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'Vegetarianism is the Way'

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Marketing the Message

The Changing Face of Vegetarianism in the United Kingdom

A talk given by Tina Fox, Chief Executive of the Vegetarian Society UK

Introduction

In the 151 years since the founding of the Vegetarian Society in 1847 the vegetarian scene in the UK and beyond has changed a great deal, with a real acceleration to these changes in the last 5 to 10 years. This brief presentation aims to cover the changes that have occurred in both the availability of vegetarian produce and the perception of the diet, the reasons why and main factors influencing the changes in both consumer choice and the Society's focus. Although there will, by necessity, be some reference to the early years of the movement and the history of Parkdale for purposes of context as this will be more than adequately covered by another speaker I will not give this area too much emphasis but will concentrate on more recent changes, particularly focusing on the commercial sector and on the last five to ten years.

I am pleased to say however that one thing remains fairly unchanged and that is motivation for accepting a vegetarian diet. Although health and, to a lesser degree, environmental factors, have influenced some people's decision to take the veggie challenge, the primary motivation for adopting the diet in the UK is still the one that I am sure motivates everyone attending this Congress: compassion. The cruelty meted out to our fellow animal companions on this planet in the name of food production is no doubt one well known to all of you and will I am sure be covered in detail by other speakers, it is pleasing to note however that such cruelty is becoming unacceptable to increasing numbers of the general public who are choosing to turn away from their involvement in it by adopting the vegetarian diet. Animal welfare is a prime factor in their making this choice, particularly for the increasing numbers of young people adopting the diet, frankly they do not feel it is correct for an animal to be killed and end up on someone's plate merely to titillate the tastebuds and they are voting with their purses and influencing the commercial sector to cater for their demands. According to Richard Ryder, from a paper presented at a previous Society AGM, guilt and fear over killing non humans goes back for more than 3000 years so I hope none of us are feeling too virtuous over our compassionate inclinations! We owe a lot of today's acceptance for a meat eating diet to the renaissance period when it seems to have become the norm - it was not until the 18th century that interest in vegetarianism

revived in Northern Europe.

History

I will start by covering a little of the history of the Society as it is not possible to explore change without knowing the original context so I hope those who are well familiar with the information will bear with me. Those of you who attended our grand 150th celebrations October 1997 in Salford and London will be well aware that the Society was founded on 30th September 1847, its roots however date back to 1807 to the Rev William Cowherd, founder of the Bible Christian Church, who was very much an influence on Joseph Brotherton. Joseph was an MP in Salford and became one of the Society's early presidents, in 1812 his wife, Martha, wrote the first vegetarian cookery books although our research has found that it is far from modern taste! As early as 1851 the slogan "live and let live" was coined and it is still very much in use today by local groups etc. In 1888 the London Vegetarian Society formed a separate body but the two started to work more closely together in 1958 when their two magazines merged together and eventually the two societies once more merged in October 1969 when Parkdale was purchased by the very far sighted trustees of the time and the Society was set up as a limited company. I am pleased to say that the Society holds an unbroken run of the Society's magazines from the first in 1848 to present day, which is quite an achievement in view of various moves and changes. It is hoped to properly archive and display our collection of historic material in the near future following refurbishment to form a permanent collection which can be visited by academics, researchers, the general public and anyone who has an interest in the subject.

Various other groups naturally grew from the Society and the movement in general, the Vegetarian Cycling and Athletic Club set up in 1887 and is still going strong 100 years later, a separate Food and Cookery section was active in the early 1960's ultimately leading to the establishment of the Society's Cordon Vert Cookery school in 1982. The Society was also involved in children's homes in Jersey and Liverpool and even, in 1900, had its own shop in Oxford St, Manchester selling items such as "Nuttose" a nutmeat alternative, amidst the pulses and potions. So who said meat alternative products were anything new?

Today there are 23 staff based at Parkdale and we receive between one and two thousand enquiries a week generally although this can increase in times of campaigns or food crisis. However Parkdale was not always such a hotbed of activity, when it was purchased from the previous owners, Cussins, (the soap people), it was intended to provide "a centre for quiet and dignity where persons of prominence can be welcomed". I am afraid that today it is far from quiet but I am pleased to say we open our doors to all comers - prominent or otherwise! The house and gardens were initially very elegant with lots of attractive trees and plants some of which are still in situ but some of which have sadly been replaced by a small housing development at the bottom of our garden which has released much needed funds for our refurbishment project. Wildlife was plentiful and visitors could hope to see polecats, shrews, fox, weasels etc. We still see the resident fox on occasion and squirrels are very hard to miss, as they currently seem to outnumber the staff. In the 1980's we even had our own bees but they did not appear to like vegetarians very much and they had to be removed due to the high number of complaints from the staff who had been stung! Memo's

