

So Many Loving Dishes!

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On Valentine's Day, many of us exchange cards, roses, and chocolates, and while these are cherished traditions, the day's deeper meaning lies in taking time to express our love and appreciation for those who matter most. It's a reminder to pause and show affection through thoughtful actions, shared time, and meaningful rituals. One of the most powerful and enduring ways we can express love is through the food we prepare and share.

Whether you live alone, with a partner, children, friends, or extended family, Valentine's Day offers a perfect opportunity to create memories through simple, nourishing meals. You don't need elaborate plans or perfect table settings, just a bit of intention and joy. Throughout the day, small gestures around food are a great way to honor the people we love.

If you're wondering how to create a festive, plant-based Valentine's spread for your family, this is the perfect place to start. You'll also find delicious recipes at the end of this article. We hope these heart-filled dishes will help you share love on Valentine's Day and beyond.



The Origins and Global Observances of Valentine's Day



Valentine's Day is widely recognized as a celebration of romantic love, but its origins are layered and complex. The holiday traces back to the ancient Roman festival of Lupercalia, a fertility celebration held in mid-February. In the 5th century, the day was associated with Saint Valentine, a martyr believed to have performed secret marriages for lovers forbidden to wed. Over time, February 14th evolved into a day of expressing love and affection, first through handwritten notes, later with cards, flowers, sweets, and shared meals. Today, Valentine's Day is observed in many countries, but its meaning and expression vary widely across cultures.

In countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, the day focuses primarily on romantic love. Partners exchange greeting cards, chocolates, bouquets of red roses, and often share a special meal. Schoolchildren may participate in classroom Valentine's Day card exchanges or friendship-themed parties.

In Japan and South Korea, the holiday is split across two dates. On February 14th, women traditionally give chocolates to men. A month later, on White Day (March 14th), men reciprocate, often with white chocolate or other gifts.

In Latin America, the celebration is often more expansive. Known as "Día del Amor y la Amistad" (Day of Love and Friendship), the day focuses not only on romantic partners but also on friends, teachers, and family, encouraging broader expressions of appreciation and connection.

In Finland, Valentine's Day is officially called Ystävänpäivä, meaning "Friend's Day." Introduced in the 1980s, it has become a day to recognize friendship, kindness, and community bonds. Cards and small tokens are exchanged between friends, classmates, and coworkers, rather than only romantic partners. Schools and workplaces often organize inclusive activities such as card exchanges, secret-friend gifts, or kindness initiatives.

I was especially interested to learn that Estonia observes Sõbrapäev, which translates to "Friend's Day." This tradition holds special meaning for me, as my dear mother-in-law was Estonian, and my husband and children carry those roots. While couples may still exchange gifts, the broader cultural emphasis is on platonic affection and the strengthening of social bonds. Children, teens, and adults alike engage in heartfelt expressions of appreciation—through small gifts, shared gatherings, and simple acts of togetherness.

In Lithuania, the holiday is growing in popularity, especially in urban areas. Couples often exchange flowers and cards, while classroom Valentine boxes are becoming common. In Latvia, Valentine's Day is widely celebrated in cities with romantic dinners, events, and gift-giving, but platonic expressions are less culturally embedded.



Globally, there is a quiet but meaningful trend toward reclaiming Valentine's Day as a celebration not just of romantic love, but of:

- Friendship and chosen family
- Kindness and compassion
- Self-care and gratitude
- Shared meals and moments of joy

This shift harmonizes beautifully with the spirit of plant-based living: nourishing connection, honoring care, and celebrating life, at every age, in every season.



Plant-Based Valentine's Day Foods and Treats

Across cultures, food lies at the heart of Valentine's Day, offering a tangible expression of care, affection, and celebration. Chocolate, especially in heart-shaped boxes, remains iconic, while romantic dinners at home or in restaurants often feature pasta, rich sauces, and indulgent desserts like cheesecake, chocolate mousse, or red velvet cake. Strawberries and raspberries, with their deep red hues and heart-like shape, are perennial symbols of love and passion. Transforming these traditional dishes into plant-based versions is a joyful way to celebrate with both compassion and vitality—without sacrificing indulgence or beauty. These plant-based alternatives not only honor the spirit of the holiday but also reflect a deeper commitment to health, kindness, and sustainability.

