

## COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

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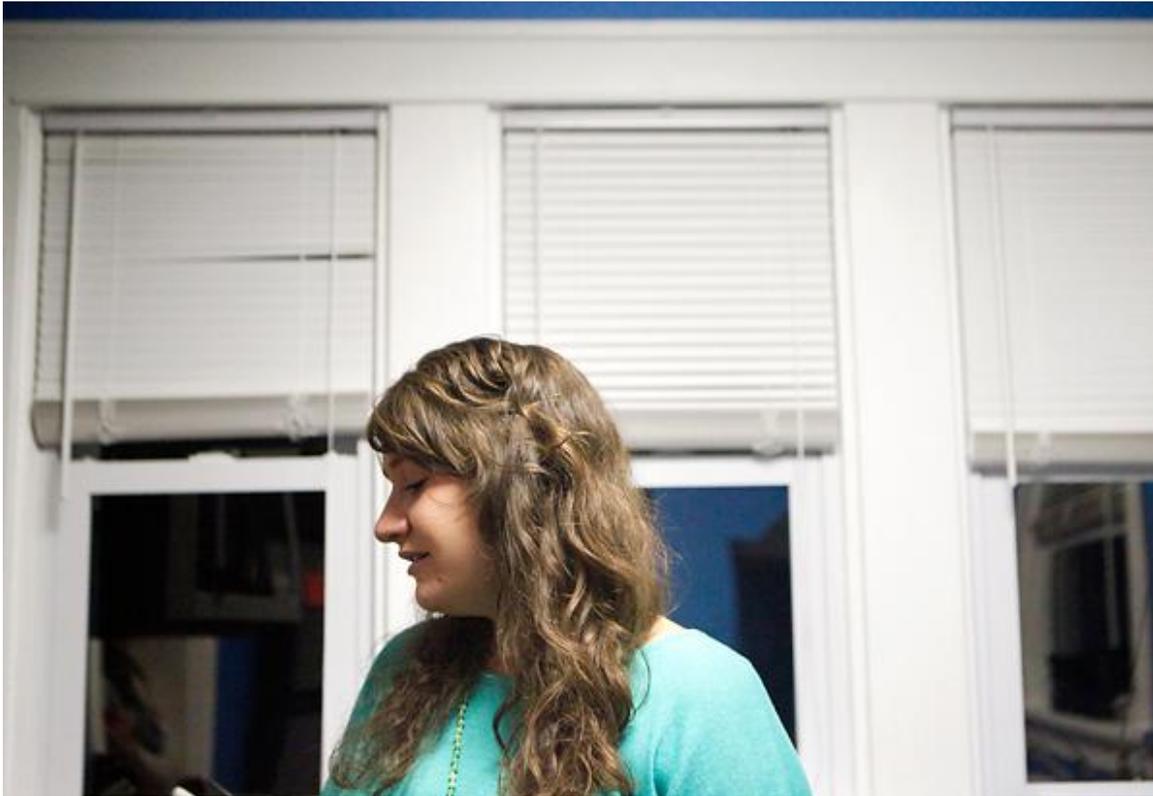
# Columbia vegetarian has a love for cooking healthy

By [Chelsea Bengier](#)

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In this file photo from Nov. 5 taken at Shelly La Fata's home, turnip soup is prepared by La Fata, who is the chef and owner of Sorella Natural Foods. It is made of turnips and topped with cucumber sauce with slivers of dehydrated mushroom and carrots. | [Jaime Henry-White](#)



Shelly La Fata of Sorella Natural Foods prepares a plant-based dinner. La Fata teaches in-home culinary classes and has a catering service. She plans to eventually sell her products in Columbia stores. | [Jaime Henry-White](#)



Seed crackers are prepared by Shelly La Fata. They contain pumpkin, flax, chia, sesame and sunflowers seeds. La Fata doesn't eat wheat or flour. Instead, she makes her own version of bread. | [Jaime Henry-White](#)



Banana soft serve is prepared by La Fata of Sorella Natural Foods. It consists of frozen bananas with raisins and homemade granola, and it was later topped with cinnamon syrup. | [Jaime Henry-White](#)

Shelly La Fata, owner of Sorella Natural Foods, prepares healthy snacks and meals in her home. La Fata teaches in-home culinary classes and has a catering service. | [Jaime Henry-White](#)

COLUMBIA — The oven dings in Shelly La Fata's kitchen, and she pulls out a tray of crackers, made from two handfuls of pumpkin, sesame, sunflower, flax and chia seeds.

She turns to the opposite counter and finishes garnishing her homemade turnip root soup with thin slices of shiitake bacon, carrot shoestrings and scallions.

La Fata's pantry not only provides her homemade meals but is the basis for her food blog, [shellypalooza](#). On the site she shares her recipes and tasty tidbits with other vegetarian foodies like herself.

La Fata, 26, experiments with plant-based soups, salads, desserts, sandwiches, smoothies and home remedies, among other staples. In 2012, her original recipes earned La Fata an award as top health blogger by Wellsphere, a healthy cooking community.

But blogging isn't the only thing brewing on her back burner. La Fata is the chef and owner of Sorella Natural Foods, a culinary school and catering service for office parties, birthdays, bar mitzvahs and family dinner parties.

