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Culture

Vegetarian Myths Debunked

A tale of the hilarious misconceptions omnivores have about vegetarians

by Taylor Clark, Slate Magazine

Every vegetarian remembers his

first time. Not the unremarkable event of his first meal without meat, mind you. No, I mean the first time he casually lets slip that he's turned herbivore, prompting everyone in earshot to stare at him as if he just revealed plans to sail his carrot-powered plasma yacht to Neptune.

For me, this first time came at an Elks scholarship luncheon in rural Oregon when I was 18. All day, I'd succeeded at seeming a promising and responsible young man, until that fateful moment when someone asked why I hadn't taken any meat from the buffet. After I offered my reluctant explanation--and the guy announced it to the entire room--30 people went eerily quiet, undoubtedly expecting me to climb on my chair and launch into a speech on the virtues of an anarchic revolution. In the corner, an elderly, suited man glared at me as he slowly raised a slice of bologna and executed the most menacing bite of cold cut in recorded history. I didn't get the scholarship.

I tell this story not to win your pity but to illustrate a point: I've been vegetarian for a decade, and when it comes up, I still get a look of confused horror that says, "But you seemed so... normal." The U.S. boasts more than 10 million vegetarians today, yet most Americans assume that every last one is a loopy, self-satisfied health fanatic, hellbent on draining all the joy out of life. Those of us who want to avoid the social nightmare have to hide our vegetarianism like an addiction, because admit it,

omnivores: You know nothing about us. Do we eat fish? Will we panic if confronted with a hamburger? Are we dying of malnutrition? You have no clue. So read on, my flesh-eating friends--I believe it's high time we cleared a few things up.

To demonstrate what a vegetarian really is, let's begin with a simple thought experiment. Imagine a completely normal person with completely normal food cravings, someone who has a broad range of friends, enjoys a good time, is a carbon-based being, and so on. Now remove from this person's diet anything that once had eyes, and, wham!, you have yourself a vegetarian. Normal person, no previously ocular food, end of story.

Some people call themselves vegetarians and still eat chicken or fish, but unless we're talking about the kind of salmon that comes freshly plucked from the vine, this makes you an omnivore. A select few herbivores go one step further and avoid all animal products--milk, eggs, honey, leather--and they call themselves vegan (pronounced vee-gan). These people are intense.

Vegetarians give up meat for a variety of ethical, environmental and health reasons that are secondary to this essay's goal of increasing brotherly understanding, so I'll mostly set them aside. Suffice it to say that one day I suddenly realized that I could never look a cow in the eyes, press a knocking gun to her temple, and pull the trigger without feeling I'd done something cruel and unnecessary. (Sure, if it's kill the cow or starve, then say your prayers, my bovine friend--but for now, it's not quite a mortal struggle to subsist on the other five food groups.)

I am well aware that even telling you this makes me seem like the kind of person who wants to break into your house and liberate your pet hamster--that is, like a PETA activist. Most vegetarians, though, would tell you that they appreciate the intentions of groups like PETA but not the obnoxious tactics. It's like this: We're all rooting for the same team, but they're the ones in face paint, bellowing obscenities at the umpire and flipping over every car with a Yankees bumper sticker. I have no designs on your Camry--or your hamster.

Now, here in America, when I say that vegetarians are normal people with normal food cravings, many omnivores will hoist a lamb shank in triumph and point out that

you can hardly call yourself normal if the aroma of, say, sizzling bacon doesn't fill you with deepest yearning. To which I reply: We're not insane. We know meat tastes good to many people; it's why there's a freezer case at your supermarket full of woefully inadequate meat substitutes. Believe me, if obtaining bacon didn't require slaughtering a pig, I'd have a bacon sandwich in each hand right now with a bacon layer cake waiting in the fridge for dessert. But, that said, I can also tell you that with some time away from the butcher's section, many meat products start to seem gross. Ground beef in particular now strikes me as absolutely revolting; I have a vague memory that hamburgers taste good, but the idea of taking a cow's leg, mulching it into a fatty pulp, and forming it into a pancake makes me gag. And hot dogs... I mean, hot dogs? You do know what that is, right?

