



# Our Hen House

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## Interview with Laura Theodore

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **LAURA THEODORE** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 225.*

JASMIN: Laura Theodore is a popular television personality and radio host, vegan chef, compassionate cookbook author, singer, and actor. Laura is author of *Jazzy Vegetarian Classics: Vegan Twists on American Family Favorites* and *Jazzy Vegetarian: Lively Vegan Cuisine Made Easy and Delicious*. Laura is the on-camera host, writer, and co-producer of the award-winning *Jazzy Vegetarian* cooking show on PBS, presently available in over 85% of American homes. In addition, Laura hosts the weekly podcast radio show, *Jazzy Vegetarian Radio*, a talk and music format focusing on plant-based recipes, eco-friendly tips, celebrity interviews, and upbeat music served with a bit of fun on the side. A love for good food, compassion for animals, and enthusiasm for great music has created a joyous life path for Laura Theodore. This week, a wonderful book for which Laura is a contributor is coming out, and it's entitled *The China Study All-Star Collection: Whole Food, Plant-Based Recipes from Your Favorite Vegan Chefs*. Read more about Laura Theodore and her many exciting projects at [jazzyvegetarian.com](#).

Welcome to Our Hen House, Laura.

LAURA: Hi, how are you? Thank you for having me on the show today! I'm happy to be here.

JASMIN: We're so excited to have you. I know that we did a Q&A with you on our online magazine at [ourhenhouse.org](#), and it's just such a treat for us to be able to actually hear your voice. And you have so many amazing things going on. I'm just so excited about sharing that with our listeners and just getting a little bit of a taste of you today, Laura.

LAURA: Well, I'm so excited to be here. I can't tell you. I'm just -- I'm thrilled about it, so I can't wait to get going.

MARIANN: As a very start-off question, can you just give us your basic principles for cooking healthy vegan food that still tastes good?

LAURA: Yeah, the basic principles is really what I started out on. I started out taking recipes that my grandmother would send me in the mail, and she would send me recipes every week when I first moved out of the house many, many moons ago. And she would send me recipes, and I kept these recipes, and when I started going vegetarian and eventually turned vegan, I started veganizing all these recipes. So I say a great way to start, an easy way to

be vegan, is to take recipes that you've had in your family or you've had in your recipe box, or you know that your family loves to eat, and make them vegan.

Now if you're not a chef, the way you can do that is you just go on the internet, and you want to say, okay, chili. You look at all the vegan chili recipes, and you kind of adapt that to your recipe. And I think that that's really the great way to get started, and a way that everybody's gonna love the food that you're making 'cause it's kinda familiar to what you're already eating, you know?

JASMIN: Oh, totally.

MARIANN: And you've actually just recently collected a lot of those very familiar recipes in your new book, *Jazzy Vegetarian Classics*, right?

LAURA: Yes. That's the basis of that book. It is something that I have been working on obviously a long, long time. And I've taken recipes from my mother-in-law, from my mother, from my grandmother, from friends, from family, everything from burgers to stuffed cabbage to shish kebabs to an enchilada lasagna and all these things, and just veganized them. And it's really fantastic because they're foods that we're all familiar with, and I think that's what we all really want to taste at the end game.

JASMIN: Mm, absolutely. I'm looking through your book right now, the *Jazzy Vegetarian Classics*. And it is such a great-looking book. It's something that I've had in our kitchen since it arrived in the mail. And I'm getting very hungry, first of all, looking through it. But second of all, it's inspiring me because I think that the basis of so many good recipes is the ability to kind of get creative based on reading them and not always follow things exactly the same. You might not have all of the ingredients in your cabinet. Is that something that rings true for you, Laura?

LAURA: I agree 100%. I think that the cookbooks that I put down and I don't keep in my pantry are ones that call for specific ingredients where I can't stray from the recipe. The ones I keep in my pantry right by my stove are the ones that I say, "hey you know what? I can look at this and substitute this and substitute that and come up with something great." And I think I agree with you 100%.

JASMIN: Tell us about the *Jazzy Vegetarian* television show. And mind you, we're taking notes because, as you know, and as we were chatting about before we started recording, we just started a show ourselves. And you are such a pro at this. I want to know more about it and where people can find it and how you are using it to actually communicate with a mainstream audience about plant-based eating.