Most of her clients are looking for a healthier lifestyle. La Fata consults their diet by advising specific food choices, organizing their pantries and fridges and coming up with quick healthy meals to make at home.

She then meets them in their kitchens and teaches them how to prepare hearty options such as green smoothies, with mango, peach, blueberry, apple juice and spinach, and salads that mix Kalamata olives, scallions, tomatoes, caramelized onions, roasted red peppers and homemade Italian dressing.

She is currently on a mission to devise a line of ready-to-eat veggie burgers, using different spices and ingredients. Some of her burger flavors include chipotle maple sweet potato, Asian stir fry, truffle cauliflower, broccoli almond and oat walnut. So far, she has already invented over 24 recipe ideas for veggie burgers.

"I had been trying to figure out what more I could do than just catering and personal chef work," La Fata said. "I would love to create a product to sell to people in Columbia and eventually expand out to Kansas City and St. Louis."

### **Diets differ, depending on preferences**

The Standard American Diet consists of [35 percent fat, 17 percent protein and 48 percent carbohydrates](#), according to The Food Channel. As a result, one third of adults are classified as obese, and health concerns such as heart disease, high cholesterol and autoimmune disease are steadily rising.

At the other end of the spectrum, [7.3 million Americans — 3.2 percent of adults — are vegetarians](#), according to data collected by Harris Interactive Service Bureau.

Yet, while plant-based and vegan diets are tied to vegetarianism, they are not the same.

A vegan diet is defined by the ethical and social issues found in animal rights and environmental causes.

A [plant-based diet studies the science behind nutrition](#) and finds natural ways to sustain health and energy, according to an article by Daniela Hermelin, M.D. In a plant-based diet like La Fata's, veggies, beans, whole grains, raw nuts and fruits are staples.

La Fata started her culinary lessons for those seeking healthier eating habits. One of the most important ways to improve a diet is to cook meals at home, she said.

"People don't think about it much because of all the messages about food and the convenience of eating fast food, but I didn't realize how bad I felt until I started eating whole foods all the time," La Fata said. "It's just an incredible difference."

She purchases most of her ingredients through local farmers and organic suppliers. That way, she can both support the local community and find products that are natural.

La Fata teaches her students how to make dishes from scratch using these components. Her classes specialize in everything from beans, sea vegetables, condiments, salads, vegan barbecue, soups and desserts.

"She's really good with people — all smiles and whatnot — but again, it comes back to her food expertise and her awe-inspiring knowledge of all the foods," culinary classmate Kristy Butts said.

Whether it's catering or teaching classes, La Fata is versatile. When she catered a bar mitzvah celebration for the Scher-Zagier family, she supplied a variety of dietary needs — kosher, vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free.

"I think the thing that sets her apart from most chefs is that she comes from a natural foods angle, so she cares about the food in terms of it being healthy as well as flavorful," Ellen Scher-Zagier said.

Food then becomes not simply a gastronomic adventure, but a lesson in nutrition, she said.

"It's almost like having a healer and a food person in one," Scher-Zagier said. "She understands the way food functions not just in terms of pleasure when you sit down to eat but how your body is going to fare with the food in the long run."

### **Italian inspiration**

Much of La Fata's love for cooking came from the Italian side of her family. When her mother married, she didn't know anything about Italian food, La Fata said. So, her Italian grandmother shared cooking skills with her mother, who then taught La Fata.

"My grandmother was a big culinary influence," La Fata said. "She never really worked, and her parents were from Italy, so she just cooked all these super traditional meals for people all the time."

Her Italian roots also inspired the business name *sorella*, Italian for "sister."

"That was a big influence on my love for food and preparing food for my loved ones," she said.

La Fata became a vegetarian in 2002 and has remained one for 10 years. However, it took her five years to stop eating boxed foods and to pick up a healthy, plant-based diet, she said.

"It's been a constant evolution," La Fata said.

### **Culinary school cooks up creativity**

When La Fata enrolled in the Natural Epicurean Academy of Culinary Arts in Austin, Texas, in 2010,

she wasn't expecting a place of meditation, support and creativity.

The school trains chefs to work with macrobiotic, vegetarian, vegan, ayurvedic and raw and living diets. Students practice yoga and aren't allowed in the kitchen if they are upset or angry, La Fata said.

"I tried to balance my energy and my mood when cooking so that it might reflect onto the meal," she said. "I tried to stay zen and learn to be patient."

Each chef had a nickname; La Fata was known as "the sauce" because of her signature sauces and "the reducer" for her ability to simmer sauces until the tastes blend harmoniously, Butts said.

"She was kind of the medium between all of us and our different interests and styles," Butts said. "She was by far the best overall chef — she could do a lot of everything."

La Fata and fellow students used cookbooks such as "The Flavor Bible" and "Raw" for inspiration. She created her food blog as an outlet for her recipes during the summer of 2010.

"The blogging forces me to be creative," she said. "Every once in a while, I will go to the store and see an ingredient I haven't seen in a while, bring it home and do something different with it."

When she was about to graduate from culinary school in June 2011, she needed a vision of what she wanted to do with her new knowledge. She said the answer came to her easily.

"I knew I wanted to go back to Missouri and introduce plant-based foods there and make everybody love it," La Fata said. "I was just really ready to come back here and start something."

*Supervising editor is [Jeanne Abbott](#).*