

Veganism and me

The principles of veganism had always appealed to Ellen Tout, but she didn't think she could forego the cheese board. Having made the switch, she reflects on how a plant-based diet has changed her body and mind

Just over one per cent of the British population is vegan, and 11 per cent of us have tried veganism at some point.* But, despite being vegetarian for 15 years, I never thought I could give up chocolate or cheese. A vegan lifestyle seemed unattainable – something for people with plenty of spare income and time to strain nut milk every morning. This changed two years ago, when my mum decided to go plant-based. After I tasted the amazing meals she created, I researched veganism online and realised that I no longer wanted to contribute to the dairy industry.

The creative cook

Initially, I didn't tell anyone and only ate vegan food at home. I soon realised I needed to improve my cooking skills – I could no longer rely on cheese to add flavour to my meals or a chocolate hit when I felt stressed. Inspired by my mum and the many vegan recipe blogs I read, I reconnected with my love of food. I had started to see cooking as a chore but now, arriving home from work, I was excited to experiment with new flavours and fresh ingredients. Mealtimes became a creative pleasure. I began to experience a change in my sense of taste, as I started to appreciate different flavours and properly relish my food.

A couple of years later, I feel stronger and fitter and know I owe it to plant-based eating. I decided to become vegan for ethical reasons, but I didn't foresee how it would open my eyes to the health benefits of living this way. I have much

more energy now and feel truly nourished by my food choices. I've heard some vegans refer to their diet as 'high vibrational', meaning feel-good food because of our connection with it and respect for its origins. I can definitely relate to that feeling. Think of it as a circle, with humans, animals and plants all connected to each other.

Being vegan, you naturally look more closely at food labels and household products. I now try to make a conscious choice about what I buy. This encourages you to consider and question your choices – to really care about what you're putting into your body and its impact on the world around you. For me, this means I've gradually come to buy less processed food and I try to eat more locally and naturally. Having to plan my meals is a kind of mindfulness – considering the benefits of certain

foods, the balance of nutrition on my plate and finding imaginative ways to make my meals delicious and nutritious. People imagine that vegans eat a restricted diet, but I now enjoy a much greater variety of foods.

This awareness has also fed into a deeper connection with the environment. The Vegan Society found that one of the most effective things an individual can do to lower their carbon footprint is to avoid all animal products. I believe that once you change the way you view food, a more mindful respect for nature instinctively follows. At the heart of veganism is compassion and kindness, and this extends beyond farmed animals to all sentient beings. I see veganism

“Who knew Italy had such delicious vegan pizzas; or that Prague had a veggie cafe on most street corners?”



as much more than a diet – it's a way of life, so I try to do what I can to make environmentally friendly choices.

Our place in the world

One challenge has been people's perception of veganism. Perhaps because it's not the norm (although demand for meat-free food increased by 987 per cent in 2017* which shows a trend in this direction), people often question my choices and, particularly on social media, those on both sides of the debate can become antagonistic. I try to respond honestly and openly, based on my experience. Eating meat and dairy is so ingrained in our society, I think people often prefer to put it to the back of their minds, like I did for years.

When I first began my vegan journey, I joined lots of groups on Facebook. These have become brilliant sources of information and connection with like-minded people.

The vegan community is lively, forward-thinking and ever growing. I've met lots of inspirational people and attended some refreshing events. My girlfriend and I first connected over our shared passion for veganism, and her promise to cook vegan food for me!

Being vegan has also helped open up a new sense of adventure in me. I love researching and planning which vegan cafes and shops I can visit on my travels. Who knew Italy had such delicious vegan pizzas? Or that Prague had a veggie cafe on most street corners?

When I first tried veganism, I wasn't sure if it would stick, but it's now an important part of my identity and I cannot imagine ever going back. I honestly believe plant-based living is the future. Veganuary is just one example of how it brings us together, and of the many people experimenting with this way of life. vegansociety.com; veganuary.com