

How the world stopped making fun of vegans – and what happened next

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Vegans spent years as the butt of the joke. Now that plant-based diets have gone mainstream, they're fighting back. And they've got a smart answer for everything.

Want to hear a vegan joke?

How can you tell if someone's vegan?

Don't worry, they'll tell you.

LMAO. If you're vegan yourself, you're probably all too familiar with this one... and all the other ones. But in 2024, do vegan jokes still land?

A clue can be found in a [wonderful moment](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3287032874852357) (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3287032874852357>) on British TV in 2022 when an anti-vegan commentator was invited to prove he could tell the difference between a plant-based sausage sandwich and a meat one. He quickly picked out one of the sandwiches, calling it "luscious and lovely" and saying "you can taste the meat in it". The punchline? They were both vegan.

This time, the meat eater was the butt of the joke. How did we get here?

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You know those scenes of actor Peter Dinklage feasting on meat in Game of Thrones? It was actually tofu. He's been vegan for years. As has Billie Eilish, who famously gifted fans the recipe for her favourite vegan-noodle soup. Her mother founded Support & Feed, an NGO dedicated to creating a fair, plant-based food system to combat food insecurity and the climate crisis.

Celebrities, search trends and sausage rolls

Dr Matthew Cole of the Open University specialises in the sociology of veganism. Not long after going vegan 18 years ago, he and Karen Morgan published a seminal paper on “[vegaphobia](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01348.x)”, which found that media coverage of vegans in the UK was overwhelmingly negative. “At that time we were very conscious of feeling stigmatised as vegans,” he says over the phone. Most of the 400 articles from 2007 that Cole and Morgan looked at “didn’t engage in a rational debate”, he says, they just relied on stereotypes of vegans as “self-evidently ridiculous”: humourless, preachy, and living by an absurd set of rules. The idea that any of the people reading this stuff might actually *be* vegans, did not seem to occur to the people writing it.

Seventeen years on, and what a difference. In 2019 a vegan sausage roll was such a hit that bakeries in the UK sold out. In 2021 Google picked out “vegan food near me” as a breakout search term, up 5000%. The Netflix documentary [The Game Changers](https://www.netflix.com/title/81157840) (https://www.netflix.com/title/81157840), which featured mixed martial artist James Wilks, racing driver Lewis Hamilton and even

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Arnold Schwarzenegger raving about their plant-based diets, showed that veganism could now reach the meatiest, most macho corners of our culture.

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“It’s becoming more and more difficult to ignore the science that connects our consumer behaviours to serious environmental consequences”

Dr. Corey Wrenn

The rapid rise of veganism hasn’t been without its bumps: the market for plant-based meat replacements took a tumble in 2022, amid rising food prices. But vegans don’t seem to be in retreat. The United States has between two and three million vegans today, according to Gallup, or about 1% of adults. In the UK a 2022 poll by YouGov put the figure at 2%, which means about a million vegans – up from an estimated 150,000 in 2006. By some counts the figure has nearly doubled again in the past year alone.

There are still way fewer vegans than there are vegetarians and flexitarians, but vegans’ journey from the fringes to the mainstream has been the really dramatic part of this story.



These two A-list celebs don't need meat to be at the top of their game. Although tennis star Venus Williams prefers to call herself a 'cheagan' – a vegan who cheats sometimes, and Oscar-winner Natalie Portman is keen to challenge the stereotype of vegans always eating alfalfa.

“Everyone was wrong”

From Matthew Cole's point of view, “things feel a lot better” as a vegan. “I don't feel like we're being ridiculed left, right and centre,” he says. Crucially, today's discourse around veganism makes the lifestyle feel *possible* – it gives audiences a sense that “I could do this.” Corey Wrenn, another vegan sociologist, agrees that “we've seen considerable strides in social acceptance”. This is at least partly because “it's becoming more and more difficult to ignore the science that connects our consumer behaviours to serious environmental consequences”.

Wrenn says: “Twenty years ago when I went vegan, no one even knew what that was. I recently visited the grocery store where I grew up in a small railroad town in southern Appalachia. I was astonished at the variety of vegan alternatives for sale. Everyday living as a vegan is a lot easier.”