from the General Secretary in 1969 showed the wages of staff in the London office were between £7 and £16 but they did get luncheon vouchers. Since its incorporation as a company in 1969 the Society has organised lots of events, AGM's, social weekends etc. As well as hosting both a previous World Congress and a European Congress, attracting well known speakers such as David Icke, Vernon Coleman, Richard Ryder and Dr Andrew Linzey at our 1990 AGM and, more recently, luminaries of the cookery world such as Colin Spencer in 1996 and Rose Elliot in 1998.

Uniquely, VSUK is the only Society with its own functioning cookery school. When it was set up in 1982 courses were initially aimed at the amateur chef wanting to improve skill and knowledge but today's courses are more equally divided with those of professional chefs and our Cordon Vert diploma which our flagship course and is essential to anyone pursuing a career in vegetarian catering. This is something our current manager, Lynn Weller, is keen to encourage as the more experienced and imaginative chefs that we have out there the better the quality of catering for the general public leaving no excuses not to go veggie. To this end one of our tutors is currently suffering on a Caribbean cruise training the staff at P & O. In recent years we have also been successful with a new range of cookery books with our first in September 1997 with Sigma Press, one in September 1998 with Harper Collins, "Food for Friends" (check web site) and a third, on low fat cookery, scheduled for NVW in the millennium, again with Harper Collins. We also hope soon to launch our own product range on the unsuspecting public once we have found a suitable commercial partner.

Over the years of its existence the Society has had to evolve its techniques and methods to match the times whilst retaining its core mission - to convert all possible to the vegetarian diet. The "steamy veg" cinema ad, sponsored by the Co-operative Bank, portraying the vegetarian diet as a healthy and sexy one and the humorous onions cinema ad currently showing with Babe 2 are a far cry from the sort of campaigns put out even 5 years ago and are very well received by the general public who literally, at times, clamour at our gates (or would if we had any!). So why the reason for the change in perception? One of them has to be the change in perception of a meat diet from being essential to one that is positively life threatening due to many recent food scares.

Health

A National Opinion Poll in June 1998 showed that 25% of those questioned did not believe meat eating to be safe and a further 7% were unsure. Concerns re the CJD link with meat led to one "vegemince" producer selling more in one month in 1996 than the whole of the previous year's production. The same was found to be true of other meat alternative proteins and, once the consumer had tried the product and found it to be satisfactory, very few consumers returned to the original meat product leading to increased sales all round in the alternative market. Although the Society, amongst others, has always publicised the 40% reduced cancer risk and 30% less heart disease risk associated with a vegetarian diet it was not until the issue of the COMA (Committee on medical aspects of food policy) in 1997 which positively linked the consumption of red meat with certain cancers, particularly bowel, stomach and colon that this issue started to penetrate the public domain. This report, by good fortune for ourselves, coincided with the publication of the WCRF's own report

which reinforced the message. Despite the fact that the Government's own Chief Medical Officer had made a public statement supporting these findings however the Society still came into conflict with both the advertising standards authority and the Charity Commission over our advertising campaign which alerted the public to the fact it was easier to cut out meat than the cancer sites. Obviously the British public, along with many other meat consumers, are very squeamish about the truth!

Despite the denials and the cover up's however, the damage to the meat industry had already been done as both Bird's Eye and Tesco have quoted figures of 40 and 50% respectively of the British public reducing meat in their diet, particularly red meat. Those of us who have been involved for many years are aware however that it is more than the 25% premature death rate for cancer followed closely by death from heart disease that needs to worry the average meat eater; the spectre of E.coli has now been added to Salmonella and other food poisons, (95% of food poisoning is caused by animal products) diabetes is an increased risk as well as increased blood pressure and obesity. Meat eaters also have to contend with gallstones, kidney stones and diverticular disease – hardly a recipe for success, particularly when you kill off your customers.