Pasta Dishes—Swap dairy-based sauces for creamy, plant-forward alternatives:

- Cashews, silken tofu, or white beans blend into velvety bases.
- Red lentils can be added to tomato sauces for protein and depth.
- Try beet, red lentil, or whole grain pastas for color and texture.

Vibrant Salads—Elevate salads with nourishing dressings:

- Blend fresh herbs, nuts, seeds, tahini, avocados, citrus juice, fruit purées, or balsamic reductions.
- Add crunch with slivered almonds, sunflower seeds, or toasted walnuts.
- Complement with seasonal fruit like strawberries, pomegranate arils, or oranges.

Decadent Desserts—Reimagine Valentine's sweets with wholesome ingredients:

- Use cashews, coconut milk, or tofu in cheesecakes and puddings.
- Sweeten naturally with dates, maple syrup, or fruit reductions.
- For color and brightness, layer with berries, beet purée, or citrus zest.

Chocolate Creations—Choose dairy-free, high-quality dark chocolate:

- Make your own chocolate bark with dried cherries, toasted nuts, and seeds.
- Use silicone molds to create heart-shaped chocolates, topped with freeze-dried strawberries, rose petals, or crushed pistachios.



Nourishing Valentine's Day Meals with Heart

Valentine's Day needn't be elaborate to be meaningful. Whether you choose one thoughtfully prepared dish or curate a full three-course experience, the ideas that follow are meant simply to inspire. Inviting children into the process, through cooking, decorating, or simply garnishing, helps foster creativity, connection, and a lasting appreciation for the joy of food made with love.

Here are a few meal ideas to help make February 14th feel extra special, without overwhelming your schedule or your kitchen. Pick one or two that resonate, adapt them to suit your household, and above all, let love be the central ingredient.

Breakfast: A Festive and Heartfelt Start

Begin the day with warmth and whimsy. Heart-shaped pancakes or French toast, served with a homemade raspberry or strawberry sauce, are perennial favorites, especially with children. For a lighter yet equally festive option, serve up a creamy chia pudding parfait with layers of vibrant red fruits (strawberries, raspberries, pomegranate arils) and berry sauce, topped with granola, nuts, or seeds. Involve children in the plating process: allow them to arrange fruits into hearts or flowers for added joy and ownership.

Lunch: Love in Every Bite

Continue the theme of color and connection with a simple, nourishing lunch. A warm thermos of red lentil or tomato soup brings comfort and color to the midday meal. Sandwiches cut into heart shapes, made with whole-grain bread and filled with eggless tofu salad, or nut butter and sliced bananas, are both playful and wholesome.

To make lunch extra special for children, consider incorporating these elements into a themed lunchbox:

- Mini cherry tomato hearts (two halves skewered together with a toothpick)
- Red and pink fruits like strawberries, watermelon hearts, apple slices, or red grapes
- Veggie dippers such as red bell pepper strips and radishes with pink beet hummus or beet cashew dip
- A homemade heart-shaped cookie or chocolate

Tuck a sweet note inside a lunchbox or on a napkin. These additions make lunchtime interactive and fun, reinforcing food as a medium for expressing care.

For snacks, a make-your-own Valentine's platter with red and pink fruits and skewers threaded with strawberries, raspberries, banana, and pear, offer a bit of color, flavor, and nutrition. Use compostable sticks and let kids help with assembly.



Dinner: The Heart of the Celebration

Let dinner bring everyone to the table for a heartfelt close to the day. Decorate using a white tablecloth with red napkins and some red candles. Place a small piece of dark chocolate or a chocolate heart at each place setting.

A classic main dish choice is a hearty pasta with homemade red lentil tomato sauce. Alternatively, try red pasta (beet, red lentil, or tomato-based) paired with a creamy white wine cashew sauce. Another option is stuffed red bell peppers, filled with brown rice, red beans, diced tomatoes, and herbs. Add a heart-shaped pepper cutout on top of each pepper before baking.

Complement the main dish with a fresh salad:

- Spinach with sliced strawberries and almond slivers
- Crisp romaine with red cherry tomatoes and candied pecans

For dessert, opt for a vegan cheesecake with raspberry sauce for richness, or a red fruit salad (strawberries, raspberries, grapes, apples, pomegranate arils) paired with pear cashew cream for a lighter, refreshing finale.

Toast the evening with a mocktail of soda water infused with cranberry juice and a twist of lime.



