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Giuseppe Arcimboldo's depiction of Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor, 1590. Modern cuisine is also recognising the potential of vegetables

A moveable feast

"New vegetarianism" is an opportunity not a sacrifice, says William Skidelsky

About a year and a half ago, I joined the ranks of the those eating less meat. I didn't do this primarily out of ecological concern, or from a desire to be healthier, but because I moved in with my girlfriend (now wife), a strict vegetarian. As I do almost all the cooking in our household, I realised that a major shift in my culinary approach was required. I now cook vegetarian most of the time, and save meat and fish for when we've got guests.

I'm not alone. In recent years, there's been growing talk of "meat reducers" and "flexitarians": people who, while not strict vegetarians, incorporate elements of vegetarianism into their diets. According to the Vegetarian Society, while the number of actual vegetarians in the UK has remained static over the past decade at around 2m, there are many more who say they've significantly reduced their meat intake, or now eat fish but no meat. Retail statistics back this up: between 2006 and 2010, supermarkets reported a 20 per cent growth in the "meat-free market," while the average amount of meat a person eats in a year fell from 81.4kg to 76.2kg. For hardliners, however, vegetarianism isn't a lifestyle choice but a moral imperative; a halfway-house just isn't acceptable.

What's been surprising is how little I've minded. Previously, like most meat-lovers, I instinctively viewed vegetables as accompaniments. I had a handful of vegetarian dishes in my repertoire, but I couldn't imagine doing away with meat altogether. Through embracing semi-vegetarianism, however, I've become comfortable with the idea of vegetables taking centre stage, and enjoyed the challenge of finding ways to make them interesting. When vegetables are side-dishes, it's easy to treat them lazily (boil or bake; slap on some seasoning). When they're all you've got, you're forced to be more creative.

Fortunately, becoming a part-time vegetarian now seems less of a sacrifice than it would have in the past. Veggie cooking has come a long way from the bad old days of anaemic salads, pulse-based stews and imitation sausages. A large part of the improvement has come about organically, simply because Britain has become more open to the cuisines of other countries, many of which have richer traditions of vegetable cookery than we do. These days, instead of being stuck with nut roast or bean hotpot, vegetarians can roam the globe, making risotto or pasta one night, hummus, baba ganoush and tabbouleh the next, and then sag aloo and dal the day after that.

Just recently, too, vegetables have enjoyed a surge of attention from chefs and cookery writers who aren't themselves vegetarians. The most dramatic example of this is Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, who, long known as a dedicated carnivore, underwent a kind of Damascene conversion, and declared that henceforth he would subsist mainly on vegetables. (This was accompanied, naturally, by a book and TV series.) In a less showy way, Nigel Slater trod a similar path with his two-volume cookbook *Tender*, based on produce from his garden. And then there's Yotam Ottolenghi, whose "new vegetarian" *Guardian* column and vegetable cookbook *Plenty* have had nearly as much impact on middle class cooking habits as the *River Café* books did back in the 90s.

Ottolenghi, who comes from Israel, is a culinary hybridist, borrowing rampantly from many cuisines to create a cooking style all his own. His eponymous London restaurants (he has four) embody a modernist informality, with their stark white communal tables and rows of sumptuously presented, ready-prepared dishes. Speaking on the phone, Ottolenghi tells me that he finds the challenge of vegetarian cooking quite different from that of cooking meat, which has "more of its own savoury, *umami* flavour. So it doesn't take much to make it delicious. All you need to do is put it on a grill and season it. With vegetables, to make something really satisfying takes a bit more attention and effort."

He adds, though, that the options become much greater if one doesn't stick rigidly to vegetarianism—something in keeping with the new "flexitarian" approach. "For example, in parts of Asia, you get a lot of use of shrimp paste, which can be used sparingly but has a very strong taste—so you don't need to eat a cow to get all those fantastic flavours. It comes from something that is more easily available and more ecological."