Environment

And what of the health of our home, Planet Earth? Growing numbers of people, particularly those involved in the environmental and green movements, are beginning to become aware of the connection of the food on their plate and the pollution and waste of resources caused by meat production. Those of us who have been vegetarian for a number of years were no doubt weaned on the idea that meat is very wasteful in terms of land use and protein conversion as it takes around 10 kilos of vegetable protein to produce one kilo of meat. The UK alone uses 80% of its land to raise livestock, it could feed around 4 – 5 times its current population by adopting a vegetarian diet and we would not need to take grain from the mouths of those starving in the third world to feed to livestock. As well as the wastage of land, meat production also consumes over 150 billion litres of water in the UK alone, and, as many of us know, water is not the unlimited resource we once thought it to be. This is hardly surprising when it takes 11,250 litres of water for one pound of meat as opposed to 13 litres for a pound of wheat. The production of this meat also destroys tracts of rainforest, uses valuable energy and water in the process and provides as a handy end product dollops of pollution in the form of animal manure and methane, adding to the greenhouse effect.

The reduction of the rainforest and other plantlife in this manner also contributes to global warming and the strange weather seasons that are occurring world-wide can be directly attributed to the unhealthy diet of humanity. Added to the Methane from animal excrement, the ammonia produced by the animals also contributes to acid rain, killing off the very trees which provide the oxygen required for us and other animal life to live and flourish. Clearing of the rainforest as well as adding to more general environmental problems also has a disastrous effect on the native animals, plants and human cultures who have previously existed in the habitat with minimal impact for often thousands of years, with around 50 species of flora and fauna a day becoming extinct. And all to create what? An

unwanted mountain of carcasses to add to the other western food mountains.

Closer to home in the west cattle and other slurry, together with pesticide run off, are destroying our native streams and rivers and killing off the aquatic life. There are valiant attempts to reintroduce the otter and even the European Beaver but those attempts will fail if we do not clean up our act. Meat production also contributes to soil erosion adding another nail in the ecological coffin. Even those members of the population who are less concerned with animal welfare can be persuaded to adopt the vegetarian diet if they are concerned about their fellow humans. With 38% of the world's grain squandered on the production of meat it is clear that many millions of people in the developing world are dying of hunger for no better reason than to pleasure the tastebuds of the rich. This is a particularly important argument to use for those members of the public who claim to care more for humans than for animals.

Even the ocean world is not safe, due primarily to overfishing and also to pollution, the ecological balance of the oceans has been disrupted, numbers of fish are reducing drastically, together with sea mammals such as dolphins, seals and whales, and the number of unknown large scale death from disease incidents continues to increase.

In an NOP survey earlier this year 80% of those questioned said that they would prefer to buy food that was cruelty free and good for the environment, this is confirmed by the current public concern over GMO's and a swing towards organic food that supermarket giants such as Sainsburys and Waitrose have been very quick to capitalise on. We are aware that a diet exists that answers the need of this 80%, increasingly so are they and the commercial sector is being driven to provide for those needs. People are literally eating their way to a better planet.

Commerce

Those of us who have been vegetarian for many years, in my case 26 years, will have seen many changes in perception of the vegetarian diet from cranky to fashionable etc. but perhaps one of the most surprising changes, at least in the western world, has been the growth and availability of vegetarian targeted products. Way back in 1972 you could not buy anything vegetarian in the supermarket, only specialised and expensive health stores full of ingredients that you didn't know what to do with. Similarly eating out was a nightmare as you were only likely to be offered an omelette made with battery eggs! According to The Grocer, bible of the food trade, in march 1998, " the meat free market has changed dramatically over the past few years" and, even more welcome " growing moral awareness" has played a part in driving consumer demand to make the vegetarian market one of the most dynamic growth areas in modern times - heartening words from a committed commercial interest with very little interest in morals. This growth is partly fuelled by the increasing numbers of meat reducers and meat avoiders who frankly would have been looked down on by vegetarians in the earlier years of the movement. Today we are likely to take a more tolerant attitude and the Society welcomes associate members, after all 1 full vegetarian or 2 50% ers still save the same amount of animal's lives and we all need to give a little encouragement to those who are putting their first wavering steps on

the path towards a more sustainable and compassionate diet.

The continued development of vegetarian convenience foods in the last few years has been our greatest ally to some extent. After all what do most of the general public want in life? An easy option. This is particularly so with regard to busy parents and business people, sadly the craft of cookery is less practised these days and many people live from the freezer and the microwave. The availability of convenience foods opens the moral choice to a large group of people without compromising the practical aspects of their life. The Grocer estimates the commercial value of prepared vegetarian food in the UK at £388 million and forecast to rise to £600 million in 1999, of course that is without any more major food scares. Tesco claim that of the 8 million customers a week they serve 50% are meat reducing, nearly half of their filled pasta range is veggie and 1/3 of their ready meals sold are veggie also. In addition 90% of their cheeses are now also vegetarian.