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Desirée Daniels says she “didn’t know a soul who was vegan” before she made the switch in 2017 (triggered by the documentary What the Health (<https://www.netflix.com/title/80174177>)). Daniels grew up in North Carolina eating “all the things regular folks eat in this area”, which meant a fair amount of barbecue ribs, pulled pork and fried chicken. When she went vegan, “people said, what in the world do you eat, there’s nothing left to eat after meat and dairy, right? Well, everyone was wrong.” To answer all the many questions she got asked, Daniels started her blog, I Can You Can Vegan (<https://www.icanyoucanvegan.com>).

“It’s gotten easier over the years,” she says, and she’s particularly proud to be able to be a vegan role model for other African-Americans. “When I went vegan there weren’t a lot of people in the vegan community that looked like me. One of the things I love about my platform is being able to share the way I eat with people from my community. I want other people to be able to see me thriving, living my life and enjoying the food that I eat, and know that it’s possible for them too.”



Famous for taking a stand for social justice, former 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick is now also a proud vegan, teaming up with Ben & Jerry's in 2021 to create a 100% plant-based ice cream called: Change the Whirl.

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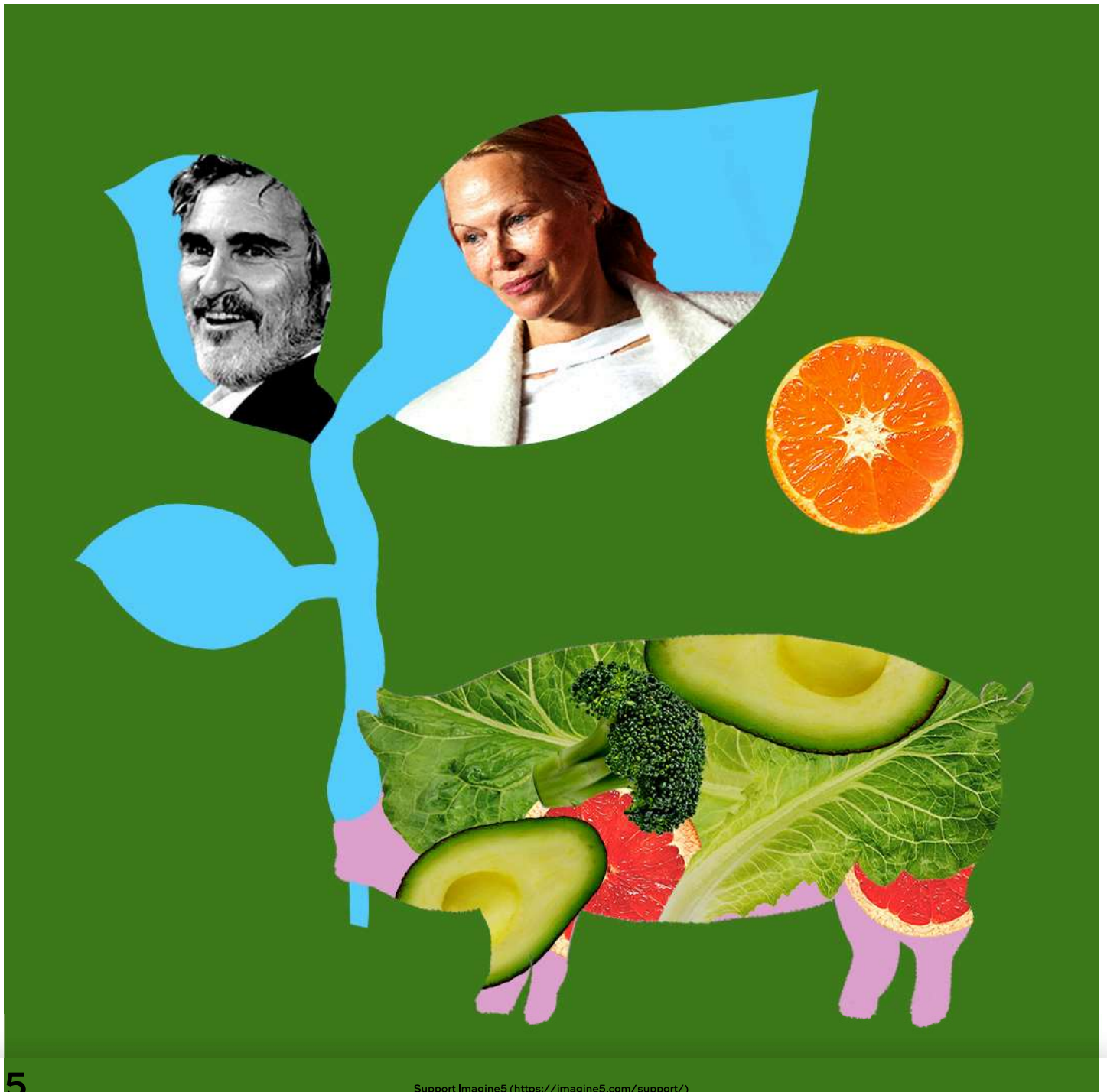
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The elephant in the room?

