

IT TOOK 330 PAGES TO turn me vegetarian. The book was Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* and the scene in a Texas slaughterhouse was so gruesome it was enough to send me into carnivorous exile.

That was eight years ago, and I've never felt healthier or had more energy. Or felt better about studies that show vegetarianism is linked to lower rates of cholesterol, blood pressure, heart disease, dementia, obesity, type 2 diabetes and breast, prostate and colon cancer. A study in the *British Medical Journal* also found that vegetarians were generally better educated, wealthier and had a higher IQ than flesh munchers.

Back in the day, being vegetarian was synonymous with tree-hugging, hairy-legged hippies. But shunning anything with a pulse or a face has gone mainstream, and when stars like Madonna and Victoria Beckham start extolling the virtues of a meat-free diet, you can be sure there will be many veggie-come-latelies.

Yet most people give up eating flesh for economic, taste, religious or health issues, wanting to avoid the antibiotics, hormones and chemicals contained in many meat and dairy products, while others are prompted by global food scandals like avian flu or BSA (ever heard of anyone dying of mad tofu disease?).

Concern for the environment is reason enough for some: A 2006 United Nations report revealed the livestock sector was a greater →

THE NEW VEGETARIANS

No longer the preserve of alternative lifestylers, vegetarianism is winning hip new converts

WORDS SHARON STEPHENSON



Makeup artist Debra Ashton-Knowles.

contributor to global warming than transportation. University of Chicago researchers took it one step further, claiming that going vegan was more effective at combating global warming than driving a hybrid Prius.

Perhaps one of the biggest reasons for forsaking meat is compassion for animals. Factory farming, battery cages and inhumane transport and slaughter practices are, for many, the thin edge of the vege. In my case, it didn't seem right to kill animals for the sake of my palate, especially when there were so many alternatives. As Sir Paul McCartney once said: "If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian."

For the love of animals

The biggest thrill Debra Ashton-Knowles gets from being a vegan is looking an animal in the eye and saying, "You have nothing to fear from me."

It's been 23 years since the *Good Morning and Dancing with the Stars* makeup artist gave up eating meat and fish, and two since she added cow's milk, eggs and honey to that list. Leather shoes and products made from wool or silk are also out.

Some might consider that slightly to the left of nutty, but the 45-year-old says cutting out so many food groups has been the most positive lifestyle choice she's ever made – and it's not just the environment or the world's animals thanking her for it.

"I've never eaten better or more interesting food in my

life. Don't get me wrong, I love my food and am happiest in the kitchen! But limiting what you can and can't eat forces you to explore more interesting and challenging tastes, which has been exciting."

The day we meet, she's singing the praises of a vegan cupcake recipe. "They taste just like Mum's, but without the eggs or cow's milk."

Debra made the connection between living, breathing animals and the carved-up bodies on her plate after reading Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation*, widely credited with being the founding document of the animal rights movement.

"I was already aware of the cruelties of animal research, but that book was a turning point in me living life in a conscientious way."

The only vegetarian in a family of nine, Debra says her mother was convinced it was a teenage fad. "But she still supported me by cooking the most beautiful vegetarian meals."

The former journalist says she did a lot of reading about making the transition to a plant-based diet. "I get frequent checkups, and last time my doctor sent me a note saying the results were excellent!"

She's never been criticised and says most people are willing to accommodate her diet ("I'll often take vegan sausages to a barbecue") while greater supermarket choice and the increasing number of vegan options in restaurants mean she has no trouble feeding herself.

It was a news item about dairying that led her to veganism two years ago.

"I couldn't bear to think of calves being taken from their mothers, sometimes within 24 hours of being born, just so that we could drink the milk. I saw the mothers trying to follow their calves and have since read that they grieve terribly. I didn't want to be part of that."

She also walks the walk in other areas of her life, as a board member of the Wellington SPCA and spokesperson for the Campaign Against Factory Farming. And she says using cruelty-free cosmetics is a no-brainer.

"I was part of an early movement to campaign for cruelty-free makeup many years ago. A lot of companies have taken a stand against animal testing and I refuse to use those which haven't. I probably wouldn't have continued in this career if things hadn't changed."

The one area of conflict is what to feed the menagerie of animals that share a home with Debbie and husband Joe. "Experts say dogs can live a vegetarian lifestyle but not cats. There's a vegan product I've fed my three cats but they don't like it. But I'm not comfortable with their food, and I continue to search for alternatives!"



Fiona Hawtin, pictured at Auckland restaurant Ima & Ibn: "When I find a place to eat that's sympathetic to veggos, I get obsessed with it!"

Getting the kids on board

Fiona Hawtin doesn't want to sound unpatriotic but the editor of *Fashion Quarterly* hopes that one day eating animals will be seen as "uncivilised".

"Given that New Zealand is a primary producing country and farmers are held in high esteem, I understand it might sound extremist, but in summer when you see sheep panting in the heat with no shelter, it isn't hard to see why I'm so opposed to the industrialisation of farm animals," she says.

