



What Is Ital Food? A Chat with Chef Troy Levy on the Plant-Based Rasta Tradition

By Courtney Davison
2024-07-29 09:10:33



While plant-based diets have surged into the mainstream over the past decade, a number of cultures around the world have been observing meat-free lifestyles for much longer. Ital, a plant-based way of eating that originated with the Rastafari faith in the 1930s, is one such tradition. More than just a [vegan diet](#), ital (rhymes with “vital”) is about eating nourishing, health-promoting food, eschewing added sugar, oil, and salt. “When you eat ital, you’re eating naturally,” says New York City–based ital chef [Troy Levy](#). “It’s about making food your medicine, and your medicine your food. As Rastas, we try to live as one with earth.”

Levy was born in Jamaica, but it wasn’t until he moved to the U.S. and started contending with the negative health effects of a standard American diet that he fully dove into the ital lifestyle. Today Levy hosts pop-ups and private events sharing vibrant plant-based dishes inspired by his childhood in the Jamaican countryside. We chatted with Levy about the meaning of ital, its relationship to veganism, and his journey to becoming a global plant-based chef.

Is ital cuisine vegan?

Troy Levy: I try to separate ital and vegan because when you’re talking about vegan food, there may be a lot of artificial flavoring and coloring to make things reminiscent of meat—like a vegan chicken or a vegan beef. When it comes to ital, we usually try to use just plants. All the sweetness that you need comes from fruits and vegetables; you don’t have to overdo it. It’s a more

natural way of doing things.

Did you grow up eating this way?

TL: I had a 50/50 lifestyle growing up. My grandmother and mother cooked meat. But my Rasta uncles, who were always visiting, would cook ital food, and I started loving that more. I felt more rejuvenated. I felt like I wanted to play more. Then, when I came to America when I was 18, it was a culture shock for me with all the fast food. I started eating so much of it. I gained so much weight that when I went back to Jamaica, my uncle asked me, “What are you doing to yourself in America?” I had to wean myself off of the fast food.

How did you decide to start doing ital pop-ups?

TL: I worked in all sorts of restaurants [in New York City], and I’d always suggest doing a vegan option. Eventually, I realized that I didn’t want to be around meat anymore, so in 2017, I decided to stop working for anybody and start doing my own pop-ups. With Taste of Ital, I travel all over the world and introduce people to ital cooking. So far I’ve been to Zanzibar, Tanzania, and South Africa, and now I’m looking at some dates in Dubai.

What has been the response?

TL: People really love it. It’s given me the opportunity to echo what the Rastas have been always saying about taking care of your vessel and all that good stuff. People have been really receptive to it.

Ital Recipes

Curious about ital cuisine? Get a taste with these delicious and nutritious ital recipes from Chef Troy Levy.

(continued)

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July 29 2024



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