

EATING N.C.

Eating N.C. — Keeping it vegan

BY EVAN SERY CHAPEL HILL



Photo @Tamara Lackey

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — This month is Veganuary, and a U.K. nonprofit encourages people to drop animal-based foods and substitute a vegan diet.

At Tamara Lackey's plant-based restaurant in Chapel Hill, vegan cuisine can start with a can of chickpeas.

“We reserve the juice — it's like gold to us,” Lackey said.

Lackey is the owner of Coco Espresso, Bistro & Bar in Chapel Hill. She says that the juice, called aquafaba, acts as the binder that helps put together a Southern staple.

“The chicken and waffles,” Lackey said.

But this isn't your mama's chicken and waffles. Everything about it is plant based.

“I stopped eating meat when I was a teenager,” Lackey said.

“Probably the number one thing is significantly more energy — I don't know why exactly, but a big difference there, and certainly being plant-based, I've not had any health issues I could have had otherwise,” Lackey said.

She says being vegan has changed her life for the better.

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For her, it's healthier and just as tasty.

“We dredge it through, we bring it in, juju it up again, and this is what gives it that extra crispiness,” Lackey explains.

After soaking the drumsticks in sauce and rub, they are fried in a pan for a few minutes before hitting the oven. The result is a delicious-looking plate of chicken and waffles.

Another popular Coco dish is the strawberry cheesecake toast made with locally-sourced ingredients.

“Things like strawberries in season, berries in season, tomatoes, not just to support our local environment, but it just tastes better when its not trucked for two days," Lackey said.

At night, the cafe turns into a bistro and bar. But Lackey's focus is not just on the kitchen at Coco — she plans to open The Beautiful Together Animal Sanctuary in Chapel Hill in September, for animals in need of refuge.

“The goal is to always have pets in foster homes because they're in such better condition by the time they get to a house," Lackey said.

She created a gallery of the pets her sanctuary has already saved inside her restaurant to bring awareness.

“It's just the idea of kindness, you know, and so we have this really intermixed with Coco, not only the gallery wall but a sanctuary latte, and a lot of fundraisers and adoption events here," Lackey said.

It's all part of Lackey's life slogan: "fueled by kindness."

“Kind to your body, kind to Earth, kind to animals, but it should be delicious," Lackey said.

Lackey says the animal sanctuary will be built on 83 acres, 15 minutes away from Coco.

Lackey is also working on a horse rescue sanctuary.

What You Need To Know

- Tamara Lackey, the owner of a vegan restaurant in Chapel Hill, says following a plant-based diet has changed her life
- Her restaurant, [Coco Espresso, Bistro & Bar](#), serves Southern staples like chicken and waffles made with only plant-based ingredients
- Lackey is opening an animal sanctuary in September as part of her mission to be kind to animals, our bodies and the Earth