Plant-based Love-filled Recipes

Heart-Shaped Cashew French Toast with Raspberry Sauce

Makes 6 slices

This healthy version of French toast is easy, delicious, and rich in calcium, iron, magnesium, zinc, and protein. Save the bread that remains when you cut the heart shapes. Use it to make croutons or breadcrumbs. Serve the French toast with raspberry sauce.

Ingredients:

½ cup fortified soymilk or other plant-based milk
¼ cup cashew nuts
¼ teaspoon vanilla
½ tablespoon maple syrup
6 slices whole grain bread, cut into heart shapes using a big cookie cutter or a sharp knife.



Instructions:

1. Place soymilk, cashews, vanilla, and maple syrup in a blender and blend on high speed until smooth and creamy.
2. Pour cashew mixture into a shallow dish.
3. Lightly spray a non-stick skillet and warm it over medium heat.
4. Dip each slice of bread into the cashew mixture, coating both sides.
5. Place 2 or 3 slices on the skillet, depending on the skillet size. Avoid overlapping slices and leave a small gap between slices.
6. Cook on medium heat until golden brown, then flip each slice and cook on the other side.

Stewed Raspberries or Strawberries

Makes about 2 cups

This simple, no-sugar-added fruit compote lets the natural sweetness of berries and stone fruits shine. It's perfect on French toast, pancakes, chia pudding, breakfast bowls, plant-based yogurt or ice cream.

Ingredients:

2 cups fresh or frozen raspberries or straw
2 tablespoons water
2 teaspoons cornstarch



2 tablespoons cold water (for slurry)
Pinch of cinnamon (optional)
Squeeze of lemon juice (optional)

Instructions:

1. Combine fresh or frozen berries and 2 tablespoons of water in a small saucepan over medium heat.
2. Stir occasionally until the fruit begins to release its juices and soften (about 5-10 minutes).
3. Make the slurry. Place the cornstarch and 2 tablespoons of cold water in a small bowl and whisk together until smooth.
4. Stir the slurry into the fruit mixture. Continue to cook, stirring constantly, until the liquid thickens and becomes glossy, about 1–2 minutes.
5. Add a pinch of cinnamon or lemon juice for extra flavor, if desired.
6. Cool slightly before serving warm or refrigerate and serve chilled.



Whole Food Creamy Chia Pudding Parfait

Makes 4½ cups (6 servings)

This quick, make-ahead dish works equally well for breakfast or as a light dessert. Rich in omega-3s, calcium, and fiber, it's also endlessly customizable. For Valentine's Day, choose red berries and berry sauces.

Ingredients:

4 cups fortified, unsweetened soy, oat, or other plant-based milk

6 tablespoons hempseeds

¼ cup dried fruit (e.g., pears, prunes, dates), steamed if hard

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

½ cup chia seeds

Instructions:

1. Place the milk, hempseeds, dried fruit, and vanilla in a blender and process on high speed until very smooth.
2. Add chia seeds and pulse until evenly distributed.
3. Pour into mason jars. Refrigerate. After 30 minutes, stir to prevent clumping and ensure a creamy texture.
4. Cover and refrigerate overnight (or at least 4 hours), until thickened.
5. Before making the parfaits, stir again. If the pudding is too thick, add enough plant-based milk to achieve the desired consistency.
6. Assemble the parfaits. Using a parfait glass or another tall clear glass, layer the chia pudding with fresh raspberries or strawberries and berry sauce. Make 4-6 layers. Top with fresh berries, a few nuts or seeds, and a sprinkle of cinnamon, if desired.



Red Lentil 1

Makes about 7

Red lentils are the fastest cooking of all legumes. They dissolve beautifully into sauces, adding body, protein, iron, and fiber. Serve with your favorite pasta or spaghetti squash. For more protein, use chickpea, edamame, or lentil pasta.

Ingredients:

½ cup water or vegetable broth
1 onion, chopped
2 cups sliced mushrooms
1 green pepper
3 cloves garlic, minced
1 cup dry red lentils
2 cups water or vegetable stock
24 ounces canned or jarred tomato sauce
½ cup red wine (optional)
1 tablespoon miso
1 tablespoon of Italian herbs or ¼ cup of a mix of fresh basil, oregano, and rosemary
Fresh ground pepper to taste



Instructions:

1. In a large pot with a lid over medium heat, place onions, mushrooms, and garlic. Add ½ cup of water or broth, cover and cook until the vegetables soften, adding water as needed.
2. Add lentils and 2 cups of water. Bring to a boil, then lower the heat. Cover and simmer for 20 minutes or until lentils are soft.
3. Add peppers, tomato sauce, red wine, miso, and herbs. Bring to a boil, then simmer for another 30 minutes or more.
4. Add fresh ground pepper. Serve hot over your favorite pasta.



