

IS THIS WHAT



VEGAN



LOOKS LIKE?

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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earing her destination, a bustling street in Soho, Lydia Smyth's heart does a pacy tap dance in her chest. The sleepless nights, the strained conversations with her mother and the meticulous planning meetings have

all led the 23-year-old charity worker to this moment. Taking a deep breath, she unzips her faux shearling coat. Her torso is completely bare, except for four words painted in black across her chest and stomach: 'WEAR YOUR OWN SKIN'. The cold descends instantly; the crowds aren't far behind; cameras start to flash. She knows that this time tomorrow, her emblazoned breasts will be doing the rounds on every tabloid website in the UK. What she doesn't know is that one phrase will dominate the comments sections: 'militant vegan'.

As she relays the story over an oat milk cappuccino, I can't say that I'm surprised. While there was a long period when the worst thing anyone could say about your choice to be vegan was that you were a hippy, today, the connotations are more complicated. At one end of the scale, you have the trolls who label dairy farmers as rapists, and masked activists who break into abattoirs to 'bear witness' to slaughter; at the other end, tote bags, T-shirts and pop-up restaurants that enable the self-described 'post-milk generation' to broadcast their ethical – and social – identity. This rise in out-and-proud personal branding has triggered a backlash, communicated through the modern cultural litmus test: the meme. 'First rule of vegan club? Tell everyone about vegan club.' It's never been cooler to be plant-based. And yet, it's never been more annoying.



THE WRITER
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Model
vegan

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 – and an interchangeable cast of up to 12 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 allotments; 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 beginning to clamber on. 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 earwig 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 jackfruit – and getting a seat on a Saturday morning remains as difficult as ever.

Watching all this unfold from the sidelines, I found myself feeling nostalgic for the time when what I ate was dictated by something more meaningful than trends, taste buds or protein content; when I'd trawl supermarket aisles for vegetable oil

spread, unable to separate the faces of dairy cows from the unctuous pleasure of salted butter; when I actually gave a shit. Yes, this nostalgia is partly fuelled by FOMO; even the friends who once served a bowl of raw crudités to their token veggie mate as a *hilarious* non-meat alternative to a chicken curry have now shunned eggs, topping their weekend #avotoast with dukkah-sprinkled butter beans instead. But it's also got a lot to do with the whole greenhouse-gases-emitted-by-livestock issue.

Something niggles in the back of my mind, though. Perhaps it's all the headlines about vegans delivering 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, veganism amped up its aggression. I call Dr Corey Wrenn, a sociologist and an authority on the global vegan movement. It hasn't, she tells me, interrupting my



#NOTALLVEGANS

theory within 30 seconds. 'That style of militant activism was actually very popular in the 1980s and 1990s, when veganism was an out-there concept and people thought the only way to get attention was to be controversial,' she explains. 'But the data shows that the vegan movement moved dramatically away from that as it became more popular – and professional.' Oh.

CRIMES OF PASSION

But if veganism has sharpened up since the days when I stood outside McDonald's handing out homemade soya burgers, why does it feel like it's become darker? Among the recent acts of extreme veganism 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". They're the ones who rise to become leaders and celebrities.'

I can't help but call to mind a young man by the name of Joseph 'Carbstrong' Armstrong, the Aussie whose recent UK tour included holding 'vigils' for 'murdered' animals, calling out dairy farmers for sexual abuse on the *This Morning* sofa with Holly and Phil and condemning Jeremy Vine's choice of ham-and-cheese sandwich during their primetime radio interview. Dr Wrenn believes Armstrong's confrontational energy is shared by a number of male vegan activists. 'Men are socialised to be expressive with their anger when they see injustice,' she explains. 'Whereas women, who are well aware that their emotionality will be framed as "hysterical", tend to focus more on mediation, education and community-building. 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 peaceful vegan activist, to speak for the militant arm? 'Honestly? Yes,' she says – albeit politely. '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 hang up feeling slightly more in touch with the six-year-old who greeted bemused burger-eaters with wide-eyed enthusiasm (which I hope they found more endearing than annoying). But if 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 on a daily basis are designed so that we react in the heat of the moment,' explains Tobias Leenaert, author of *How To Create A Vegan World: A Pragmatic Approach* (£17.99, Lantern Books). 'Because angry posts get more traction, the whole system

is built on outrage.' Leenaert's point speaks to my fears about aligning myself with a cause that has gained infamy for dietary orthodoxy.

