

## **An Interview with Paula Marie Coomer, Author *Blue Moon Vegan***

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**Q: In your previous book, *Blue Moon Vegetarian*, you recount your transition to vegetarianism and then becoming a vegan. What have you since learned along that journey?**

A: Oh my. That is another book in itself. First, cooking and inventing recipes has gotten more and more exciting as I experiment with all the things you can do with unusual ingredients. It's almost become an obsession. I've also learned that what I originally suspected is true: that people are being abused by our food system, our education system, our political system, and our economic system. I've learned that there is an entire growing world of people who are doing exactly what I'm doing--moving away from what we've always accepted as "the way life is" to "what it can be." I've learned how beautiful and terrible is this responsibility to care for our bodies, which are our only true vehicles, the only way we get to stretch out this privilege called existence. I've learned what true love is, because in the course of taking better care of myself, I have come to love and accept myself for who I truly am--and I've learned that person is not at all who I thought she was. I've learned that reaching out and sharing that care with others is the secret to happiness. It is the fountain of youth.

**Q: At one point you swore that you would not write a follow-up cookbook to *Blue Moon Vegetarian*. Yet *Blue Moon Vegan* is full of over 100 recipes. What inspired you to do a complete cookbook?**

A: I name her in the introduction to *Blue Moon Vegan* so I feel comfortable naming her here. My former marketing manager Kate Burkett, who continues in the role now of project manager, slowly kept urging me. I think she could see I was in total denial about this part of myself. I am absolutely not a domestic person. I don't clean house. I shell out money from the meager pittance I make teaching writing at a university to pay someone else to do it. I don't shop for drapes and swirly-gigs for the house. I'm just not that way. Never have been. But Kate kept bringing it up, and people so loved the recipes in *Blue Moon Vegetarian*. It wasn't until I had a full 100 recipes that I was able to admit that I actually took a great deal of pleasure from creating with food. However, because of my denial, I made a deal--and one that is very valuable to me personally--and that was that I'd do the cookbook if I could also do a book about the medicinal properties of herbs, spices, and other plants (*Blue Moon Medicine Woman* will hopefully be out next year) and another one called *Blue Moon Folkways in the Kitchen*, in which I hope to translate with vegan resources my mountain grandmothers' ways of growing and preserving foods, but more importantly, making their own cleaning products, soaps, shampoos, etc.--which occupied their entire lives and involved the killing of animals--as well as some new things I've learned about vegan basics such as nut cheeses and homemade milks. More than anything, I wanted a way to preserve what my generations of women knew: how to survive in wilderness. A day may come when this knowledge has a great amount of value for all of us.

**Q: Your husband Phil has been your partner along this journey and in creating these recipes. How important was the support in that relationship to making the transition to becoming vegan? And who really “runs” the kitchen?**

A: Ha! Well. Phil loves to say I wear the pants in the family, but I think we share the kitchen. He does more of the day-to-day cooking, and I do more of the inventing. *Blue Moon Vegetarian* depicts some of the tension early in our relationship. That tension disappeared when we were in the kitchen cooking together. It was immediately obvious that we both go into more or less a Zen state when we are cooking. How could you know that about yourself if you've never cooked with anyone else? Still, I doubt we'd have stayed together if we hadn't embarked on the journey together. It saved us. We were completely different when we ate meat. We were both more aggressive, more unwilling to compromise, and our moods were more volatile. People have no idea how adverse to their wellbeing a heavy-meat diet really is.

**Q: What advice do you have for people who are trying to make the transition to vegan while living (and possibly still cooking for) people who are not?**

A: Don't preach. Be a quiet example. Let the insensitive comments roll off your back-- because there will be plenty of them. When you cook something that turns out extra yummy, offer a taste. Join an online support group (a great one on Facebook is "Vegan Support Group"; also "Ask a Vegan Dietician" is a very caring environment.) In more populated areas you should be able to find groups that meet for vegan potlucks. Most importantly, don't give up. Thousands and thousands of testimonies exist from people whose families eventually transitioned to at least eating some vegan or vegetarian meals. Happened in my own family with my sons and their wives. They haven't given up meat, but they don't eat so much of it, and when we gather, my daughters-in-law cook vegan dishes for us, to rave results.

**Q: Some people are concerned that eating an entirely plant-based diet will deprive them of nutrients. Can you speak to the ways in which your recipes compensate for what people fear is being lost when they give up meat?**

A: Well, most of that concern is unfounded, except for B12, which you do really have to work at since animal flesh is the most ready source for it. We take a supplement, and add nutritional yeast (which is packed with B12) whenever we want a cheesy flavor to a dish but don't have a batch of nut cheese in the fridge. Once in a while we each will pop a multi-vitamin, but not on any kind of regular basis, and certainly no more than we did when we followed an omnivorous diet. I've learned to listen to my body. I'll find myself eating a bunch of fruit or craving dark greens or squash. I'll feel the urge for nuts or decide I can't live another day if I don't eat a bowl of pinto beans. The back of *Laurel's Kitchen* has an excellent breakdown of nutrition in various foods. I'd suggest having a similar nutrition guidebook on hand as people are trying to learn about the vegan lifestyle. You definitely have to be proactive and try not to feel intimidated as you learn.

