



Sunday, Oct. 06, 2002

Should We All Be Vegetarians?

By RICHARD CORLISS

Five reasons to eat meat:

- 1) It tastes good
- 2) It makes you feel good
- 3) It's a great European tradition
- 4) It supports farmers
- 5) Your parents did it

Oh, sorry...those are five reasons to smoke cigarettes. Meat is more complicated. It's a food most people eat virtually every day: at the dinner table; in the cafeteria; between bread in the park; with mustard at a sports stadium; or, a billion times a year, with special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame-seed bun. Beef is ubiquitous.

But for many, meat is an obscene cuisine. It's not just the additives and ailments connected with the consumption of beef, though a dish of hormones and E. coli bacteria might be effective enough as an appetite suppressant. It's that more and more people, particularly young people, are eating their vegetables. Some 10 million Americans today consider themselves to be practicing vegetarians, according to a Time poll of 10,000 adults. Britain's Mintel, a market research company, estimated that last year — in the wake of the "mad-cow" and foot-and-mouth crises — the U.K. was home to 3.4 million vegetarians, or 5.7% of the population, up from 2.6% in 1985.

To get a taste of the meat eater's ancient pride, just click on South Dakota cattleman Jody Brown's website, www.ranchers.net, and read the new meat mantras: "Vegetarians don't live longer, they just look older"; and "If animals weren't meant to be eaten, then why are they made out of meat?" For Brown and his generation of unquestioning carnivores, dinner is something the parents put on the table and the kids put in their bodies. Of his own kids, he says, "We expect them to eat a little of everything." So beef is served nearly every night at the Brown homestead, with nary a squawk from Jeff, 17, Luke, 13, and Hannah, 11. But Jody admits to at least one liberal sympathy. "If a vegetarian got a flat tire in my community," he says, "I'd come out and help him." For the rancher who makes his living with meat or the vegetarian whose diet could someday drive all those breeder-slaughterers to bankruptcy, nothing is simple any more. Gone is the age of innocence, or naiveté, when such items as haircuts and handshakes, family names and school uniforms, farms and zoos, cowboys and ranchers, had no particular political

meaning. Now everything is up for rancorous debate. And no aspect of our daily lives — our lives as food consumers — gets more heat than meat.

For millions of vegetarians, beef is a four-letter word; veal summons visions of infanticide. Many children, raised on hit films like *Babe* and *Chicken Run*, recoil from eating their movie heroes and switch to what the meat defeaters like to call a "nonviolent diet." Vegetarianism resolves a conscientious person's inner turf war by providing an edible complex of good-deed-doing: to go veggie is to be more humane. Give up meat, and save lives!

"The way farmers treat animals is monstrous," says Bernard Hermann, a Parisian who hasn't tasted animal flesh in 33 years. "They are stuffed full of drugs and starved of sunshine." Those are strong words indeed from a man who lives in a country where ducks are force-fed a combination of warm maize and fat to meet the public's demand for foie gras de canard.

Of course, one of the lives you could save, or at least prolong, by not eating meat is your own. For vegetarianism should be about more than not eating; it's also about smart eating. You needn't be a born-again foodist to think this way. The American Dietetic Association, a pretty centrist group, has proclaimed that "appropriately planned vegetarian diets are healthful, are nutritionally adequate and provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases." So, how about it? Should we all become vegetarians? Not just teens but also infants, oldsters, athletes — everyone?

There are as many reasons to try vegetarianism as there are soft-eyed cows and soft-hearted kids. To impressionable young minds, vegetarianism can sound sensible, ethical and — as nearly 25% of U.S. adolescents polled by Teenage Research Unlimited said — "cool." In Britain, the cool factor is also at work, at least among girls. A U.K. Food Standards Agency survey found that 10% of 15- to 18-year-old girls claimed to be veggies.