LAURA: Yay! It's so exciting, thank you so much. Well, I'm so excited 'cause right now, we are in nearly 90% of American homes, which is so, so exciting. We're on the Create network, which is basically the HGTV/Food Network of public television, so all the public television stars. It's a 24-hour network, and it's broadcast in over 75% of the country. And we're on every Tuesday and every Thursday at 8 o'clock and 2:30 PM, that's 8 AM and 2:30 Eastern Standard Time. And of course, it changes with the time zone. And so it's very exciting to be there, as well as many public television stations and a lot of PBS stations across the country.

And I'm so glad you asked about it because people say, "well gosh, gee, I want a TV show! It's so easy!" Well, I started conceiving this show in 1999! And my background is an actor and a singer. I have six albums coming out and a seventh one coming out in the fall. And so it is something where I always wanted to combine my great love of the arts with my great love of food, and of course mainly my compassion for animals. And I had dedicated myself a long time ago. I said, if I was one of those people that was ever gonna get up on the podium and win an award, you know how when Marlon Brando won that Academy Award and he had the Native American go up -- you know who I'm talking about. They talked about the --

JASMIN: Yeah, yeah, of course.

MARIANN: Absolutely.

LAURA: I said, well, when I win my Academy Award, I'm gonna go up there and I'm gonna talk about saving the animals. And I said to myself, I made a commitment to myself. I said, if I ever get a place in the public eye to help animals, that's what I would dedicate my life to. And of course, life takes its twists and turns. And this is how it's actually come to me, not through that Academy Award, although that could happen.

MARIANN: Why not?

LAURA: But it's come through this television show, which was to make a long story a little bit short, about 15 years in the making.

MARIANN: Yeah, and it's just such an important way to bring this food to the mainstream. And as I can say, having, as Jasmin says, just started doing a television show, it is a lot of work! I mean, it really is so much more work than it looks like. So I give you all the credit in the world to be producing this really, really top notch show that's reaching so many people. You mentioned that you were a musician, and I understand that you're called the Jazzy Vegetarian.

LAURA: Yes.

MARIANN: How do you use music to enhance your food and your cooking?

LAURA: Well, I think that music and food really, they just go together, like peanut butter and jelly. Think about this. When you walk into a restaurant, what's playing? Music. Whether you're at Sardi's in New York or you're at a greasy spoon in Oklahoma, there are two things and only two things that those restaurants have in common. That's food and music. There's gonna be some kind of music playing in the background. I mean, really think about how music can help the mood of our meal. It really is something that's really very important, so that's how I really started pairing them all together.

JASMIN: Well, I think it's wonderful that you're using this unique talent that you have and this skill to speak up for animals and to win people's hearts over with the absolute accessibility and deliciousness of veganism. And of course you also have a weekly podcast. And listen, I have a question for you again, Laura. It's gotta be harder to talk about food when people can't see it. I feel as though I am really not very good at doing, for example, food reviews or talking about recipes, on the podcast, which is why we have wonderful

reviewers join us and do it for me. I always just kind of want to say, well, just taste it! How do you manage that and get this point across?

LAURA: Well, I like to -- what I do is I make notes for myself every week. I'm a person, I like to write a script when I do the television show. I write a basic script and then I improv in between. And I do the same thing when I do the radio show. I write myself a script with a few words like "luscious," "mouth-watering," "really delicious," and I kind of take those words and I put them into the podcast and when I'm describing a recipe, my mouth is starting to water. So that's really kind of how I make it happen.

MARIANN: Yeah, it's tough, but you really do make it happen. And you had mentioned that you haven't yet gotten an Academy Award, but you have -- we've heard something about the 2014 Taste Award. Can you tell us about that?

LAURA: Ah, yes! That was just last month. It was really, really exciting. The Taste Awards, they're the new awards that really are the only thing in town for people in the Lifestyle category like myself. And I won for Most Outstanding Passion, I really liked that.

JASMIN: Nice.

LAURA: Yeah!

JASMIN: That is fantastic. An Academy Award is totally next, I have no doubt.

LAURA: I hope so. Thank you.

JASMIN: Well, that's exciting. It's just so wonderful to hear all of this. And a lot of people think that cooking healthy is too time-consuming. Mariann and I are very into a healthy, whole foods-based vegan diet, and I know that it *can* actually be time-consuming. I think over the years of eating this way and cooking this way, I've developed a few of my own kind of shortcuts. But overall, it's not nothing sometimes to prepare a nice, healthy, vegan meal. Shopping for fresh vegetables and prepping them can take a lot of time, and cooking things from scratch can take a lot of time. Please share with us and our listeners, but especially us because I feel like you're just giving me advice here -- I keep forgetting that this is for our listeners too -- tell us how you do this! And give us tips on preparing quick but delicious vegan meals.