The hairdresser-turned-journalist became a strict vegetarian when she was 12, when keeping pet hens turned her off eating chicken. "I used to love the taste of meat and can remember consuming a lot of steak, roast lamb and oysters. But for me it became an ethical issue – I don't think it's acceptable practice to eat animals. But at the same time, I don't bang on about it in the company of others or want to make people feel uncomfortable eating meat in my presence."

However, meat is definitely a four letter word in the

Auckland home Fiona shares with her partner Jonathan Maze and their children Polly, seven, and Louis, four.

"Both my children are vegetarians, although we encourage them to eat fish once a week, while Jonathan will eat fish at restaurants but not at home."

Fiona jokes that she gives her kids iron supplements "to stop the bad mother looks!" but says processed foods don't make it into the cupboards at home, because of their tendency to include animal by-products.

"Choosing this lifestyle has made me a better cook; I spend lots of time in the kitchen at weekends making homemade pasta and gnocchi, extensive Indian meals and brioche."

But it's when eating out that the fashion maven has the hardest time. "We've got such a big meat-eating culture here it's a bit like trying to be a veggo in France, where they eat anything that moves, or Kenya where bone soup is as common as a cup of tea. But I do get annoyed when a restaurant doesn't factor in vegetarians or they aren't happy to make something decent – like →

THIS LIFESTYLE HAS MADE ME A BETTER COOK; I SPEND LOTS OF TIME IN THE KITCHEN AT WEEKENDS MAKING HOMEMADE PASTA AND GNOCCHI, EXTENSIVE INDIAN MEALS AND BRIOCHE

the business lunch I attended last week where I was served three pieces of tofu and a few button mushrooms while the rest of my table tucked into substantial lunches. Seriously, I can do vegetarian food much better at home than most of the top-notch restaurants manage.”

So how does Fiona reconcile her beliefs with the fashion and beauty industry in which she works, which isn't known for its high ethical standards?

“I've learned to keep my personal beliefs in check and not compromise my professional life. When I first became a vegetarian, I tried to wear non-leather shoes and so on, but it was too hard back then, so I developed my own personal code of conduct that I don't transgress. Otherwise I'd have ended up becoming a crazy woman who never left her house for fear of breathing in bugs!”

For anyone thinking of giving up meat, Fiona's advice is to “Just do it”.

“I find it strange that people say, ‘I'm thinking about becoming a vegetarian because I saw the Jamie Oliver programme on chickens but...’ Or they go to petting farms and make baby noises at the lambs and then go home to their lamb dinners. Come on, people!”

A tastier plate

Think being a vegetarian takes all the fun out of eating? You haven't been to Tamara Staples' house. I arrive to a delicious meal of vegetable tagine with lemon almond couscous, wilted spinach and spiced carrot salad. Dessert is, of course, a collection of treats from her Wellington cupcake shop Tempt.

“I tend to eat better meals than I did as a carnivore, simply because I'm experimenting and branching out more,” says the 40-year-old patisserie chef. She knows she's struck a chord when partner Adam and children Maddie, 13, Dani, 10, and Max, seven, opt for her meals rather than the meat dishes they usually eat.

Melbourne-born Tamara, who recently moved to New Zealand for love, admits she does sneak the odd bit of fish. “But generally I'll stick to things like pulses and lots of soy products. I'm convinced my body is benefiting from a lighter-style diet.”

It was for health and taste reasons that Tamara opted to forsake meat. “I was working at a chalet in the French Alps where I was doing a lot of the cooking. I didn't like the quality of the meat we were using, or even know what it was! It seemed easier to give it up for a little while.”

That temporary decision has lasted 18 years. “Going into it, I didn't really think about how it would affect me. I made the leap and then tried to ensure I was doing the right things nutritionally.”



Patisserie chef
Tamara Staples.

Indeed, the biggest hurdle she faced was explaining her decision to her family after returning from her OE. “Probably the biggest negative of being a vegetarian is other people's reactions – that I can't be as healthy as meat eaters or that I'm setting a bad example for my children. Then there's the ‘What am I going to feed you?’ question when you're invited to people's homes. Luckily, the availability of options has increased; these days there's no reason to be lumped with a sad-looking salad.”

Being gluten-intolerant ups the ante, and means it's critical Tamara keeps an eye on her health. “I have regular iron checks and monitor my diet to ensure I get as many nutrients as possible, especially B group vitamins.”

It's the ultimate sacrifice for any vegetarian, but Tamara regularly cooks meat for her family. “It can be difficult to smell and touch, but I'm a trained chef so it's something I'm used to.” Her oldest daughter shows signs of following in her footsteps, but Tamara is keen that her kids get adequate nutrition from all the food groups while they're growing. “They can make that choice later.”

Nor does she have an issue with using animal products in her business. “I have to separate my own beliefs if I want to make a profit. I've had customers wanting a vegan cake and I'm happy to make that but, from a baking angle, the best cakes are made with butter and milk. I supply a product that people have definite expectations of.” □