

Searching for Vegetopia

Stop eating meat?
It proved harder than it looked for one intrepid soul.

by Kristine Bruneau

Last January, I joined six million adults in the United States when I gave up eating meat. The path to vegetopia hasn't been painless.

Along the way, I've struggled, slipped and questioned my choice. After all, I consumed meat at most meals for nearly 40 years without worrying where it came from or what was added to it.

My trouble began one evening while I was preparing ground beef for my dog (yes, she is a princess). The garishness of raw meat and its oozy gumminess suddenly repulsed me. My husband had to finish frying the fleshy hunk while I scrubbed my hands.

This wasn't a fleeting moment of feminine sensitivity—I wasn't ovulating. But something had changed.

I had grown up in an Italian-American household where family gatherings were synonymous with food and meat took center stage at every meal. We salivated for fried meatballs,

sausage and pork in the Sunday sauce. We lunched on salami sandwiches, munched on chunks of Margherita pepperoni and grilled a juicy assortment of ambiguous animal parts.

I had cooked ground beef many times before that fateful evening. Over the years, I would sometimes be bothered by little things—a chunk of fat, a bit of gristle. But I'd always get over it. That is, until now. I started contemplating vegetarianism (even as I pulled on my leather boots). I thought, How hard could it be to not eat meat?

I couldn't quit cold turkey, though; I had a 10-pound side of beef on ice to roast for Christmas dinner. I decided to renounce meat for my New Year's resolution. In the meantime, better stock up on heavy protein.

When I casually announced my conversion to friends and family, they asked, "Why?"

"Because it's healthier," I said, opting out of the moral-ethical rationale in fear of being called a hedonistic hypocrite. I didn't add that I would outlive carnivores, lose the junk in my trunk and maybe even reduce my odds of cancer. As an added bonus, I would never get Mad

Cow disease or bird flu. So, while I munched on organic grass and bark, I could watch my loved ones croak from contaminated meat. Brilliant!

I felt pretty good about this rationale until my husband informed me that regardless of our food choices, everyone eats bugs. He had gleaned this little gem from some "Animal Planet" episode, which revealed that insects, nits and weevils are in everything we eat. (And months later, the tainted-spinach fiasco knocked me off my high health horse; I can get E. Coli right along with my carnivorous friends.)

As I embarked on new recipes, I faced more questions.

"What's tofu?" my husband asked as I squeezed yellowish water from a lump of bean curd.

"Coagulated soy milk," I said. "It's high in protein, vitamins, minerals and cholesterol-free."

"It reminds me of the gloop served for breakfast in *The Matrix*," he said. "You know ... the stuff that Dozer said contained everything the body needs and that Mouse said tasted like Tasty Wheat. But the rest of the crew really thought it tasted like—"