LAURA: Wow, thank you for asking that because I think a lot of people think of me and they think, "oh, this woman is in the kitchen cooking all day." Eh! As we said, I'm producing a television show, I'm writing cookbooks, I'm making music, I'm doing a podcast. We're working a 70, those 90-hour weeks full of passion, full of life. But at the end of the day, it's like, oh my gosh, what am I gonna cook? And I think that two-ingredient meals are really great. Now Dr. Pam Popper came up with a great recipe. You take kale, you steam it down, you mix it with some marinara sauce, you can pour it over some whole grain pasta. There's a great meal. Taking a few key ingredients, because several times a week that's what I do. I don't cook up lavish recipes 'cause, like everybody else in America, I just don't have the time.

So one of my biggest tips -- I've talked about this on the TV show, on the radio show -- is keeping products that you like in your pantry. Find a great vegan marinara sauce that you like, maybe a couple of different flavors. That way you can mix it up with some white beans,

some black beans, a little bit of green. Stick some spinach in there, just a couple things. Throw it in the pot. Make some pasta, make some quinoa, make some rice. What I like to do is make up quinoa, make up brown rice. You keep it in the refrigerator for a couple of days. That way you can make easy casseroles out of it, but just keeping those few ingredients.

Another thing I really like to do is I like to keep Italian seasoning in my pantry. I know that sounds kinda goofy, but the thing is, when you're making a recipe and you think about, if you have to add all seven of those spices or herbs that are in Italian seasoning, if you have an Italian seasoning that you like, you can take just tomato sauce. You can take just some beans, mix them up with a seasoning that you really like, drop them in a casserole, add a little bit of tomato sauce, add a little bit of olive oil. I think just taking basic ingredients, cooking them up, that's what makes cooking easy. Does that make sense?

JASMIN: Totally makes sense! And something that you're saying that's really resonating with me is to keep it really easy while you're making it because I have been given the advice to make things in large quantities in advance, like cook every Sunday for the next three or four days or five days. And I always say I'm going to do that and I don't think I have ever once done that ever. So I like the idea in theory of cooking in advance, but I think that what you're saying is much more doable for someone like me who's just too busy planning my own media stuff to take the time to plan my own sustenance stuff, you know what I mean?

LAURA: 100% I agree with you. And I'm so glad you brought that out because I have to make a confession. I never do that. I never -- on Sunday, it's like, oh my gosh, I'm so tired. I want to cook a nice dinner on Sunday night, but I don't cook that extra food. So that's why, during the week, let's say I'm gonna make some rice. I'm gonna make it for dinner anyway. I'll just make the three times the amount of rice then. Or if I'm gonna make a pasta casserole -- once again, the marinara sauce is really a big thing 'cause you can do so many things with it. You can just take some penne, mix it up with some black beans, a great marinara sauce, make it as a casserole, drop it in the oven, and then you have it cold the next day for lunch, it's really good. Or you can have it for another night of the week. But what I do is, when I make something, and I happen to be cooking it, I just make more of it so we have leftovers for another meal, and that really saves time on cooking too. But I don't ever cook for the whole week on Sunday.

JASMIN: Right!

MARIANN: Yeah. You have to find out what works for yourself, and all of your ideas really sound like they would work for us. But on a much more important note, how do you incorporate sweets into a healthy diet?

LAURA: Well.

JASMIN: Yeah, let's get to the important stuff please.

LAURA: Yeah, let's get to the important stuff. I do try to minimize the amount of sweets. I don't eat sweets every day. And I think a lot of people think that I do because the dessert sections in my books and on the TV show are so big. But I think that when you're gonna

have a sweet, you're really going to want to enjoy it because it does have those calories in it.

But one of my most popular recipes is really one of the easiest, and it's pretty healthful too. And you just take some tofu, you put it into a blender. I add a little bit of sugar. You add some really good quality vegan chocolate, 60-75% cacao is really best for this. Heat up a little bit of nondairy milk on the stove. Pour it over that. Mix it all up in the blender, put it in the refrigerator, and you have a really, really delicious vegan chocolate pudding. I like to keep with desserts on a general basis that are very, very easy to make, and that do have some healthful ingredients. I think that's a great way to get started.

JASMIN: That sounds so good, and I love that it's mainly a blender type recipe because I think our Vitamix is what we cook 99% of our meals in.

LAURA: Me too. Putting things in a blender is really something great. There's another great thing. It's something else I keep in the refrigerator that's great for dessert, and I take this idea from the great chef Jacques Pepin. Now he of course is not vegan, but he keeps tortillas in the refrigerator. Now, we all have tortillas, but tortillas make a great dessert.

