

Going vegan in Netherlands is easy

SUZANNE MORPHET
takes an eye-opening
plant-based food tour

Food was on my mind when I flew into Amsterdam in early April.

The Dutch capital had just voted to ban the advertising of meat to dampen demand for animal products, which contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions.

To me, that sounded like good news.

Since transitioning to eating mostly plants six years ago (a big leap for this beef farmer's daughter), finding tasty and healthy food has been the most challenging part of travel. I still remember one evening in Ecuador where my only option was to order a plate of broccoli.

According to I Amsterdam, the Amsterdam region's official foreign trade and investment agency, "the culinary landscape in Amsterdam is undergoing a seismic shift", with a growing acceptance of meat substitutes in daily meals, which supports the city's goal of at least 60 per cent plant-based diets by 2030.

On the other hand, the Netherlands is still the largest exporter of animal products in the European Union, and the second-largest in the world. It was hard to imagine I would find a plant paradise. When I asked a Dutch friend before arriving, she emailed



Above, Patrick Boone is co-owner of V For Food, a tour company that gives participants a taste of vegan options in Utrecht. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

to say, "If you order a veggie meal in a non-veggie restaurant, it is mostly disappointing."

However, my friend had a recommendation: a new restaurant near her town of Bussum, just south of Amsterdam,

that serves nothing but plant-based cuisine. "You will feast your eyes, mouth, stomach and soul," she assured me.

De Groene Afslag (The Green Exit) is also a hotel, conference centre and training school in an



Above, plant-based coffee and cake at De Groene Afslag. Below, mushroom balls at fine-dining restaurant Kasvio.



abandoned military building that's been creatively restored with pre-used furnishings. It's run by a foundation with the goal of inspiring people to change course,

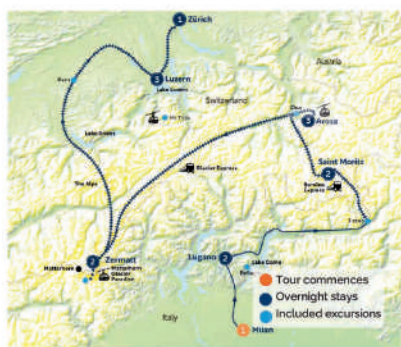
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Above, a cycling food tour in Utrecht with V For Food. Right, tour guests get a taste of Indian-style cuisine at Little World Kitchen. Below, Messy, 'sister' of Nessie, the Loch Ness monster, is made from old jeans, in the reception area of De Groene Afslag. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



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"to start doing things radically differently", according to its website, "given the heavy toll the global livestock industry takes on the planet".

The menu changes with the season and our multi-course meal included asparagus soup and wood ear mushrooms with spring onion and smoked tofu. Even my meat-loving husband was impressed by the depth of flavours and variety of textures. European wines come from producers who "have their hands in the soil" and are dedicated to biodiversity.

Between courses, we admired

three-dimensional works of art including Messy, "sister" of Nessie, the Loch Ness monster, made from 800 pairs of old jeans. Our server pointed out the restaurant's unique ceiling, possibly the most expensive in the world — it's covered with out-of-circulation banknotes from Germany.

De Groene Afslag is one-of-a-kind, but that was our cue to seek out other fully vegan or vegetarian restaurants — and we found many, especially in Utrecht, where we joined a vegan food tour by bicycle with V For Food.

Company co-founder Patrick Boone calls Utrecht "the hidden food capital" of the Netherlands, a city where passionate chefs and entrepreneurs are exploring the wide world of edible plants.

We cycled between half a dozen restaurants, stopping to sample silky-smooth hummus and smoky baba ganoush from Za'atar, curried chickpeas from Little World Kitchen, pizza with meltily delicious "mozzarella" at Vegan Pizza Bar, and crispy mushroom balls resembling Sicilian arancini at the fine-dining restaurant Kasvio.

Perhaps surprisingly, at least one of the restaurant owners — Thijs Tooten of Za'atar — isn't vegan or vegetarian himself but thinks everyone should eat fewer animal products. "We don't just have a climate problem," he says, "but also a culture problem. We don't know each other's cuisines, stories and flavours enough."

Even more surprising? There were no other vegans or vegetarians on this food tour. Patrick says two-thirds of his guests on average are meat-eaters,



and he appreciates the opportunity to show them how delicious the alternatives can be.

"So, we try to make it just food, fantastic food," he explained, "not trying to convince and convert people because, with my own background not being vegan, it wouldn't have worked with me." (Patrick was a butcher for years, but one day while travelling in Indonesia he met a pig in someone's backyard, looked it in the eyes and had an "aha" moment.)

At least two of the restaurants on Patrick's tour are so successful they now have multiple locations. Vegan Pizza Bar, for instance, also has locations in Rotterdam and The Hague and is opening a fourth in Amsterdam.

Co-owner Maarten Kleizen told me that developing their own "mozzarella" was key. When they tested plant-based cheeses already on the market, they either turned into a puddle of oil when heated or were so starchy they stuck to your teeth. "We developed our vegan mozzarella with the love and care it deserves, and for one purpose: baking in an oven."

That dedication to quality and creativity is evident elsewhere. In Amsterdam, Nick Pina pioneered plant-based cuisine with his restaurant Mr & Mrs Watson, named for Donald Watson, the British founder of the vegan movement.

"When we opened in 2015," he said, "there weren't many showing that plant-based food could be refined, exciting and something everyone could enjoy."

After closing that business, he's recently opened a new one — simply called Mr Watson — that

focuses on mushrooms, which he thinks is the perfect food for the times we're in. "They can be grown almost anywhere, use very little water and land compared to many other foods, and every variety brings something different."

Interestingly, tourists can take some of the credit for pushing the vegan food scene from the margins into the mainstream in Amsterdam. In the last decade or so, "more people — particularly younger residents and tourists — began seeking plant-based options or reducing meat consumption and restaurants responded to that demand," a spokesperson for Amsterdam & Partners (Amsterdam's tourism office) told me.

Tourists as part of the solution to climate change, not just part of the problem? Now, that is good news.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of V For Food. They have not influenced this story, or read it before publication.



fact file

■ De Groene Afslag in Bussum, Netherlands, is a fully plant-based restaurant supporting local farmers who are improving biodiversity by shifting from annual monocultures to perennial polycultures. For daily menus and prices, see degroenefslag.nl/agenda.

■ V For Food offers guided and self-guided food tours in Utrecht, Rotterdam and Amsterdam, including a cycling tour in Utrecht, from \$16.30 (€10) per person. See app.vforfood.com.



At Mr Watson, a new vegan restaurant in Amsterdam, the focus is on mushrooms. Picture: Mr Watson