College students think so too. A study conducted by Arizona State University psychology professors Richard Stein and Carol Nemeroff reported that, sight unseen, salad eaters were rated more moral, virtuous and considerate than steak eaters. "A century ago, a high-meat diet was thought to be health-favorable," says Paul Rozin of the University of Pennsylvania. "Kids today are the first generation to live in a culture where vegetarianism is common, where it is publicly promoted on health and ecological grounds." And kids, as any parent can tell you, spur the consumer economy; that explains in part the burgeoning sales of veggie burgers (soy, bulgur wheat, cooked rice, mushrooms, onions and flavorings in Big Mac drag) in supermarkets and fast-food chains.

But there are also less salubrious reasons for vegetarianism's appeal. According to Brigitte Boucher, a nutritionist with the Institut Danone in Paris, the increasing number of young vegetarians is due to "a combination of the effects of the 'mad cow' crisis, along with the desire to control weight, especially among young girls. For them, meat means fat. It's a false kind of vegetarianism, and too often it's a means

of becoming anorexic." Boucher sees calcium and iron deficiencies as the most common problems facing younger vegetarians, since iron derived from animal products is far more easily absorbed by the body than that derived from vegetable products.

Children, who are signing on to vegetarianism much faster than adults, may be educating their parents. Vegetarian food sales are savoring double-digit growth. Top restaurants have added more meatless dishes. Trendy "living foods" or "raw" restaurants are sprouting up, like Roxanne's in Larkspur, California, where no meat, fish, poultry or dairy items are served, and nothing is cooked to temperatures in excess of 48°C. "Going to my restaurant," says Roxanne Klein, "is like going to a really cool new country you haven't experienced before."

Fabio Bassan, a 48-year-old chef and nutritionist, founded Arancia Blu, one of Rome's first vegetarian restaurants, in 1993. He makes sure his cuisine — handmade ravioli with chick peas and nuts covered in a parmesan and rosemary sauce, lasagna with asparagus and rich Castelmagno cheese, plus chocolate desserts and wine that goes for up to \$150 a bottle — is anything but boring. Bassan, who hasn't eaten meat in 20 years, estimates that only 5% of his customers are true vegetarians. "Vegetarian cuisine used to mean two boiled potatoes," he says. "We try to make it creative, and it is even becoming trendy. Eating vegetarian doesn't have to be a punishment."

But vegetarianism has its hidden complexities. For one thing, vegetarians come in more than half a dozen flavors, from sproutarians to pesco-pollo-vegetarians (see box). The most notorious are the vegan (rhymes with intriguing or fatiguing) vegetarians. The Green Party of the movement, vegans decline to consume, use or wear any animal products. They also avoid honey, since its production demands the oppression of worker bees. TV's favorite vegetarian, the cartoon eight-year-old Lisa Simpson, once had a crush on a fellow who described himself as "a Level Five vegan — I don't eat anything that casts a shadow."

To true believers — who refrain from meat as an A.A. member does from drink, and spit if told that there's gelatin in their soup — a semivegetarian is no vegetarian at all. A phrase like pesco-pollo-vegetarian, to them, is an oxymoron like "lapsed Catholic" or "semivirgin." Vegetarian Times, the bible of this particular congregation, lays down the dogma: "For many people who are working to become vegetarians, chicken and fish may be transitional foods, but they are not vegetarian foods...the word 'vegetarian' means someone who eats no meat, fish or chicken."

Clear enough? Apparently not to many Americans. In a survey of 11,000 individuals, 37% of those who responded "Yes, I am a vegetarian" also reported that in the previous 24 hours they had eaten red meat; 60% had eaten meat, poultry or seafood. Perhaps those surveyed thought a vegetarian is someone who, from time to time, eats vegetables as a side dish — say, alongside a prime rib. If more than one-third of people in a large sample don't know the broadest definition of the word vegetarian, one wonders how they can be trusted with something much more difficult: the full-time care and picky-picky feeding of their bodies, whatever their dietary preferences may be.