JASMIN: Really?

LAURA: You take the tortilla. You brush some maple syrup on either side of the tortilla, put it on the parchment, and then take either apples, pears, peaches, plums, slice them up and toss them with a little bit of maple syrup or vegan sugar, maybe a little bit of vegan margarine if you like that. You arrange them over the top of the tortilla, put them in the oven. Twenty minutes later, you have a delicious vegan tart that looks like it was made in a French restaurant.

JASMIN: Amazing!

MARIANN: I want it right now.

JASMIN: Yeah, well, in the freezer right now, we have those Ezekiel wraps. We always have those because I feel like they're just so convenient to throw a gigantic salad in and not have to use a fork. So I'm gonna definitely try it with that.

Now, Laura, we all know how much some people resist -- they just resist and resist and resist the suggestions that they try out vegan cooking. They can't get it through their heads that it's possible to cook without their mainstay ingredients like butter and eggs and meat at the center of the dish. Now, when you're trying to convince someone to try out vegan cooking, what are some of your favorite main dish recipes that convince them that this is doable? Because a lot of our listeners are already vegan and are just working on their friends and family. What would they be able to do with their friends and family?

LAURA: Well, I think the main thing is what we talked about at the beginning of the conversation. When I have guests over, and most of my -- I'm out in New Jersey now. So, not that many vegan people around me, to say the least. When people come out to visit me from the city, they're not vegan. When my parents come -- nobody's vegan. And I have to convince them all the time. I think staying with those basic recipes, your chilies, your pastas, your lasagna, finding a great vegan recipe for, for example, a stuffed cabbage, things that are family- and crowd-pleasers. That's the thing to serve people. And that's also the thing to

say to people, “hey you know what, there are so many great substitutions out there now,” A. And B, also, if you eat a vegan chili, you really can’t tell the difference. You eat a vegan lasagna, if it’s made properly, you really can’t tell the difference. So that’s the way I convince people.

MARIANN: Yeah, I think that’s absolutely the way to go. Once you’ve been vegan for a while, it’s very easy to move onto much more vegetable-centered dishes. But when you’re dealing with people who are just trying this out, making it as familiar as possible is really important. So aside from offering these great recipes, what other tips are useful when you’re trying to get people to add more vegan meals to their diets?

LAURA: Well, I think that it really depends. If you’re just starting off with that one meal a week, which I know most of your listeners are already vegan, but if you’re trying to talk someone else into starting on the vegan life path, really the main thing that I stick with is just start with that one meal a week, that one meal that is really gonna make a difference, in the environment, for the animals, and eventually people say for your health. And so if you start off with just one commitment, okay, every Monday night is gonna be vegan Monday night, and we’re going to have a lasagna, a chili, or we’re gonna try some new recipe off the internet. If you’re already vegan and you’re trying to get friends to get on that path, I say suggest the same thing to them because I think that if someone thinks they have to wake up one morning and say, oh my gosh, all of a sudden I’m vegan, or all of a sudden I’m gonna have vegan for dinner every night, people get kind of freaked out. But if you start with, hey, it’s that one time a week, see if you like it, and then come on board with us ‘cause I know you’re gonna love it, that’s the way to get started.

JASMIN: One thing that struck me about looking through *Jazzy Vegetarian Classics* is that everything looks so beautiful. I’m usually the one that cooks in our household, and I think that my food is pretty good and I think that Mariann thinks it’s pretty good because she eats the whole bowl and practically is licking the bottom of it. But it’s not pretty. It’s not something that I would want to serve if I had our larger extended family come over for example. How do you make food look so sensational?

LAURA: Well, I think we do eat with our eyes first. I think that’s really important. And I was very, very fortunate. My grandmother, who I talked about earlier in this conversation, her name, believe it or not, her last name was Cook, Grandma Cook. So that describes -- she was an amazing, amazing chef, and she taught my mother to be so. So both my mother and grandmother really were amateur food stylists. Everything my grandmother and my mother taught me about food styling, and then now that I do it for a living because I have to have the food styled on the TV show and the books, I basically learned to do it myself. But one really great, easy tip for making your food look professional is just always have some parsley in your refrigerator.

JASMIN: Okay.

LAURA: You can take it, roll it up, take off the stems, mince it up, and then before you serve the dish you put the parsley over the top and it always makes everything look a little bit more appetizing for any savory dish.

