The V word. It could conjure images of a slogan tee or a blood-splattered placard; be the root of your entire identity or the source of all your cynicism. As veganism continues to monopolise headlines (and not always for the right reasons), one vegan-curious writer asks what it means to be plant-powered in 2018

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I should know. At the risk of sounding like an insufferable bellend, I was a vegan long before the high street made a T-shirt about it. For half the week, between the ages of four and seven, I lived with my dad – an inter-hare vegetarian – and 21 other adults and children – in a sustainable-living cooperative between two crumbling houses in a deprived part of Sheffield. Veganism was at the heart of our alternative setup. Vegetables were grown out the back or in nearby alleys; the milk in the fridge was soya; and rocking up at a protest armed with flyers was as ordinary an event as a bowling outing. I was an enthusiastic member of a small organisation called Sheffield Kids Against McDonald’s. Much as I’d like to use this as evidence of being ahead of the curve (“hair flick”), as I grew older – and my living arrangements became more conventional – my commitment to the cause faded. Throughout my teenage years, I drifted between veganism and vegetarianism, and by 22, I had a taste for seafood and expensive leather goods.

PLANT-BASED HYPE

At precisely the same time as I was stepping off the wagon, thousands of my peers were getting straight in their heads. In 2016, a nationwide survey by The Vegan Society found that 542,000 people in the UK were following a vegan diet – roughly the entire population of my childhood haunt. Sheffield – up by 350% over the past 10 years. And the food industry has responded in kind. By the end of 2017, vegans could enjoy everything from a dairy-free mozzarella alternative atop their Pizza Express margherita to a shot of almond milk Baileys. Even the coffee shop where I earworn on Lydia’s conversation and end up mining her for “militant vegan” intel (The Fields Beneath in North London, should you be in the area) underwent a plant-based transformation last year. Cow’s milk gave way to oat, the pulled pork in the baguettes was replaced by butter beans instead. But it’s also got a lot to do with the whole greenhouse-gases-emitted-by-livestock issue.

Something niggle in the back of my mind. Perhaps. It’s all the headlines about vegan deliveries bringing death threats. Or maybe it’s that joke about how you always know if someone is vegan (because they’ll make sure you know within seconds of meeting). On thinking it through, I’m forced to admit that, having shed my vegan skin once, I’m worried that adopting it again will reduce my identity to a five-letter word that is achingly 2018.

If I’m to align myself with this cause once more, there’s something I need to get straight in my head. How and why does it feel like it’s become darker? Among the recent acts of extreme vegan activism are tweets sent to a farming sustainability consultant suggesting that drinking cow’s milk would bring back the cancer she’d just recovered from; masked groups breaking into abattoirs; and a 20-year-old trainee sheep farmer hounded with death threats. ‘Veganism is being wrongly associated with extremism because a tiny fraction of the movement is getting the most airtime,’ Dr Wrenn explains. And though over two thirds of UK vegans are women, it seems that men are more likely to be prominent vegan activists. ‘Women tend to be overlooked in majority-female social justice movements, while male activists experience a “glass elevator effect”’, she adds. It’s the ones who rise to be leaders in the vegan movement. It’s tragic that long-standing, peaceful leaders in the vegan movement are suddenly being held accountable for the actions of an extreme few.
A FEW BAD EGGS

I feel a pang of guilt and I call Lydia. Was it frustrating for me to ask her, a passionate vegan activist, to speak about the militant arm? “Honestly? Yes,” she says without pausing. “We’re like any other movement: made up of thousands of factions. I’ve got a wide vegan network, and I don’t know a single person who would ever dream of threatening a farmer.”

Lydia grew up in the Lake District next door to a dairy farm. She tells me she went vegan the night she was woken by a distressing sound. “It was coming from the fields next to my house. I watched as farmers prised the mother cow away from her calves. People think these scenes are vegan propaganda. They’re not. It was one of the most brutal, upsetting things I’ve ever witnessed.”

I hung up feeling slightly more in touch with the six-year-old who greeted hormone-burger eaters with wide-eyed enthusiasm (which I hope they found more endearing than annoying). But the modern equivalent of flyering strangers is sharing stories on social media, that doesn’t bode well for a nuanced discussion. Experience has taught me that these networks don’t always encourage polite debate; they do invite hate-speech. “The platforms we use have taught me that these networks don’t have an equivalent of flyering strangers is sharing stories on social media, that doesn’t bode well for a nuanced discussion. Experience has taught me that these networks don’t always encourage polite debate; they do invite hate-speech. ‘The platforms we use have taught me that these networks don’t have the slow opinions take to form, the more likely they are to last.’

GOING THE WHOLE HOG

Could someone please slide this message into the DMs of the vegan Instagrammers who spam my feed with ‘Eating meat is the root of all evil’? ‘I’m doing something for animals; it’ll make everyone think about their diet.’ It’s a sentiment echoed by Ruby Tandoh – the former Bake Off star-turned-author, who has gone vegan to “live more to help the movement than someone else’s history of disordered eating. While most of the activists I spoke to acknowledged the need to be mindful of the fact that low incomes and difficult relationships with food might prevent people from going vegan overnight, Leenaert goes one step further. He argues that vegans should be more supportive of the likes of reductarians, flexitarians and,labelatarianism,fanatical wing that fails to represent the vast majority. Engage with the arguments you don’t understand, not just the ones you do – oh, and always be open to changing your mind. I’ll be arriving at my conclusions with a wholehearted respect for yours. Should I try to tell you what you should be eating, drinking or wearing – or show an unsolicited vegan burger in your direction – feel free to flick me the V ✊

The figures behind the rise and rise of the plant-based movement make for powerful reading...

VEGANISM IN NUMBERS

755

The number of complaints to the Advertising Standards Agency about a KFC advert featuring a dancing chicken – the highest in 2017. Viewers deemed it ‘disrespectful’ and ‘disturbing’.

24 hrs

The time it took plant-based burger business The Vurger Co to hit its £150k investment target in November 2017. There’s been a 185% increase in vegan product launches since 2012.

18

The percentage of greenhouse gas emissions generated by livestock farming. That’s more than cars, trains, planes and ships combined. It’s not just cow farts that contribute. Think processing factories, fertilisers and farming machinery.

58,000,000

The number of posts filed under #vegan on Instagram. There’s a limited so-called militant gore – it’s more chia puddings, odes to the versatility of nut butter and the odd sanctimonious quote, such as: ‘Sorry for the inconvenience, we are trying to change the world.’

42%

The percentage of UK vegans aged 15-24. The Vegan Society predicts numbers will grow, with this lot inspiring further generations to choose the ‘post-milk’ life.