Like many high-protein foods, you must season or marinate tofu and tempeh. Tempeh done correctly is addictive.

If you were stranded on a deserted island and could only eat one kind of ethnic food, what would it be?

I used to say it would be corn on the cob, but the corn has changed so much over the last few years, and it certainly isn't like it used to be in the years of the American Indians. Today, I'd say I'd be happy to live like islanders do—on mangoes and coconuts.

Do vegetarian restaurants face any special obstacles that meat-based restaurants don't have to face?

Contrary to what public perception can be, it is not difficult to get organically grown produce or products. Today, organic is the biggest growing segment in the food industry. Sure, I am a bit spoiled, living in California, where so much produce is so readily available, but I've been traveling quite a bit this year, teaching cooking classes with my cookbook, and I've seen organic and vegan food everywhere, and what I hear from regional people is that they are hungry for more of it.

Can you give us one great cooking tip for aspiring vegetarian chefs?

Have your own well-sharpened knife, lots of patience, and stay open. From a macrobiotic perspective, cooking is yang (constrictive), so loosen up, and don't

forget to breathe. Have a beer at the end of a long workday and a few good laughs. First, create in your mind—picture the dish, the meal—and then create it with technique. Read and read—about food. Follow recipes until you can make up your own and shop at farmers' markets to be inspired by fresh produce and meet the people who grow our food.

What are some ingredients that you recommend vegetarians and vegans have in their kitchens to cook with?

Good quality sea salt is a must; throw out your regular table salt. Asian condiments like miso, tamari, mirin, umeboshi, and rice vinegar.

Are there any newer vegetarian products on the market that you are particularly fond of?

Earth Balance margarine and Vegemise.

Have you had any noteworthy comments from or experiences with diners?

I am blessed. RFD is very loved among a local and national community.

Please give us some specialty tips for:

- *How best to prepare tofu:* start with water-packed tofu
- *How best to prepare seitan:* in spicy stews
- *How best to prepare tempeh:* always marinate in a unique broth or sauce before cooking
- *Your favorite way to work with a certain fruit or vegetable:* Cut vegetables into beautiful, precise pieces, then simply steam or bake them, and for a vegetable dish, douse them with some sort of sauce or dressing.

In my cookbook, you'll find basic preparations for the plant-based proteins.

Creamy Broccoli Soup With Red Pepper Crème

Double Chocolate Layer Cake

Living Paradise