Stuffed Peppers with Rice and Red Beans

Makes 6 servings

A hearty, plant-based main dish featuring tender red bell peppers filled with a savory blend of brown rice, red beans, tomatoes, and warming spices. Add a pinch of cayenne, chopped hot peppers, or a dash of hot sauce if you like it hot. This dish is perfect for everyday nourishment or a festive occasion like Valentine's Day. Add flair with heart-shaped pepper cut-outs.

Ingredients (Serves 6)

- 6 large red bell peppers, tops removed and seeds cleaned
- 2 cups cooked brown rice
- 1½ cups cooked red beans (or one 15 oz can, drained and rinsed)
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 tablespoons vegetable broth or water (for sautéing)
- 1 (15 oz) can diced tomatoes, undrained (fire-roasted, if available)
- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon smoked paprika
- ¼ teaspoon salt, or to taste
- Fresh ground black pepper, to taste
- ¼ cup water, for baking dish
- Optional garnish: fresh cilantro, avocado slices, or plant-based yogurt

Instructions:

1. Preheat your oven to 375°F (190°C).
2. Wash the bell peppers and slice off the tops (about ½ inch from the stem). Set tops aside to cut into heart shapes for garnish. Remove seeds and membranes from the insides. To help the peppers sit flat, slice a thin sliver off the bottom, being careful not to cut through the base.
3. In a large skillet over medium heat, add 3 tablespoons vegetable broth or water. Add chopped onion and sauté for 5–7 minutes, until softened. Add minced garlic and cook for another 1 minute until fragrant.
4. Add the diced tomatoes (do not drain), chili powder, cumin, smoked paprika, salt, and black pepper. Stir to combine. Cook for 2–3 minutes, allowing spices to bloom and flavors to deepen.
5. Add the cooked brown rice and red beans to the skillet. Mix well to coat everything in the tomato mixture. Simmer gently for 5–7 minutes, allowing flavors to meld. Adjust seasoning to taste.
6. Spoon the filling into each pepper, packing lightly but not too tightly.

7. Select a baking dish large enough to hold all peppers upright. Pour 1/2 cup of water or broth into the bottom of the baking dish. Add peppers. Cover tightly with foil and bake for 30 minutes.
8. Remove foil, add little pepper hearts, and bake uncovered for 15–20 minutes more, until the peppers are tender and the filling is hot and bubbly. For a lightly browned top, broil for the final 1–2 minutes, watching closely.
9. Remove from oven and let cool slightly. Serve with optional toppings such as sliced avocado, plant-based yogurt, or lime wedges and chopped cilantro, and a green salad.



No-Bake Raspberry Cheesecake

Makes 12 small slices



A stunning two-tone raspberry cheesecake with a creamy, tangy base and vibrant berry top—crowned with fresh raspberry sauce.

Crust Ingredients:

1½ cups raw nuts (pecans, walnuts, almonds, or a mix)

1 cup Medjool dates (pitted)

½ cup unsweetened shredded coconut

¼ tsp sea salt (optional)

Instructions:

1. Process all ingredients in a food processor until the mixture holds together when pressed.
2. Press firmly into the base of a 9-inch springform pan lined with parchment. Refrigerate while preparing the filling.

Filling Ingredients:

3 cups raw cashews, soaked 3–4 hours and drained

1 cup plain unsweetened nondairy yogurt

Juice of 2 lemons (about ¼ cup)

⅓ cup maple syrup (or more to taste)

2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

2 teaspoons agar powder

½ cup water

1½ cups fresh or thawed frozen raspberries



Instructions:

1. In a small saucepan, combine agar powder and water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and stir constantly for 4–5 minutes until dissolved. Remove from heat.
2. In a high-speed blender, blend cashews, yogurt, lemon juice, maple syrup, and vanilla until very smooth.
3. Pour about half of the cashew filling into a bowl. Add a little less than half of the agar mixture and blend briefly. Pour over the crust.
4. Return the rest of the filling to the blender. Add raspberries and the rest of the agar mixture. Blend mixture until smooth. Pour this pink layer over the white layer.
5. Refrigerate 4–6 hours or until fully set.
6. Top each slice with raspberry sauce and garnish with fresh berries, mint, or lemon zest. For clean cuts, dip your knife in hot water between slices.