Of this slice of veggie pie, the meat alternatives constitute quite a chunk, clearly many of us like the taste and texture of meat but not the source of the product. Now consumers can have the taste and texture of the bacon butty, a very English snack, without the guilt, a fact the Society reinforced in conjunction with Redwood Foods in National Bacon Week in 1998. Meat analogues are nothing new, around 2,800 BC the Chinese transformed beans into curd or tofu giving a meaty texture but this development did not follow in the west until the 19th century when the first nut meats appeared. By the 1960's nuts were being replaced by Soya and today's technology includes arrum (pea based), wheat based products and mycro protein (fungi). Even better news is the growth of dairy alternatives, Soya cheese, yoghurts, ice cream etc. Clearly this sector still has a long way to go before veganism becomes the norm for everyday shopping but it is still a pleasure to see these products out there on the supermarket shelves. A growing interest in the UK in global foods has also added variety to the options available. After all, it is cheaper for the manufacturer to use vegetables instead of meat in the various curries, pastas, fajitas etc. and consumer acceptability is high so why not provide the vegetarian version?

One of the leaders in this veggie convenience revolution was our own sadly missed patron, Linda McCartney for reasons of conscience not profit. Linda's range targeted particularly the less adventurous who liked the taste and texture of sausages, meat pasties etc. and the success of her range lead to competition and more variety. Linda's range, limited as it may be, opened the door so others could follow. It is a door that widens every day and for that the movement owes her a great deal. The range was re launched in 1996 to add new categories including Soya yoghurt and in 1998, vegetarian Fishcakes. McVities, the owner of the range, were also amongst those supplying free produce to our vegetarian barbecue in June at this year's VegFest.

One of the more recent expanses in the market has been the burst of activity in the veggie slice or pate ranges. Until the last year or so, the vegetarian who did not want cheese or egg on their sandwiches every day was forced to make their own spreads but now most supermarkets have something available for the packed lunch, although they are still a little unimaginative and dominated by cheese ingredients. Companies such as Redwood however

produce a good range of meat like slices, all of which are both vegan and low fat.

A plethora of "suitable for vegetarians" symbols adorns these products but increasingly the Society's own, established in the 1970's, is being sought by those companies who take the matter more seriously. Each month 2 or 3 new companies join the scheme assisting both the Society's income and the public's confidence. Last August the trustees approved further changes to the licence which means that no products will now be approved which contain GMO ingredients as these will have been tested on animals and the effect such ingredients on both the health of the consumer and the environment is as yet unknown. This has led initially to a loss of some of our clients but we expect to obtain new clients with more concern for their customers. There are still gaps in the vegetarian market waiting to be exploited, baby food, food for young people (pizza and veggie burgers appear to be the staple diet), and general improvement in the ready meals available far too many of which focus on soggy creamy or cheesy sauces and there is considerable scope for products with a better texture and flavour. The Society hopes to develop its own product range so watch this space!

In 1997 the Society had quite a breakthrough when a leading supermarket, Tesco sponsored National Vegetarian Week, for the first time. Although the staff actually found this to be a rather limiting way of working it was still very worth doing for the credibility it gained for the Society and the movement, suddenly the market took us so much more seriously, after all Tesco were vying for the number one place with Sainsbury, who had previously sponsored our cookery school, so it showed that they took the veggie market very seriously. The market is also starting to realise that it is not only vegetarians who eat vegetarian food and even Don Curry, Chairman of MLC has admitted that meat consumption has dropped by 25% over the last 20 years - I've got sad news for him as it is accelerating!.

In a report in March 98 Mintel estimate that 25% of consumers are potential purchasers of veggie food for whatever reason and that vegetarian food is becoming more mainstream. Mintel also estimates the market has grown by 70% between 1992 and 1997 and that almost a quarter of all women aged 16 to 34 no longer eat red meat. According to Mintel there is also good news for the rest of Europe as levels of vegetarianism in Holland, Denmark, Germany and Sweden are similar to those in the UK. I imagine this is particularly good news to "Meaning Green" the world's first vegetarian and organic fast food chain. Launched in November in Stockholm, Sweden, it is the owner's intention to open 100 restaurants in Western Europe and the USA in the next five years starting with London in autumn 1999. The president, Greg Dingizan, intends to generate economic as well as ethical profit with the vision as a guiding principle and hopes that the vegetarian movement will benefit from Meaning Green's success.

