

Is vegetarianism a diet or an ideology?

Valerie Lawrence

Vegetarianism is becoming an increasingly popular diet choice for health- and environment-conscious North Americans, and the many food-choice restrictions possible are matched only by the many different motivations for starting such a diet.

John Robbins, a vegetarian who does not approve of the way animals are treated during the food-production process, felt so strongly about the issue that he gave up his inheritance, the Baskin-Robbins empire. He published *Diet for a New America* (Toronto, Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1987), which detailed abuses in animal-related agriculture.

Others choose the vegetarian route for less altruistic reasons and are motivated by nothing more than the desire to improve their health. Daren Carbonneau of Ottawa is a runner and cyclist who switched to a vegetarian diet 2 years ago because it provides "better fuel for my training."

On the other hand, Ottawa's Marie Laurin has a severe reaction to certain foods because her body cannot produce enzymes needed to break down proteins. Her diet is currently restricted to certain vegetables, fruits, types of fish and some highly processed white breads.

In many cases, however, a

decision to eat no meat goes beyond selective shopping at the supermarket. For some vegetarians, the choice symbolizes their entire political, social and ecological posture. Vegetarianism is their ideology.

Sunny Maya of Ottawa belongs to this group. "I just see that there's a whole other way of living and that everything can line up together: concern for the environment, concern for health and concern for resource distribution between rich and poor countries can all come together through the way that one lives. One casts a vote for the planet by the lifestyle."

She first decided to become a vegetarian in 1981 after "getting out of a family milieu" in which meat was eaten regularly and "the Sunday roast was like a high point."

La popularité du végétarisme ne cesse d'augmenter. Pour certains, la décision de s'abstenir de viande est liée à la santé. Pour d'autres, ce choix symbolise l'ensemble de leur attitude politique, sociale et écologique. Quelle qu'en soit la raison, les restaurants remarquent le changement et commencent à offrir plus de mets qui ne contiennent pas de viande. Les nutritionnistes disent que l'adoption d'un régime végétarien nécessite une planification et des conseils diététiques.

She didn't feel she needed that much meat and after meeting other vegetarians and reading some texts during her first year at university, decided to eliminate most of it from her diet.

A vegetarian is someone who lives primarily on plant food and who abstains from all meat, fish or fowl. "I don't eat anything that tries to get away," is one common vegetarian maxim. Some vegetarians, and probably most North American ones, consume dairy products and eggs — they are called lacto-ovo vegetarians. However, a "pure" vegetarian eats only plant food, although they may use other animal-related products, such as leather shoes.

After Maya read Robbins's book 3 years ago, she became a vegan — someone who does not use animal-derived food or products of any kind. For example, vegans do not consume products such as eggs, lard or honey and do not wear wool or leather.

However, veganism is but one of the endless distinctions and variations found in the vegetarian movement. "It's very much like when you get into any small community," Maya explained while sitting in The Green Door, a bustling, cafeteria-style vegetarian restaurant in Ottawa. "First you think it's homogeneous . . . But it's not. Everybody is different."

Vegetarianism has been around for a long time but not as an independent movement. "One

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can only speak of the history of vegetarianism as a footnote to the history of something else," explains Keith Akers in his text, *A Vegetarian Sourcebook* (Putnam Pub Group, New York, 1983). It traces the history and motivations of vegetarians.

In ancient times various groups, including some Hindus and Buddhists, practised vegetarianism, but abstention from meat was not a central aspect of their philosophies or religions. Today, Seventh-day Adventists are encouraged to practise vegetarianism and nearly one-half of them

do. Because they provide an identifiable cohort, their dietary practices have been the subject of scientific scrutiny. A 20-year study involving 25 000 church members from California found that lacto-ovo vegetarians were much less likely to die of heart disease or non-insulin-dependent diabetes than meat eaters in the group. The study also suggested that vegetarians are less likely to develop hypertension, osteoporosis and certain cancers.

The first organized vegetarian societies did not appear until the 19th century. The Bible Christian

Church, founded in England in the early 1800s, required its members to take a vow of abstinence from both meat and alcohol. In 1847, some of its members helped to establish the first Vegetarian Society in England; it expanded to the United States 3 years later.

Until World War I the popularity of vegetarianism grew steadily in the United Kingdom and North America, but the two world wars slowed growth on both sides of the Atlantic. Civilians were not as likely to join clubs and organizations during these years but they were eating less meat because

Changes in restaurant industry point to growth of vegetarian movement

The Canadian restaurant and food industry has picked up on one of the latest trends in the diet-health-environment movement by creating a niche market for vegetarians.

