

Veganism creates \$2.8B market

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The shoes are fashionable.

And the food isn't bad either.

No longer considered a "hippie fad," the vegan lifestyle is translating into business opportunities for some local entrepreneurs, resulting in part from a growing \$50 billion a year natural-products industry.

"People think vegans are grungy, granola eaters," said Ana Terrazas, who has been a vegan for 25 years.

"But it is becoming more mainstream, and businesses are thinking about that."

In Tucson, that means a Web site for vegan consumers, a new line of vegan brownies and a new restaurant devoted to vegan palates.

For those not in the know, veganism is defined as a person who avoids using eggs, dairy, honey, meat, poultry and fish, and does not buy products derived from animals, such as fur or leather, according to the Vegetarian Resource Group, based in Baltimore, Md. There are more than 1.7 million vegans, in the United States, according to a 2000 poll conducted by the group.

Choices for vegan consumers are growing along with demand, as more niche businesses cater to vegans, and main-stream grocery stores carry more products, said John Cunningham, consumer research manager for the vegetarian group.

The market for foods replacing meat and other animal products is estimated at \$2.8 billion, according to Mintel International Group Ltd., a research consumer company.

"It would behoove a company to introduce new vegan products, because they would be able to reach the widest market," said Cunningham, who added that vegan products have potential to carry over to mainstream consumers.

Success for such products, however, depends on marketing, Cunningham said.

But because vegan products are such a niche business, vegans usually spread the word quickly, he said.

Local business owners already are seeing an impact with their new enterprises.

With its blend of exposed brick, natural wood and Japanese inspired interiors, the crowd at Lovin Spoonfuls, 2990 N. Campbell Ave., ranges from those who prefer soy-based foods to those who consume the occasional grilled steak.

"I enjoy a good T-bone now and then. But the salads here are the best," said Ross Conway, a construction worker who craved something a bit different for lunch last week.

The eight-month-old cafe is Tucson's latest vegan-specific restaurant serving breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"We appeal to vegans, veggies and nonveggies alike," said Peggy Raisglid, owner of Lovin Spoonfuls.

When Raisglid opened the café, she wanted to trump certain stereotypes about vegan cuisine.

"We wanted to show people that vegan dishes can be delicious. It could be something tasty, not grainy," said Raisglid, vice president of the Vegetarian Resource Group of Tucson.

Tinkering with taste is also the focus of M. TwoFeathers, owner of Epic Vegan Treats and the Epic Café at 745 N. Fourth Ave.

TwoFeathers launched a line of vegan seed cookies, brownies and snack bars last fall and said he hopes to market them across the country this year.

The café sold about 5,000 of the goods each year before repackaging them and changing the dairy-free recipe, which uses organic items and have no trans fats.

The café now sells 10,000 of the vegan baked goods annually, TwoFeathers said.

The potential for markets outside Tucson is there, said TwoFeathers. Starbucks, Wild Oats and Whole Foods are possible outlets for such goods.

"I mean, just because you're vegan doesn't mean you don't want junk food," he said.

The growth in vegan products extends beyond food. Run out of the garage of his Civano home, David Sudarsky's thevegetariansite.com Web site stocks more than 500 pairs of vegan shoes.

The Web site sells such brands as Ethical Wares and Ecolution, makers of hemp shoes, wallets and accessories. The Web site also sells a range of products, including lip balm and vitamins.

Turned off by the fur trade and the meat industry, Sudarsky first tried vegetarianism 13 years ago before becoming a vegan.

"In most cities, you can't walk into a store to find vegan stuff," he said.

That was one reason he started the Web site, he said. He now orders products from different companies and ships them to clients around the world.

Since going online six years ago, Sudarsky said he has seen 20 percent annual growth in sales, with increasing orders from Canada, Europe and Japan.

After quitting his job as an astrophysicist to pursue the business full time, Sudarsky said he doesn't have any regrets.

"It's good to know that you're providing a quality product that doesn't conflict with your beliefs," he said.