We know that fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes and nuts are healthy. There are any number of studies that show that consuming more of these plant-based foods reduces the risk for a long list of chronic maladies (including coronary artery disease, obesity, diabetes and many cancers) and is a probable factor in increased longevity in the industrialized world. We know that on average we eat too few fruits and vegetables and too much saturated fat, of which meat and dairy are prime contributors. We also know that in the real world, real diets — vegetarian and nonvegetarian — as consumed by real people range from primly virtuous to pig-out voracious. There are meat eaters who eat more and better vegetables than vegetarians, and vegetarians who eat more artery-clogging fats than meat eaters.

At the International Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition, held this spring at California's Loma Linda University, research papers included some encouraging if tentative findings: that a predominantly vegetarian diet may have beneficial effects for kidney and nerve function in diabetics, as well as for weight loss; that eating more fruits and vegetables can slow, and perhaps reverse, age-related declines in brain function and in cognitive and motor performance — at least in rats; that vegetarian seniors have a lower death rate and use less medication than meat-eating seniors; that vegetarians have a healthier total intake of fats and cholesterol but a less healthy intake of fatty acids (such as the heart-protecting omega-3 fatty acids found in fish oil).

But one paper suggested that low-protein diets (associated with vegetarians) reduce calcium absorption and may have a negative impact on skeletal health. And although several studies on Seventh-Day Adventists (typically vegetarians) indicated they have a longer-than-average life expectancy, other studies found that their prostate-cancer rates were high and that they were more likely to suffer hip fractures.

Can it be that vegetarianism is bad for your health? That's a complex issue. There's a big, beautiful plant kingdom out there; you ought to be able to dine healthily on this botanical bounty. With perfect knowledge, you can indeed eat like a king from the vegetable world. But ordinary people are not nutrition professionals. While some vegetarians understand how to watch their riboflavin and vitamins D and B12, many more haven't a clue. This is one reason that vegetarians, in a study of overall nutrition, scored significantly lower than nonvegetarians on the U.S. Department of Agriculture (usda) Healthy Eating Index, which compares actual diet with usda guidelines.

Another reason is that vegans skew the stats, since their strict avoidance of meat, eggs and dairy products can lead to deficiencies in iron, calcium and vitamin B12. "These nutrients are the problem," says Johanna Dwyer, a professor of nutrition and medicine at Tufts University in Massachusetts. "At least among the vegans who are also philosophically opposed to fortified foods and/or vitamin and mineral supplements."

Debates about the efficacy of vegetarianism follow us from cradle to wheelchair. In 1998 child-care expert Dr. Benjamin Spock, who became a vegetarian late in life, caused a stir by recommending that children over the age of two be raised as vegans, rejecting even milk and eggs. The American Dietetic Association

says it is possible to raise kids as vegans but cautions that special care must be taken with nursing infants (who don't develop properly without the nutrients in mother's milk or fortified formula). Other researchers warn that infants breast-fed by vegans have lower levels of vitamin B12 and dha (an omega-3 fatty acid), important to vision and growth.

And there is always the chance of vegetarian theory going madly wrong in practice. A Queens, New York, couple were indicted last May for first-degree assault, charged with nearly starving their toddler to death on a strict diet of juices, ground nuts, herbal tea, beans, flaxseed and cod-liver oils. At 16 months, the girl weighed 4.5 kg, less than half the normal weight of a child her age. Their lawyer's defense: "They felt that they have their own lifestyle. They're vegetarians." The couple declined to plea-bargain and are still in jail awaiting trial.

Many children decide on their own to become vegetarians and are declaring their preference at ever more precocious ages; it's often their first act of domestic rebellion. But a youngster is at a disadvantage insisting on a rigorous cuisine before he or she can cook food — or buy it or even read — and when the one whose menu is challenged is the parent: nurturer, disciplinarian and executive chef. Nathan van der Raaij, an energetic, hockey-playing 11-year-old from Amsterdam, has "always" been a vegetarian despite being born into a determined meat-eating family. For years his parents ignored what they fervently hoped was a fad, but now accept his eating habits. "We have no idea where it came from, but we respect his choice," says his mother, Robin Pascoe. "We do make sure he eats well but don't want it to restrict our lives. We want to be free to eat at restaurants or at friends' homes without people having to make an extra effort."