Cranberry Sparkle Mocktail

Makes 2 servings

A light and festive alcohol-free drink, perfect for sharing on Valentine's Day or any occasion that calls for a toast. Tart cranberry and zesty lime meet crisp bubbles in this simple, elegant mocktail.

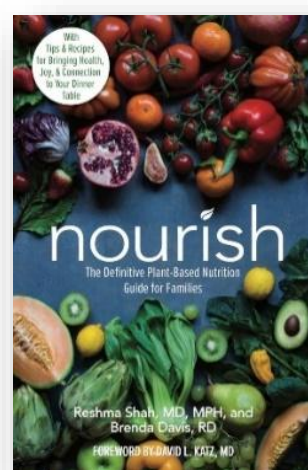
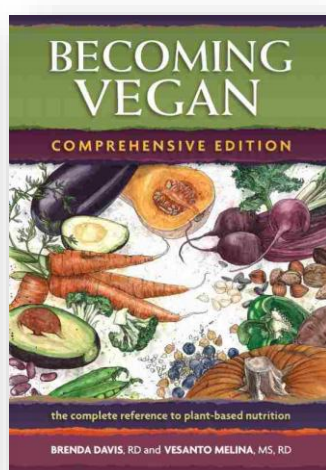
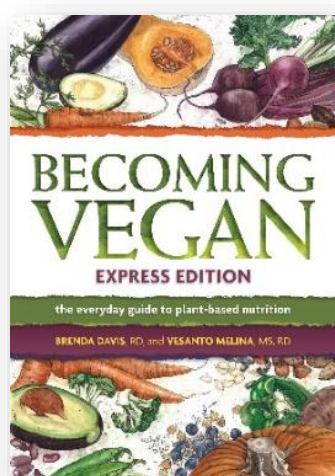
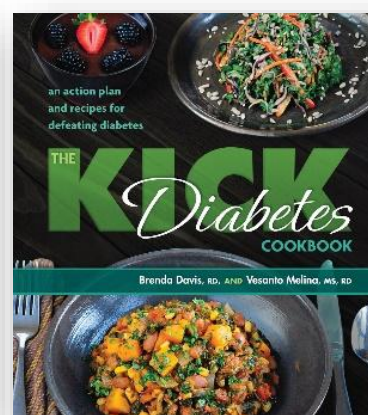
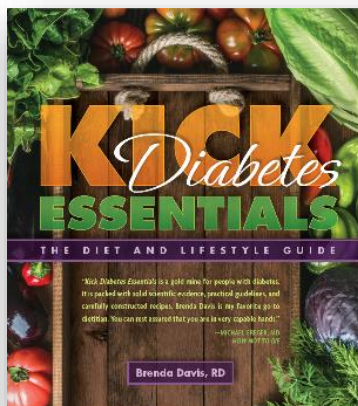
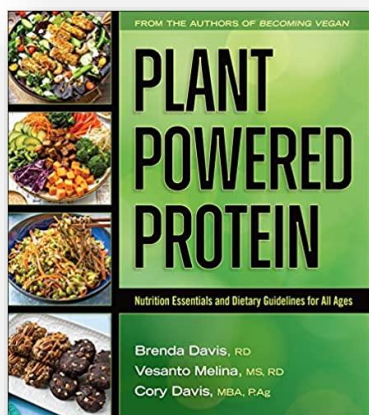
Ingredients:

- 2 cups soda water (chilled)
- ½ cup unsweetened cranberry juice
- Juice of ½ lime (or two generous squeezes)
- Fresh mint sprigs or whole cranberries, for garnish
- Ice cubes

Instructions:

1. In two festive glasses, divide the cranberry juice and lime juice evenly.
2. Top each glass with 1 cup of soda water and stir gently.
3. Garnish with a sprig of mint, a few whole cranberries, a slice of lime, or all three.
4. Serve immediately and enjoy the sparkle.





This article was originally written for So Many Cooks in the Kitchen. Brenda Davis, RD is a plant-based pioneer and author/co-author of 13 books on plant-based diets. She is the author/co-author of Plant-Powered Protein, Nourish, Becoming Vegan: Comprehensive and Express Editions, Kick Diabetes Essentials, and The Kick Diabetes Cookbook.
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