Although there still aren't a lot of restaurants catering exclusively to vegetarian appetites, many are adding vegetarian items to established menus. McDonald's, for instance, announced recently that it is going to test market a nonmeat burger.

The Canadian Restaurant Association (CRA) doesn't even track the size of the vegetarian market because it is still too small to register significantly in research into consumer attitudes. "I hate to put it this way but it's not worth while doing it when we're looking at much larger segments of the industry, like family-style restaurants," says Kevin Tuttle, an information specialist at the CRA.

Despite the apparently small size of the vegetarian market, there are signs that the diet is being adopted or accept-

ed by more and more people. Most bookstores have at least a few cookbooks describing the wonders of tofu and most grocery stores will carry the ingredients listed in the books' recipes; some stores cater exclusively to the vegetarian lifestyle.

Air Canada is one of many airlines offering a vegetarian meal selection on its flights. It is the third most popular type of special meal requested by passengers, explains Bernard Claudel, manager of dining and beverage services at the airline; only meals based on religious and medical requirements are more popular. Requests by vegetarians now account for more than 25% of the airline's special-meal requests, Claudel says, and a vegetarian selection may eventually become part of its regular menu.

Even the Beef Information Centre has noticed a small vegetarian presence in Canada, although it says beef consumption is not declining. "Certainly vegetarianism is out there," says Carolyn McDonell, nation-

al coordinator at the centre, which is the promotional and educational wing of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association. "There would seem to be an increase in vegetarianism but at this point we're trying to get a handle on that."

The centre will use data from a national consumer study conducted last fall to find out which consumers are adopting vegetarian diets and whether it is a fad or long-term trend. "We're keeping an eye on it . . . but no, it's not a major thing for us at all," says McDonell.

Tuttle says it is impossible to tell if changes in the marketplace are caused by vegetarians, or by a general shift in which Canadians are simply becoming more concerned about their intake of saturated fat and cholesterol. But even if vegetarianism never becomes widely accepted, there are signs that it will expand beyond its position in the specialty-food market and become a more mainstream choice made by health-conscious Canadians.

of wartime rationing and economic restrictions caused by the Great Depression. By 1944 a small number of British vegetarians had rejected the animal-consuming soci-

ety around them and formed the first vegan society.

In the past 30 years, the growth of vegetarianism has been stimulated by the increased mili-

tancy of animal rights activists and concerns about personal health and the environment. Only 0.2% of Britons did not eat meat in 1945, according to the British

Vegetarian diets require careful planning, nutrition experts say

The National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), after studying the medical literature, has developed a policy statement concerning vegetarian diets. The Ottawa-based institute, which was founded in 1983 to provide leadership in the nutrition field, used mostly American data when it listed the advantages and disadvantages of a vegetarian diet in 1990.

Its conclusions do not promote vegetarianism but simply state the facts about this alternative diet: "Health benefits associated with a vegetarian diet include lowered risks for some chronic degenerative diseases such as obesity, coronary artery disease, non-insulin-dependent diabetes and colon cancer. These benefits may also be achieved by following an omnivorous diet low in fat, especially saturated fat, and high in complex carbohydrates."

The American Dietetic Association (ADA) states that "vegetarian diets are healthful and nutritionally adequate when appropriately planned." However, an ADA position paper also points out that vegetarian and nonvegetarian diets may be either beneficial or detrimental depending on the planning used to develop them.

The ADA says people with special nutritional needs, such as lactating mothers, growing children and people recovering from an illness, should be cautious about following a vegetarian diet, and vegans must be

more concerned than lacto-ovo vegetarians about their consumption of sufficient calories and vitamins such as vitamin D. The ADA says people with special needs should consult a qualified nutritionist to plan a diet that meets their especially high nutrient requirements.

A Canadian researcher has conducted studies that indicate a vegetarian diet can meet all nutritional requirements if properly planned. Professor Rosalind Gibson of the Division of Applied Human Nutrition at Ontario's University of Guelph has examined and compared the nutritional status of adolescent vegetarian and non-vegetarian girls. She found that teenagers on vegetarian diets had lower iron levels, but she still believes that these diets can be adopted without putting someone at risk of developing iron and zinc deficiencies as long as "very careful food choices" have been made.

Gibson says the teenage vegetarians in her study developed deficiencies because they did not know enough about substituting other foods for the meat they were no longer eating. She says their diet should be planned with a nutritionist's help so that it won't have to be supplemented with vitamins.