Most haute cuisine establishments in Britain now offer vegetarian tasting menus, something very few did a few years ago. A recent visit to the Ledbury, a Michelin two-starred restaurant in Notting Hill, became a compare-and-contrast exercise in how successful this could be: while I had the normal tasting menus based on meat and fish, my wife had the vegetarian one, and allowed me to plunder liberally from her plate. Although her menu was imaginative and faultlessly executed, many of the dishes, when set alongside the richer flavours of mine, did seem underpowered, as if lacking something.

Given its reliance on great depth of flavour, vegetarian haute cuisine may always struggle to hit the heights. But elsewhere, certainly, even if the future isn't vegetarian, it will surely involve considerably less meat.

William Skidelsky is books editor of the Observer

Leith on life

Sam Leith

The age of the troll

Two pieces of wisdom today preoccupy me. One, whose originator is unknown, is: "Don't feed the trolls." The other—which I've heard plausibly attributed to the *Guardian* columnist Grace Dent—is: "Never read the bottom half of the internet." The latter—a warning, essentially, against plunging into the foaming cauldron of madness in online comment threads—is a sort of preventative measure. If you don't read the bottom half of the internet—the bit under the bridge—you stand that much less chance of finding yourself looking down on a hungry troll, with a billy-goat in your arms, and being overcome by temptation.

A troll, in internet terms, is someone who sails into a discussion just to mess things up. He is the poker of sticks into ants' nests: the commenter who gatecrashes a rape survivor's messageboard with a collection of Frankie Boyle jokes, or posts fake news stories about stock in forums for investors. The idea is not to contribute to the discussion, but to derail it. Online trolls thrive on rage, hurt and confusion. What they're after is a rise. Hence: don't feed the trolls. It only encourages them.

This stuff can get ugly. Trolls are, as I write, in the news because of the case of 21-year-old Liam Stacey, who used Twitter to unroll a stream of racist abuse as footballer Fabrice Muamba lay critically ill. Stacey was, controversially, sentenced to 56 days in jail. It was the racist component of his remarks, it's worth noting, that landed him the custodial sentence: there's no law against being offensive in general.

I don't have any way of knowing whether Stacey is, when not behind a computer screen, convulsed with race hate. It seems perfectly plausible, though, that he was actuated not by personal racism so much as by the profound taboo on racist language itself. The troll need not be in earnest; he's simply looking for whatever will provoke the greatest reaction. The more profoundly offensive we find a particular type of language—be it racist, misogynist, obscene, violent, or paedophilic—the more attractive it becomes to the troll. That's suggestive. It makes the phenomenon something akin to an internet-wide return of the repressed.

There's a detachment, there, too. It's not a phenomenon that would be possible were trolls to see their victims face to face. Here is the moral disconnection made possible by anonymity or, at least, the mediated interactions of cyberspace. The relationship is between you and a screen. The process is doubly dehumanised: your victim is an abstraction; your troll-self a persona.

There was an oddly touching story not long ago about Noel Edmonds, who discovered that someone had set up a Facebook page calling for him to be killed. This page wasn't, we can assume, in earnest: those soliciting assassinations tend not to do so on Facebook. But it upset Edmonds. He hired a firm that helped him track down the troll, a PhD student at a Kent university, and requested a face-to-face meeting in exchange for not involving the police. Edmonds said: "I could see there was someone young behind this and I didn't want to see that person's life ruined with a criminal record." The student, when they met, was reportedly "shaking with fear and in floods of tears and saying sorry." That's the sound of the reality gap closing.

But though it's a commonplace that trolls of the sort who baited Fabrice Muamba and Noel Edmonds are on the rise, what seems to me to have sneaked up on us is how much the methods and dynamics of trollery have entered the mainstream. Trolls are not marginal. The dividing line between the top half of the internet and the bottom half has become so blurred as more or less to have ceased to exist. The trolls have escaped. They've overrun the bridge. Troll speaks unto troll, and there are bits and pieces of billy-goat—blood, horn, fur, fragments of bone—all over the shop.

You can see trolliness in the Twitter feeds of drunken students. But you can also see it in entertainment: the "new nastiness" in stand-up comedy—using offensive ▸

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