Opinion
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A plate of goat cheese bruschetta prepared by certified executive chef Jim Churches, preside

A plate of goat cheese bruschetta prepared by certified executive chef Jim Churches, president of the American Culinary Federation's Michigan Chefs de Cuisine Association and a member of St. Patrick Parish in Brighton, Mich. With planning, flexibility and creativity, Lenten meals can engage the entire family and every palate. (OSV News/Courtesy of Jim Churches)

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While the season of Lent is marked by fasting and abstinence, cooking for a hungry family in this season of prayer and penance "doesn't mean boring or 'fish all the time,'" a Catholic chef told OSV News.

Catholics fast and abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and forego meat on all the Fridays of Lent as well. In the Latin Catholic Church, those norms are obligatory for the faithful ages 18 through 59.

Members of the 23 Eastern Catholic churches observe their own particular restrictions during Lent, more commonly known among those churches as the Great

Fast.

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But discipline and deliciousness aren't necessarily mutually exclusive, said certified executive chef Jim Churches, president of the American Culinary Federation's Michigan Chefs de Cuisine Association and a member of St. Patrick Parish in Brighton, Michigan.

Churches — who also offers culinary instruction through Homeschool Connections, a national Catholic homeschooling course provider — said the key to Lenten cooking is to "plan ahead."

"When you don't think about it until it's Friday, it's a knee-jerk reaction of, 'What do we have around the house?'" he said.

Instead, he advised, "take the time throughout the year to write a note" about family favorites — such as "mac and cheese, or pizza" — that can be enjoyed "without the meat component," and cook the meatless versions on a regular basis.

"You can nail it down, and have the kids excited about it," he said. "Get their input. And then they start to say, 'This is really good.'"



Certified executive chef Jim Churches, president of the American Culinary Federation's Michigan Chefs de Cuisine Association and a member of St. Patrick Parish in Brighton, Mich., is seen in this undated photo. (OSV News/Courtesy of Jim Churches)

Ditching meat — and dairy, and fish — all year long is something the nonprofit PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) is hoping Christians and others will embrace.

PETA's Christian outreach division, LAMBS (an acronym for "least among my brothers and sisters"), has issued a "40 Days of Lentils" challenge, inviting faithful to adopt a vegan lifestyle for both spiritual and ecological benefits.

The campaign includes vegan starter and creation care kits and cites numerous scriptural references to animals — with the organization noting that while Jesus is recorded in the Gospels as eating fish (and likely lamb, at least during Passover), he "would be horrified by today’s factory-farming practices."

Although he doesn't eschew meat, Churches admitted, "My body tells me sometimes, 'You've had too much meat,' and you just don't crave it; you want something light."

For millions worldwide, going meatless and eating light aren't choices, but necessities — something Catholic Relief Services, the official humanitarian agency of the U.S. Catholic bishops, highlights in its annual Lenten Rice Bowl initiative.

Now in its 50th year, the campaign invites participants to prayerfully eat simple, meatless meals and donate savings toward CRS's humanitarian and development projects, with 25% of the funds benefiting local hunger relief efforts and 75% assisting those in a number of low-income nations.

As part of Rice Bowl, CRS provides meatless recipes from the areas it serves, among them egg sauce with boiled yams from Nigeria, black bean soup from Guatemala, dahl (a lentil-based dish) from Bangladesh and crispy pancakes from Vietnam.

Churches told OSV News that some of his Lenten favorites are Polish pierogi — boiled or fried unleavened dough dumplings filled with vegetables (and, outside of Lent, meat) — as well as "really creative salads" with "strawberries, goat cheese and candied nuts."

He describes his cooking style as "very cheese-forward and butter-forward," heavily incorporating dairy in the style of classic French cuisine.

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But even on a tight budget with limited room for dairy, Lenten meals can be flavorful and interesting, Churches said.

"You can buy dried gnocchi (Italian dumplings made of flour or potato starch), which is very inexpensive but very filling," he explained. "You can make that with a white or red sauce … keep some of the pasta water to help thicken up your sauce a little bit, and throw your vegetables in there."

Of course, fish and seafood are still staples of Lent, said Churches, noting the fish fry he started at his parish five years ago.

"One of our top sellers is the bang-bang shrimp," he said, describing a popular recipe for fried shrimp in a spicy, sweet chili sauce with a mayonnaise base.

That recipe and Churches' other signature Lenten dishes are a far cry from those listed in a late-19th century "Cookery Book for Fasting and Abstinence Days" by an author simply known as "P.O.P."

The volume — released in London by Burns and Oates, and in the U.S. by the New York Catholic Publication Society — features instructions for eel soups and pie, as well as anchovy toast and imitation mutton broth, dishes the author hoped would offset the "monotony" of faithful's Lenten fare.

Yet the main ingredient for Lenten cooking isn't something found in a grocery store, said Churches.

"When you gather around the table, it's a nourishing experience; a family-driven thing," he said. "It's all about family connection."



A plate of alfredo Brussels sprouts prepared by certified executive chef Jim Churches, president of the American Culinary Federation's Michigan Chefs de Cuisine Association and a member of St. Patrick Parish in Brighton, Mich., are seen in this undated photo. Churches told OSV News that with planning, flexibility and creativity, Lenten meals can engage the entire family and every palate. (OSV News/Courtesy of Jim Churches)

This story appears in the **Our Daily Bread** feature series. View the full series.