The Society had no major financial sponsor for Vegetarian Week in 1998 although publishers of our new book, Harper Collins, provided a lot of support. Products however were sponsored by a number of companies for our barbecue, raffle, tombola, goody bags etc. These included Redwood foods, Sainsbury, Dragonfly foods, Orchid drinks and many others. We have now moved away from only working with the commercial sector one week

in the year and are planning other joint ventures such as a vegetarian sandwich leaflet with assistance from Marmite, Schools materials with Provamel and another possible campaign with Redwood. This provided a win / win situation. They benefit from our name and credibility (and the feel good factor) and we benefit in terms of income and increasing our profile. In addition the more companies we work with, the more companies potentially want to work with us. In the past the Society has also produced a joint leaflet on nutrition with Sainsbury which widens the availability of our name to every supermarket in the country and which has led to links on their web site. The move from health store to supermarket for veggie foods and ingredients is a welcome one as many health stores with all their pills and potions give the wrong message. This is not obviously the case with the more genuine private establishments and organic co-operatives and green stores, which are springing up around the country.

With regard to external catering the news is both good and bad, according to Mintel around 19% of people eating out will choose a vegetarian option, often in search of a lighter option and more and more catering establishments are widening the choices to cater for such a market but are they doing it correctly? A survey by Yorkshire Trading Standards in summer of 1998 came to the conclusion that many pub caterers in particular did not understand the market and often put fish in the menu as suitable for vegetarians or sold items with non veggie cheese as vegetarian. Clearly this is an area where we still have work to do although I am pleased to say the Society's Food and Drink guild, which checks thoroughly all licensed establishments is growing all the time and we now have our first few food chains, "FT5K" and First Leisure, showing that more caterers are beginning to take the issue seriously.

It is also particularly noticeable that the fast food sector, traditionally anti vegetarian, is now providing meat substitute dishes although there is only one properly vegetarian burger - the Vegetarian Whopper in Burger King which has the Society licence. When it comes to eating out, London is estimated to be the veggie capital of the western world with an estimated 75 totally vegetarian restaurants. This explosive growth in the market has also led to less traditional alliances for the Society, for the past two years for example, our annual report has been sponsored by ethical investment funds and we are currently working on veggie friendly pensions schemes. The Society also achieved a lot of press when it licensed the first vegetarian camera (digital) for Ricoh and next year we will be working with Gardening Which on vegetarian barbecues as part of NVW. All this is rapidly leading to a change of image for both the society and vegetarians as individuals.

Image

Even ten years ago anyone admitting to be vegetarian could be considered weird or cranky and was expected to wear sandals beads and a beard (even the women!). However this view can hardly be maintained when Burger King use Frank Bruno to launch the veggie whopper and Granada services this year used cricketer, Ian Botham. Vegetarians in the UK still tend to be in the higher socio economic classes with disposable income to spend on animal welfare and green issues. This no doubt contributes to the spread of the diet as many of these professional vegetarians are in influential jobs such as teaching, media, art or theatre

.In the pop world, many famous vegetarians such as Michael Jackson, Madonna, Paul McCartney, Kate bush, Damon Albarn etc. are seen as examples to be followed by many young people. Vegetarians are less likely to be seen these days are self denying and holier than thou, a view which has no doubt lost us many converts in the past, but are viewed as aspirational and enlightened , as people to be emulated.

A survey sponsored by Dalepack in 1998 showed that 82% of those asked felt there would be more vegetarians in the future In 1984 2.1% of the UK population was said to be vegetarian but this has now grown to 7%, increasing to 12% amongst 15 - 24 year olds, the consumers and parents of the future. According to the Society's own estimate at this rate of change everyone in the UK will be vegetarian by 2035 and a similar exercise by the American Vegan Society puts the year at 2075 for the USA. In the west films such as Babe and Babe 2, Pig in the City, are helping people to make the link between a living animal and the meat on their plate to the detriment of the slaughter industry. .

In the final years of the millennium people are starting to wake up to the meat industry's lies and cruelties and to choose the obvious alternative. The Society continues to put every effort into reaching this receptive audience, Parkdale is currently undergoing major refurbishment in order to improve efficiency and to raise the profile of the Cordon Vert school. We continue to work with high profile celebrities and with the commercial sector at any reasonable opportunity to spread the message in a palatable way. Flexibility is the key, it is important to be able to grab opportunities when they present, definitely a case of they who hesitate is lost as the media is a very fickle friend. All in all these are changeable but exciting times - the future's bright, the future's veggie!

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