JASMIN: I think that's like some of the best advice I've ever been given about how to make my food look good because I am not an artist and I'm not a food artist, and I definitely can have parsley in the fridge.

MARIANN: And it's so important to pull this off when you're doing things like going to potlucks that aren't all vegan and you want people to select this food and find out how good it is. Or if you're going to a family dinner and everybody's bringing a dish, and you want people -- 'cause you know your food tastes great, but if they don't try it they're not gonna find that out.

JASMIN: Totally.

LAURA: Absolutely. And when you're serving a dinner party, here's another great tip. You want to think of the colors divided on the plate. When you think of a carnivorous or an omnivorous diet, you think about the potatoes, the vegetable, and the meat, and that is what divides the plate. A lot of times when I'm feeding people who are not vegan, or even when my vegan friends come over 'cause I always want them to have a really gourmet style meal, you want to think about that plate. Think about the different colors on that plate. You want to think of having a green. You want to think of having your orange of your sweet potato or your acorn squash. You want to think of having your mushrooms. You've got that brown, you've got that green, you've got that orange. That's another way you can make food look really, really professional. And just divide them into little places on the plate, pour that parsley over the top, and serve it and it's gonna look like it's a famous restaurant.

JASMIN: Noted, noted. And we understand that you're going to be one of the contributors to a new book that's coming out this week that we absolutely cannot wait for, *The China Study All-Star Collection*. And tell us all about this because I have in front of me a little preview of the book. It's not the whole book, I can't wait to get the whole book. But I'm looking through this pamphlet-y thing that the publisher sent me, and this is going to also have one of the coveted spots in the kitchen where I keep only three cookbooks at a time. Tell me about this book, Laura.

LAURA: I am so honored and so excited to be part of this book because my friends, my colleagues, the great chef Del Sroufe, who's a dear friend, he is really highlighted in this book, the fabulous Lindsay Nixon. I know AJ has some stuff in here. And the great Dr. John McDougall, I just interviewed him last week, he's fantastic. And of course, T. Colin Campbell is making some commentary in the book, a lot of great chefs. And what BenBella has done is they've put together all the all-star chefs to make a great book. And it is edited by LeAnne Campbell, and she's a PhD herself. And it's really, really a great book because a lot of people now are not only looking for great plant-based, great vegan, compassionate meals. We're also looking for things to make our health just a little bit better. And I like the fact that this whole collection is low or no fat and it really follows the principles that were brought forth in *The China Study* by T. Colin Campbell, so it's really exciting.

JASMIN: So exciting. I'm really thrilled about this. And as I said, it's coming out this week, so people could look for that, and also the *Jazzy Vegetarian Classics: Vegan Twists on American Family Favorites*. And I'm just so excited about all you're doing. But with everything you're doing, how do you kick back? What's your favorite thing to do that doesn't have anything to do with food?

LAURA: Oh, goodness gracious.

JASMIN: Uh-oh. I stumped you, ha ha!

LAURA: Well, I'm an admitted workaholic. I love what I do. And of course, luckily we all have to eat, so I get to cook every day, so that's really a lot of fun. But I am still a musician, I'm a recording artist. I'm working on a new album, so in my free time I'm composing and working on music. And let's see. And in the summer I love to swim and kayak, is that good?

JASMIN: That's great. There you go. I was looking for something like swim and kayak. I'm sure that you have your computer with you on the kayak and probably some kind of a large mixing bowl and some ingredients, but that's okay!

LAURA: Actually not. I am really good at, once you do get me out of the office, I'm pretty good at chilling out, and just watching the sunset while I'm paddling down the lake. So I'm looking forward to that, actually. I don't know if that's ever gonna come this year. It was a cold winter.

JASMIN: It was indeed, but I think that it's definitely going to come. I have no doubt. And can you just tell our listeners how they could find out more about you online?

LAURA: Absolutely. Just go to [jazzyvegetarian.com](http://jazzyvegetarian.com). Please join us. Jazzy Vegetarian on Facebook, on Twitter, on Pinterest. And basically that's all you need to know.

JASMIN: Wonderful. Well, I can't thank you enough, Laura, for joining us today on Our Hen House. And we'll definitely be keeping our eye out for all of the wonderful work you're doing with Jazzy Vegetarian, and we'll keep our eye out for *The China Study All-Star Collection* coming out this week. And please come back and join us another time because this was really fun. Maybe next time we could get you to sing for us.

LAURA: I'd love to. Thank you so much. It's been an honor to be here today.

JASMIN: That was Laura Theodore. Learn more at [jazzyvegetarian.com](http://jazzyvegetarian.com).