By adolescence, kids can read the labels but often ignore the ingredients. Research shows that calcium intake is often insufficient in American teens. By contrast, lacto-ovo teens usually have abundant calcium intake. For vegans, however, consuming adequate amounts of calcium without the use of fortified foods or supplements is difficult without careful dietary planning. Among vegan youth who do not take supplements, there is reason for concern with respect to iron, calcium, vitamins D and B12, and perhaps also selenium and iodine.

For four years Christina Economos has run the Tufts longitudinal health study on young adults, a comprehensive survey of lifestyle habits among undergraduates. In general, she finds that "kids who were most influenced by family diet and health values are eating healthy vegetarian or low-meat diets. But there is a whole group of students who decide to become vegetarians and do it in a poor way. The ones who do it badly don't know how to navigate in the vegetarian world. They eat more bread, cheese and pastry products and load up on salad dressing. Their saturated-fat intake is no lower than red-meat eaters', and they are more likely to consume inadequate amounts of vitamin B12 and protein. They may think they are healthier because they are some sort of vegetarian and they don't eat red meat, but in fact they may be less healthy."

Jenny Woodson, 20, now a junior at Duke University in North Carolina, has been a vegetarian from way

back. At six, on a trip to McDonald's, she ordered a tossed salad. When Jenny lived in a dorm at high school, she quickly realized that teens do not live on French fries and broccoli alone. "We ended up making vegetarian sandwiches with bagels and ingredients from the salad bar, cheese fries and stuffed baked potatoes with cottage cheese." Jenny and her friends were careful to avoid high-fat, calorie-laden fare at the salad bar, but for those who don't exercise restraint, salad-bar fixings can become vegetarian junk food.

Maggie Ellinger-Locke, 19, of University City, Missouri, has been a vegetarian for eight years and went vegan at 15. Since then she has not worn leather or wool products or slept under a down quilt. She has not used cups or utensils that have touched meat. "It felt like we were keeping kosher," says Maggie's mother Linda, who isn't Jewish. At high school Maggie was ridiculed, even shoved to the ground, by teen boys who apparently found her eating habits threatening. She found a happy ending, of sorts, enrolling at Ohio's Antioch College, where she majors in ecofeminism. "Here," she says, "the people on the defensive are the ones who eat meat."

Maggie hit a few potholes on the road to perfection. Until recently, she smoked up to two packs of cigarettes a day, quitting only because she didn't want to support the tobacco business. And she freely admits to an eating disorder: for the past year she has been bulimic, bingeing and vomiting sometimes as much as once a day to cope with stress. But she insists she is true to her beliefs: even when bingeing, she remains dedicated to vegan consumption.

The American Dietetic Association found that vegetarian diets are slightly more common among adolescents with eating problems but that "recent data suggest that adopting a vegetarian diet does not lead to eating disorders." It can be argued that most American teens already have an eating disorder — fast food, soft drinks and candy are a blueprint for obesity and heart trouble. Why should teens be expected to purge their bad habits just because they have gone veggie? Still, claims Simon Chaitowitz of the pro-vegetarian and animal-rights group Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, "Kids are better off being junk-food vegetarians than junk-food meat eaters."

Maybe. According to Dr. Joan Sabat , chairman of the Loma Linda nutrition conference, there are still concerns over vegetarian diets for growing kids or lactating women. When you are in what he calls "a state of high metabolic demand," any diet that excludes foods makes it harder to meet nutrient requirements. But he is quick to add that "for the average sedentary adult living in a Western society, a vegetarian diet meets dietary needs and prevents chronic diseases better than an omnivore diet."

Like kids and nursing moms, athletes need to be especially smart eaters. Their success depends on bursts of energy, sustained strength and muscle