As a consolation prize we American vegetarians get tofu, a treasure most omnivores are more than happy to do without. Well, this may stun you, but I'm not any more excited about a steaming heap of unseasoned tofu blobs than you are. Tofu is like fugu blowfish sushi: Prepared correctly, it's delicious; prepared incorrectly, it's lethal. Very early in my vegetarian career, I found myself famished and stuck in a mall, so I wandered over to the food court's Asian counter. When I asked the teenage chief culinary artisan what was in the tofu stir-fry, he snorted and scoffed something. Desperation made me order it anyway, and I can tell you that promises have rarely been more loyally kept than this guy's pledge that the tofu would taste like, uh, that word he said.

So here's a tip: Unless you know you're in expert hands (Thai restaurants are a good bet), don't even try tofu. Otherwise, it's your funeral.

As long as we're discussing restaurants, allow me a quick word with the hardworking chefs at America's dining establishments. We really appreciate that you included a vegetarian option on your menu (and if you didn't, is our money not green?), but it may interest you to know that most of us are not salad freaks on a grim slog for nourishment. We actually enjoy food, especially the kind that tastes good.

So enough with the bland vegetable dishes, and, for God's sake, please make the Gardenburgers stop; it's stunning how many restaurants lavish unending care on their meat dishes yet are content to throw a flavorless hockey puck from Costco into the microwave and call it cuisine.

Every vegetarian is used to slim pickings when dining out, so we're not asking for much--just for something you'd like to eat. I'll even offer a handy trick. Pretend you're trapped in a kitchen stocked with every ingredient imaginable, from asiago to zucchini, but with zero meat. With no flesh available, picture what you'd make for yourself; this is what we want, too.

For those kind-hearted omnivores who willingly invite subversive vegetarians into their homes for dinner parties and barbecues (really! we are not afraid of them!), the same rule applies--but also know that unless you're dealing with a vegetarian who is a unusually demanding person, we don't expect you to bend over backward for us. In fact, if we get the sense that you cooked for three extra hours to accommodate our dietary preferences, we will marvel at your considerate nature, but we will also feel insanely guilty. Similarly, it's very thoughtful of you to ask whether it'll bother me if I see you eat meat, but don't worry: I'm not going to compose an epic poem about your corpse sandwich.

Which leads me to a vital point for friendly omnivore-herbivore relations. As you're enjoying that pork loin next to me, I am not silently judging you. I realize that anyone who has encountered the breed of vegetarian who says things like, "I can hear your lunch screaming," will find this tough to believe, but I'm honestly not out to convert you. My girlfriend and my closest pals all eat meat, and they'll affirm that I've never even raised an eyebrow about it.

Now, do I think it strange that the same people who dress their dogs in berets and send them to day spas are often unfazed that an equally smart pig suffered and died to become their McSandwich? Yes, I do. Would I prefer it if we at least raised these animals humanely? Yes, I would.

Let's be honest, though: I'm not exactly St. Francis of Assisi over here, tenderly ministering to every chipmunk that crosses my path. I try to represent for the animal kingdom, but take a look at my shoes--they're made of leather, which, I am told by those with expert knowledge of it, comes from dead cows. This is the sort of revelation that prompts meat boosters to pick up the triumphant lamb shank once again and accuse us of hypocrisy. Well, sort of. (Hey, you try to find a pair of nonleather dress shoes.)

My dedication to the cause might be incomplete, but I'd still say that doing something beats doing nothing. It's kind of like driving a hybrid: not a solution to the global-warming dilemma but a decent start. Let's just say that at the dinner table, I roll in a Prius.

Finally, grant me one cordial request: Please don't try to convince us that being vegetarian is somehow wrong. If you're concerned for my health, that's very nice, though you can rest assured that I'm in shipshape. If you want to have an amiable tete-a-tete about vegetarianism, that's great. But if you insist on being the aggressive blowhard who takes meatlessness as a personal insult and rails about what fools we all are, you're only going to persuade me that you're dumb.

When someone says he's religious, you probably don't start the stump speech about how God is a lie created to enslave the ignorant masses, and it's equally offensive to berate an herbivore. I know you think we're crazy. That's neat. But seeing as I've endured the hassle of being a vegetarian for several years now, perhaps I've given this a little thought. So let's just agree to disagree and joyously get on with it.

Because, really, peace and understanding are what it's all about: your porterhouse and my portobello coexisting in perfect harmony--though preferably not touching. We're actually not so different, after all, my omnivorous chums. In fact, I like to think that when an omnivore looks in the mirror, he just sees a vegetarian who happens to eat meat. Or, no, wait, maybe the mirror sees the omnivore through the prism of flesh and realizes we all have a crystalline soul.

Hey, while you're here: Have I ever told you about anarchism? Plpi