**Q: How did you come up with the ideas for these dishes? Did you start with non-vegan dishes and look for vegan alternatives? What was the process of developing the recipes?**

A: Some of the recipes are "translations." They are the recipes from *Blue Moon Vegetarian* that I reworked with vegan ingredients. And in all cases I like the flavor and texture of the vegan versions better. Other things are favorites--such as Blue Moon Biscuits and Gravy and Chick Salad--that I experimented with for a while until I got them close to the old-fashioned originals. Of course a number of the recipes are from Jan Calvert's bakery (oh my gosh, is she ever good at what she does). The rest are restaurant dishes I tried to recreate or—as with some of the drink recipes—are contributed by people I know. A few were invented and tested literally as we were doing the main part of the photo shoot. All the recipes in one way or another have been tasted by other people, and a majority tested by someone else or made a second and third time by Phil and me. A few are flat accidents, such as Cherry Power Balls, which came about because I didn't have the right ingredients for Protein Balls from *Blue Moon Vegetarian*, which I happened to be craving at the time.

**Q: What suggestions do you have for people who may have a hard time finding the ingredients for the recipes in traditional grocery stores?**

A: This is so bourgeois. This thing of being able to make choices about the food you eat. Any of us who are able to make this choice should be so grateful. But it's also sad that a "traditional grocery store" means a store where you can't buy whole foods. I believe we have a duty to eat low on the food chain, to make the food we have go further for more people. That said, phenomena such as food deserts are a reality. It can be difficult to get good wholesome ingredients, but there are also such things as food co-ops and buying clubs. As much as anything, I believe it's a case of educating people. I live in a place where I can't necessarily get ingredients I want without an 80-mile round trip. I buy mostly in bulk through an organic food buying club. It's like anything else. If you want to do it, you search out the resources. You use your pennies to buy apples instead of candy bars. Even food banks are likely to have legumes and rice. There are farmers' markets where the day's produce goes for very low prices when compared to grocery store produce departments. There's your own balcony or back yard in which to grow a plot of vegetables. You learn to preserve your own food. To take advantage of what's in season and put it away. It's a constant process. It's a lifestyle. I do get it that the availability of whole foods is sketchy in many parts of our country, and it's a real shame, and it needs to change, and people need to insist on it by refusing to buy packaged foods. You can buy a bag of nuts in a quick-stop just as easily as you can buy a bag of potato chips.

**Q: Many of your recipes seem to be inspired by family memories. How big a role does tradition play in your cooking? Was it a challenge to update some of those traditional recipes with healthy options?**

A: My mother and grandmothers were such good cooks. Of course they never measured, never wrote a thing down, and still came up with the same result every time. But we're talking squirrel, deer, opossum, chickens they raised and chased down and

butchered themselves. Salt pork and hams they smoked in sheds. Sugary cakes and pies. Potatoes mashed with cream from their own cows and butter they churned themselves. Every piece of meat was fried in pork fat from animals my grandfathers raised. Beef, well, you don't butcher your milk cows. It's safe to say I will never make a biscuit--which were like layered clouds--anywhere close to as good as theirs, but I certainly have the flavor down, and it wasn't as tough to mimic as you might think, since coconut oil behaves very much like pig lard, and coconut milk is actually better, to my notion than cow's milk. Same goes for gravy, coleslaw, fruit salad. Definitely I have worked hard in my life to be as good as they were. Definitely it was the craving for those familiar flavors that drove me during the creation of *Blue Moon Vegan*. I won't say it was easy. The process of trying to recreate a dish is much more a thing of trial and error. But I'd match Jan Calvert's breads, cookies, and pastries against any traditional recipe, and I know that's where most of hers started. I did not, you notice, try to mimic my mother's raisin pie.

**Q: What are some of your favorite recipes in the book? Are there any recipes that were a big and/or surprise hit with non-vegan family and friends?**

A: I could live off of Cherry Power Balls and Chick Salad. And I was completely ecstatic when I finally got Blue Moon Biscuits and Gravy right—which ultimately came after the photo shoot, by the way—and Cherry Oat Sunday Cake, well, I really should have named it Cherry Oat Every singledayoftheweek Cake, because the first time I made it, I had it for breakfast every morning and Phil ate it after work every day until it was gone. My oldest son still doesn't believe Jan's cookies and muffins are both vegan and gluten-free. Everyone loves my lasagna. That's been a staple with my sons and me for decades, and it's not unusual for us to have it at Christmas. My oldest son scrutinized most of the recipes in the photo shoot. He loved Hot Tomato-Basil casserole, and ate so many of Surprising Tortillas that we barely had enough for the photo shoot. Spicy Chili Bean Stew was a hit throughout the Inland Northwest as we made batch after batch and carted it around to book signings when we were promoting *Blue Moon Vegetarian*, same with Phil's Vegetable Roll-ups. And Day at the Beach? Well, probably you can use your imagination. It goes on and on, really, I'm happy to say.

**Q: Aside from delicious recipes, what do you hope people take away from this book?**

A: I hope more and more people will begin to turn their backs on mass food production and start growing tomatoes on their balconies. You can grow potatoes in a garbage can--in fact they do quite well. You can grow herbs on a window sill, strawberries in a coffee can, lettuce in a yogurt carton. For that matter, you can grow your own yogurt just by sterilizing a jar, stirring a spoon of organic, unsweetened yogurt in some unsweetened coconut milk and sitting it in the oven with the light on for a day or in a cooler with a heating pad. Grow a jar of sprouts in three days for a penny or two. Cook a pot of beans not from a can, but from dried for a quarter. I want people to know how much fun it is to make food acquisition and preparation central to day-to-day life. How everything else falls into place once you do that. Less stress and more energy translates to more appreciation for everything else. After that the waves of goodness just keep rolling and rolling.