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It's clear that your typical vegan of 2024 is a little different from your typical vegan of 10 or 20 years earlier. While the central motivation for going vegan has historically been concern for animals, veganism's profile in the 21st century has risen hand-in-hand with two other issues: health and climate change. Eating more plants and less meat is increasingly recognised as good for your body, and is also one of the most powerful ways (https://www.instagram.com/p/ClgjBUJsdwA/?img_index=1) you can cut your individual carbon footprint. These concerns, boosted by veganism's trendy, celebrity-endorsed image, are just as likely to be on the minds of today's vegans as animal welfare. In fact, for some, the V word itself comes with unwanted baggage – hence the rapid rise of the term “plant-based”.

Of course, having Natalie Portman and Venus Williams post about their vegan diets is great. But committed vegans have mixed feelings about becoming fashionable. After all, veganism is, for them, a belief, not just a lifestyle choice – a movement, not an aisle in a supermarket. Corey Wrenn feels it's important that, as the vegan community expands, it doesn't lose sight of the point. Despite widespread public discussion of plant-based diets, “the animals themselves remain hidden from the conversation,” she points out. All those pigs in stalls and hens in cages, are the elephant in the room, which powerful interests would love for us to all just keep on ignoring.



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Two of Hollywood's longstanding vegans, Joaquin Phoenix and Pamela Anderson have both living the lifestyle since childhood. Famous for her red Baywatch bathing suit, soon she could be adding an apron to her signature style, as the host of her own plant-based cooking show due to debut later this year.

Get to know your inner vegan

So while the diet may have broken into the mainstream, the underlying philosophy hasn't always come with it. And in the shouty, polarised world of 2024, those who want to broach the topic of how our society treats animals, must be ready for an argument. Ed Winters has built a big social media following (<https://www.instagram.com/earthlinged/>), by calmly picking apart people's arguments (or lack of arguments) against veganism – he just published a book called How To Argue With a Meat Eater and Win Every Time (<https://www.howtoarguewithameateater.com/>).

“The reason people hate vegans is because they know it's the right choice but they like bacon too much”

Romesh Ranganathan, comedian

Others are reclaiming the stereotypes that have been used against them – like the notion that vegans think they're better than everyone else. “I *am* better than you,” says comedian Romesh Ranganathan (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1s82TI6izo>) on his BBC talk show. “I'm better for the planet, I'm better for the animals. There's nothing worse about me except I'm slightly irritating to have round for dinner... I genuinely believe the reason people hate vegans is because they know it's the right choice but they like bacon too much.”

The attitude that Ranganathan skewers is what Corey Wrenn calls “do-gooder derogation”: society's rather childish habit of giving people a hard time when they dare to be better than the norm. (Anything but deal with the cognitive dissonance, right?) Vegans have their own joke about this:

How many meat eaters does it take to change a light bulb?

None. They'd rather stay in the dark.

But, putting the jokes aside for a minute, perhaps the clang of cognitive dissonance can guide us to a learning opportunity. Matthew Cole says it's up to the vegan movement to “encourage people to recognise that veganism is aligned with the values and principles they already have”. “Yes, there are challenges involved,” he says, “but it isn't like this means radically rethinking who you are or what you believe in.”

Cole knows that people influence people, so the more of us begin to embrace plant-based living, the more others will follow. Then we can retire those old jokes for good. In fact, if there's a vegan joke for these new times, it would be one that doesn't pit herbivores and omnivores against each other, but brings everyone together. How about:

Why are vegans the best friends in the world?

They'll never have beef with you.

Or something along those lines. Only funnier.

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