It didn't always feel this way to me. Though I staunchly believed that I was doing the right thing by *not* eating animals, I didn't expect everyone else to take up my cause. Perhaps because avoiding meat and dairy back then was so bloody difficult. Those soya burgers weren't plucked from the freezer aisle in Tesco; they were made by adding water to a dehydrated protein mix,

'WE'RE NOT GOING TO ENCOURAGE MORE PEOPLE TO BECOME VEGAN BY GUILTING THEM INTO IT'



then shaping the anaemic pink mush into patties. (It won't shock you to hear that we didn't turn many people off their Happy Meals.) Could the increasing ease of following a plant-based diet be contributing to the righteousness that has made vegans the butt of the joke? Leenaert thinks so. 'Those who say "there is no excuse not to be vegan now" need to understand the difference between being "right" and being effective,' he explains. 'Currently, vegans are in the minority, and we're not going to encourage more people to join the movement by guilting them into it. The slower 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 *WH* columnist Alice Liveing whenever she posts a meat-based meal? In a March post to her 636k followers, the 25-year-old PT warned that the constant slamming of animal products could be harmful, by making people scared of food. It's a sentiment echoed by Ruby Tandoh – the *Bake Off* star-turned-author, who has been open about her 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 reducetarians, flexitarians and adopters of #meatfreemonday who want to limit their meat and dairy intake without going the, er, whole hog. As Leenaert puts it: 'A curious non-vegan who reduces their meat and dairy intake – and influences others around them to do so – could do more to help the movement than someone who's quick to tell you they haven't touched a milk by-product in three years.'

Such attitudes can hinder more than they can help. Talent agent Romy Barnside, 29, had always been open to the idea of becoming a vegan – until she met one. 'For my girlfriend's sister, life revolves around being vegan. If we all go out for a meal, I know not to order meat or fish because it will trigger a pissed-off expression or a full-on appraisal of [Netflix anti-dairy industry doc] *Cowspiracy*,' she explains. 'Now I feel less inclined than ever to go vegan because it won't feel like I'm doing something for animals; it'll just feel like I'm giving in to her.'

Lydia gets it. 'My mum was originally concerned about me aligning myself with what she saw as a radical movement. But she's come around – she even did Veganuary this year, which was a huge moment for me,' she explains. 'She doesn't have to share my views – I just want her to be supportive.'

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THE V SIGN

At the end of our call, Lydia throws down the gauntlet. 'I challenge anyone to read about how a cow is artificially inseminated and not question their consumption of dairy.' I accept. The first Google search result I click on is an account on PETA. Their rape analogy jars with me, so I turn to the Veganuary site. It's all a bit vague. Determined to understand the mechanism, I end up on agricultural websites. As for the impact, well, let's just say sunflower spread has replaced the Lurpak in my fridge. By the time you read this, I'll probably still be struggling to find an inexpensive and satiating alternative to a mid-afternoon hard-boiled egg (suggestions welcome – DM me). And yet, I'm still reluctant to slap a label on myself, mainly because I'm wrestling with how to integrate vegan principles into my life in a sustainable way. Oat milk? Sure! Selling my favourite leather totes on Depop and forcing extended family members to do a supermarket sweep before I come to stay for the weekend? Not so much.

But I do have some vegan takeaway. Plant-based or otherwise, any way of eating will elicit extreme emotions. Every movement has a fanatical wing that fails to represent the views of 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 shove an unsolicited vegan burger in your direction – feel free to flick me the V. **WH**

VEGANISM IN NUMBERS

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

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.

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 'distressing'.

18% 

The percentage of greenhouse gas emissions generated by livestock farming. That's more than cars, trains and planes 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 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 to 34. The Vegan Society predicts numbers will grow, with this lot inspiring further generations to choose the 'post-milk' life.