

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—"

“Alright, I get the picture.”

He pulled on his coat.

“Where are you going?”

“To Wegmans,” he said, “for something to eat.”

I should have known there’d be problems. There’s a stigma associated with vegetarianism that is perhaps self-perpetuated. I’m branded as difficult, anti-social and selfish, even though the last thing I want is to cause someone to feel uncomfortable. I doubt, however, that anyone would think less of me if I refused to eat vegetables.

Just as problematic was knowing how to start. What do I eat? What do I say? What do I wear? I was clueless.

I called my neighbor, Moi (pronounced Mo-ee) Dugan of Penfield, who became a vegetarian in college when meat started to gross her out. “I’m not very righteous about it,” she said. As a lacto-vegetarian, she drinks milk but doesn’t eat eggs. She whips up meat entrées for her family and then makes her own meals.

“What do you eat?” I asked.

“Lots of tofu.” She goes through nearly two pounds of it a week,

reinventing favorite recipes.

I spoke with another friend, holistic health practitioner Dorinne Lopez of Rochester, who offered yet another choice. As a semi-vegetarian—or flexitarian—she follows a vegetarian lifestyle but occasionally slips in chicken or fish for added protein. She also brings veggie burgers to barbecues and has found her secret ingredient: garlic. “Garlic makes everything taste better,” she said.

But I still didn’t know which kind of vegetarian I should be. Then one day at Strong Museum, while waiting for my son’s hot dog at Bill Gray’s, I overheard a woman ask the server whether their fries were cooked in vegetable oil or lard.

“Are you a vegetarian?” I asked, slipping off my leather Coach backpack so it wasn’t quite so visible.

“I’m a vegan,” she said.

I felt like the poster-girl for dysfunctional vegetarians with my leather boots, bag, belt and jacket. While we chatted I couldn’t help thinking about the rest of my un-eco-friendly possessions and practices. And then she said, “Being vegan is a habit.”

I had to establish my habit. Since I had a soft spot for cheese, yogurt, eggs and animal by-products, I decided to create a niche for myself as a lacto-ovo-leather vegetarian. The leather, I reasoned, was okay. After all, the animals were already dead: No need to become a frump.

But I’m still struggling with that justification. I never really thought about what inhabited the skin before I did. Fashion is part of life, and I want to look good. The leather jacket was on sale. My leather pants were a gift (and, yes, incredibly soft). Leather shoes are durable—and just try to find shoes in mainstream shops that aren’t made with some animal by-product. I try to be more conscious of what I wear and what I buy, but, honestly, choosing eco-friendly, cruelty-free, leather-alternative, sweatshop-free products is difficult, costly and gives me a headache. While I recently purchased a polyvinyl purse, I still wear my leather Coach backpack to yoga class.

And becoming a vegetarian doesn’t change your taste buds. I just turned 40 and was told that, for my age, I need 1,200 mg of calcium a day. But I gag on a



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glass of milk. And the alternatives aren't any better; I refuse to eat a pot of boiled kale.

Which brings me back to where all vegetarian discussions inevitably go: soy. I'm not a huge fan of soy, and while food manufacturers claim to have improved the taste of soy products and meat substitutions to capitalize on this billion-dollar industry, I've found only a few soy products I like. It's one reason I can understand why some vegetarians switch back to an omnivorous lifestyle. Aside from the fact that meat tastes good, vegetarianism is difficult to maintain—especially when you travel away from home.

On my very first day as a vegetarian, my family and I ordered take-out from TGI Friday's in Niagara Falls, Canada. I chose the cheese quesadilla, only to taste bacon in my first bite. I didn't want to eat it, but it was too late to order something else and I was hungry. Plus, the alternatives were my son's chicken or my husband's burger.

It wasn't the only time I slipped. At Tommy Bahamas in Naples, Fla., I succumbed to crab. It was after I had downed two Hurricane Tommy drinks—my husband's covert ploy, I believe,

to get me to eat some "real protein." At Whole Foods in Alexandria, Va., I slurped chicken noodle soup because I was ill and couldn't find ready-to-eat vegetable soup. Unfortunately, the soup stayed with me the rest of that day.

As for my lapse in my hometown Wegmans as I rolled past my former favorite area, the Sushi bar, I don't really have an excuse. There they were, in all their green, goddess glory: Dragon Rolls. I pushed by, stopped and then turned the cart around. I needed a Dragon Roll. Now. I grabbed the package and raced to the checkout. As soon as I reached the car, I opened my treasure and inhaled every last one. I felt the hamster wheel in my head start to spin again.

While close friends tolerate my alternative burgers on chicken wing night, my Italian grandmother doesn't get it. "Just pick out the meat and eat the vegetables," she said, pushing a bowl of her fresh, beef barley stew under my nose. Tempting, but I passed.

Still other folks don't know. A friend made sandwiches for our zoo outing. She doled out PB&J to the kids and handed

me a BLT. It was thoughtful and kind. I accepted the sandwich, but said nothing. When she wasn't looking, I stuffed it in my bag, thinking that I could just pull out the bacon and eat the rest. I never ate it. In hindsight, I doubt she would have cared if I told her I was a vegetarian, albeit a conflicted one. I don't want to be rude. I just don't want to eat meat.

I know it's impossible to live without causing harm. My yoga practice teaches me to be more conscious of my actions and strive to be more considerate of others and myself. While my choice may reduce the suffering of some farmed animals, it seems to have increased my own suffering and, perhaps, that of those around me. Being a vegetarian is not as easy or certain as I thought. The mental gymnastics of morality, health, fashion and spirituality—not to mention the uncomfortable situations in which I've found myself—have left me with an ongoing headache.

Yet I forge on. For now, I remain an occasionally lapsing, leather-clad vegetarian.

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