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Why Vegetarians Are Eating Meat

A growing number of vegetarians are starting to eat humanely raised meat. Christine Lennon talks to a few converts—including her husband and famed author Mollie Katzen.

BY CHRISTINE LENNON

To a die-hard meat eater, there's nothing more irritating than a smug vegetarian. I feel at liberty to say this because I am one (a steak lover) and I married the other (a vegetarian with a pulpit). For me, "Do you now, or would you ever, eat meat?" has always been a question on par with "Do you ever want to get married?" and "Do you want children?" The answer to one reveals as much about a person's interior life, and our compatibility, as the response to the others. My husband Andrew's reply to all of those questions when I asked him three years ago was, "No."

Obviously, we're now married. We had twins earlier this year. And somewhere in between those two events, the answer to the third question was also re-evaluated, and the vegetarian soapbox was put to rest, too.

Yes, my husband has started eating meat again after a seven-year hiatus as an ethically motivated and health-conscious vegetarian. About a year ago, we arrived at a compromise: I would eat less meat—choosing mostly beef, pork and poultry produced by local California ranchers without the use of hormones or antibiotics—and he would indulge me by sharing a steak on occasion. But arriving at that happy medium wasn't as straightforward as it sounds. In the three years we've been together, several turns of events have made both of us rethink our choices and decide that eating meat selectively is better for the planet and our own health. And judging by the conversations we've had with friends and acquaintances, we're not the only ones who believe this to be true.

For Andrew and about a dozen people in our circle who have recently converted from vegetarianism, eating sustainable meat purchased from small farmers is a new form of activism—a way of striking a blow against the factory farming of livestock that books like Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* describe so damningly. Pollan extols the virtues of independent, small-scale food producers who raise pasture-fed livestock in a sustainable and ethical manner. In contrast, he provides a compelling critique of factory farms, which cram thousands of cows, pigs or chickens into rows of cages in warehouses, feed them drugs to plump up their meat and fight off the illnesses caused by these inhumane conditions, and produce innumerable tons of environmentally destructive animal waste.

The terms "grass fed" and "pasture raised"—meaning that an animal was allowed to graze the old-fashioned way instead of being fed an unnatural and difficult-to-digest diet of mostly corn and other grain—have now entered the food-shoppers' lexicon. But Andrew and I didn't fully understand what those phrases meant until we got to know Greg Nauta of Rocky Canyon Farms. Nauta is a small-scale rancher and farmer from Atascadero, California, who grows organic vegetables and raises about 35 animals on pastureland. Since we met him at the Hollywood Farmers' Market a year ago, it has become even clearer to us that supporting guys like him—by seeking out and paying a premium for sustainably raised meat—is the right thing for us to do.

Nauta's cattle graze on 200 leased acres of pasture in central California and are fed the leftover vegetables and fruits he grows that don't sell at the farmers' market, supplemented by locally grown barley grain on occasion. "That's dessert," he says of the barley, "not a main course. That would be like us eating ice cream every day."

Three times a week, Nauta loads his truck full of coolers stocked with cattleman's steaks and handmade pork sausages and drives to the Los Angeles-area farmers' markets. Selling his vegetables and meat directly to conscientious eaters, people to whom he talks weekly about rainfall averages and organic produce, Nauta says, is "the best way small guys like me can compete." In the past several months, Nauta has noticed a handful of curious vegetarians, like Andrew, wandering over to his booth to ask questions. And they're satisfied enough with the answers to give his meat a try—and come back for more.

If preserving small-scale farming isn't a compelling enough reason to eat beef or pork, consider the nutritional advantages grass-fed meat has over the factory-fed kind. "One of the benefits of all-grass-fed beef, or 'beef with benefits,' as we say, is that it's lower in fat than conventionally raised beef," says Kate Clancy, who studies nutrition and sustainable agriculture and was until recently the senior scientist at the nonprofit Union of Concerned Scientists. "The other thing is that the meat and milk from grass-fed cattle will probably have higher amounts of omega-3 fatty acids, which may help reduce the risk of heart disease and strengthen people's immune systems. What's good for the environment, what's good for cattle, is also good for us."

Combine these findings with the questions being raised about meat replacements derived from soy and wheat gluten, and the real thing seems better by the minute. "What we know about soy is that as you process it, you lose a lot of the benefits," says Ashley Koff, a Los Angeles-based registered dietician. "Any soy-based fake meat product is incredibly processed, and you have to use chemicals to get the mock flavor. Any other whole-food diet is going to be a lot better for you." Vegetarians like Andrew—he once brought a tofu sandwich to a famous Texas barbecue restaurant—may now have a harder time justifying their "healthier" dietary choices.

Former vegetarians are some of the most outspoken proponents of eating meat. "I was vegan for 16 years, and I truly believed I was doing the right thing for my health," says the actress and model Mariel Hemingway, who is the author of *Healthy Living from the Inside Out*. "But when I was vegan, I was super-weak. I love animals, and we should not support anything but ethical ranching, but when I eat meat, I feel more grounded. I have more energy."

Even chef Mollie Katzen, author of the vegetarian bible the *Moosewood Cookbook*, is experimenting with meat again. "For about 30 years I didn't eat meat at all, just a bite of fish every once in a while, and always some dairy," she says. "Lately, I've been eating a little meat. People say, 'Ha, ha, Mollie Katzen is eating steak.' But now that cleaner, naturally fed meat is available, it's a great option for anyone who's looking to complete his diet. Somehow, it got ascribed to me that I don't want people to eat meat. I've just wanted to supply possibilities that were low on the food chain."

Recently, when responding to the invitation to her high-school reunion, Katzen had to make a choice

between the vegetarian and the conventional meal. She checked the nonvegetarian box. "The people who requested the vegetarian meal got fettuccine Alfredo," she says. "It's a bowl full of flour and butterfat. I'd much rather have vegetables and grains and a few bites of chicken."

or Andrew and many of our ex-vegetarian friends, the ethical reasons for eating meat, combined with the health-related ones, have been impossible to deny. "The way I see it, you've got three opportunities every day to act on your values and have an immediate effect on something you're concerned about," Andrew says. "You're probably worried about Darfur, too, but what can you do about that every single day? Write a letter? It doesn't have the same kind of impact."

Supporting ranchers we believe in, and the stores and restaurants that sell their products, has a very tangible impact that we experience firsthand all the time. But ask most vegetarians if the battle between small, sustainable ranchers and industrial farming is at the top of their list of concerns about eating meat, and you'll probably be met with a blank stare. "For people who are against eating meat because it's wrong or offensive to eat animals, even the cleanest grass-fed beef won't be good enough," Katzen says.

Convincing those people that eating meat can improve the welfare of the entire livestock population is a tough sell. But we'll keep trying. What we've discovered is that you can hover pretty close to the bottom of the food chain and still make a difference, quietly. We've found a healthy balance somewhere between the two extremes—which, come to think of it, is also a good way to approach a marriage.

Christine Lennon is a freelance writer in Los Angeles who regularly contributes to InStyle and Time.

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