But she says the real problem may lie in the generally poor eating habits of teenagers because some of the non-vegetarians in her study also

had "suboptimal iron" sources in their diet. She said her study also determined that the energy intake of teenagers is generally too low. "So I don't think the deficiencies are totally due to the vegetarian diet. I think they have to do with food choices made by that group of people."

Eleanor Nielson, director of public education at the Canadian Cancer Society, says that more research is needed on the connection between diet and cancer before the society will make a policy statement on vegetarianism. "There's a general belief that diet really is an important factor when it comes to cancer but the evidence is not firm enough from a scientific standpoint," she says.

The society has not specifically examined whether vegetarian diets are better at preventing cancer than non-vegetarian diets, but it does encourage increased consumption of fruits, vegetables and grains, foods that are integral to the vegetarian diet.

Carol Dombrow, manager of nutritional programs at the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, says the foundation encourages people to cut back on their saturated-fat intake but says it would not be practical to ask them to give up meat entirely. Instead, her organization has adopted Canada's *Guidelines for Healthy Eating* as its statement on diet. Setting the finer details of that diet will be up to each Canadian.

Vegetarian Society. By the early 1980s, it says, that figure had risen to 2%, and by 1991 7% of the population identified itself as vegetarian. There is no national vegetarian association in Canada and no accurate statistics about the strength of vegetarian movement here.

Akers points out that people usually adopt vegetarianism on their own, without joining an organization. Rik Scarce, a graduate

of killing animals for human consumption.

McQueen, a vegan, joined the TVA in the mid-1970s. He says dietary veganism is only one-stage in his progression but pure veganism, his final objective, is much more difficult to achieve because many animal products are "hidden." For example, pig fat is used in tire production, and many oils and lubricants contain other animal-related products.

government, economics, environment, and sex and the family. The nutritional value of food, once the central issue, becomes almost secondary."

McQueen says that popular culture and tradition hold back the more widespread acceptance and adoption of vegetarianism. However, many well-known people, from scholars to artists, have contributed to our culture and, at the same time, have practised or advocated vegetarianism. Examples range from Albert Einstein and George Bernard Shaw to William Shatner and k.d. lang. (lang, well known for her vegetarian diet and her involvement in producing a "meat stinks" commercial, recently won a prestigious American Music Award. The Alberta government refused to congratulate her because meat production is a major industry in Alberta and some of the province's politicians are angered by her antimeat stand.)

Even the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles have a book, *ABCs For a Better Planet*, that discusses the environmental effects of eating meat and shows one of the Turtles eating a salad while a cow looks on.

There is no typical vegetarian, just as there is no single motivation for becoming a vegetarian. The vegan, for example, is still a minority within the vegetarian world, to say nothing of Canadian society as a whole. Few vegetarians predict theirs will ever be a widespread movement in Canada, although they do see a shift toward their way of thinking that is driven, at least in part, by concerns about the environment and personal health.

And most vegetarians say they are happy to remain a subset of society. "It's a special privilege to be vegetarian," says Andrea Hacquoil of Ottawa, who teaches vegetarian cooking. "If people don't want it, that's their problem. I'm the lucky one." ■

"It's a special privilege to be vegetarian."

— Andrea Hacquoil

student of sociology at Washington State University, in Pullman, says vegetarians do not join clubs because they are already part of a subculture that "resides within various other subcultures such as the environmental movement." In a recent book dealing with the "radical environmental movement" he examined the beliefs of North American environmental groups. He found vegetarians were active in environmental movements and animal rights groups.

Some vegetarians do, however, form local organizations. The Toronto Vegetarian Association (TVA), founded in 1945, now has approximately 600 members; it was an outgrowth of the Food Reform League, which was launched in 1911. Peter McQueen, the TVA president since 1986, says the first members were concerned with the morality

"Now if you want to be a purist, really purist, you could say, 'Well, I won't drive a car.' But then you're going to have to extend that to say, 'Well, I won't take public transit or ride a bike and I won't buy products that have been shipped by a truck.'

"I mean, how far are you going to go? There aren't any vegan tire factories, so you either choose to be part of the real world, or you don't."

In his book *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* (Washington Square Pub, New York, 1980), Peter Farb explained the transition that takes place in people who eat "health" food. "As they develop their own network of communications, the faddists gradually extend their beliefs about food to other avenues of life until, in time, they arrive at a full-blown ontology, or world view, that encompasses religion,