

Some sausages are more equal than others



By Megan Lane
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With organic meat now readily available, vegetarians who once shunned flesh because of concerns about factory farming find their resolve weakening. Mine has.

Roast duck. Lancashire suckling pig. Venison tenderloin. Welsh rabbit (definitely not rarebit). Devilled lamb's kidneys. After 14 years of my eyes skating over such items on a menu, while dining out last month my interest was piqued by the fleshy riches on offer.

Because I have started eating meat again, but only meat from animals who've enjoyed a happy life before being slaughtered. Unlike when I decided to eat neither beast nor fowl, organic and free-range meat is now easily available.

It was having a baby that first made me question my meat-free diet; I wrestled with whether she would be vegetarian too (my omnivore partner having ceded the decision to me).

Having low iron levels myself, despite a fondness for spinach, dhal and dried apricots, I decided that organic meat would be part of her diet. So why feed my baby something I'm not prepared to eat myself?

It took another year - and a bout of food poisoning from a tofu sausage - for meat to pass my lips. An organic pork and leek banger from the local butcher. It tasted good. My digestive system didn't crumble. My animal welfare issues were assuaged. And, since then, my iron levels have gone up.

Farmers' markets

The nation as a whole is being encouraged to eat better quality meat, less often, for the good of our health and the planet. Last April, researchers at the University of Chicago calculated that cutting meat intake by a few burgers a week would have the same effect on carbon emissions as switching from a four-wheel drive to a saloon car.

Supermarkets and farmers' markets do a brisk trade in organic products, with meat, eggs and dairy all popular. According to the Soil Association, consumption of organic poultry has risen by 55% since 2004 and concerns over GM food and processed meat have boosted sales of all organic meat.

But it remains a niche market, typically bought by those who decide to throw money at the problem. Organic products account for just 1.4% of red meat sales, up 14% on last year.

Chris Lamb, of the Meat and Livestock Commission, doubts that organic meat will ever dominate the market. "You couldn't turn over the whole of British production or consumption to being organic - it's unfeasible in terms of the amount of land available and the price."

Nor does he see a day when producers and marketers set out to woo wavering vegetarians.

"But if there is someone who is vegetarian for ethical reasons, the fact that there are now organic, outdoor-produced, farm shops that make the whole thing look more acceptable, that gives them an easier access point back."

Holiday fare

Bella Jacobs, a mother of two from north London, was a vegetarian for 10 years - "I wore anti-vivisection badges, the lot" - but lapsed while on holiday in France six years ago.

"I was a bit bored with eating cheese sandwiches there, and realised that I no longer had my youthful horror of killing animals - not eating meat had become a habit, not a passion. So I succumbed. And it was easier than I thought.

"Now I eat mostly organic meat, and I try really hard to never to eat bog-standard chicken - I once worked in a chicken factory and it was just horrid the way the meat was treated. I've done the force-fed goose thing with foie gras, but I'd never eat veal, or pork from a country that keeps pigs in boxes."

Organic or not, a Vegetarian Society spokeswoman says hardcore vegetarians will not weaken their resolve.

"You would be hard-pressed to find a committed vegetarian who would switch back to being a meat-eater simply because a lamb or cow was bred on an organic farm. These animals are still killed whether they lived on an organic farm or not."

Yet she partly undermines the point by admitting that many of the UK's three million vegetarians give up meat because of the cruelty and poor practices involved in factory farming.

"We are not criticising the more responsible methods employed by organic farmers in the way they run their livelihoods. I don't doubt that people who claim to eat only 'ethical' meat are clearly uncomfortable with the idea of causing pain and distress, but the only way to completely avoid that is by cutting out meat."

That is a step too far for many Britons, but 30% of the UK population is actively reducing their red meat intake.

Among them is the family of Rachael Deacon, a teacher in Blackburn, Lancashire. A vegetarian for 10 years, she lapsed after craving meat while pregnant, eight years ago. Today she cooks mostly vegetarian food but splashes out on organic chicken or lamb every so often.

"You hear so many scare stories now about battery chickens. Because I don't buy much meat, I pay more to buy healthier food. I don't want my animals to be slaughtered horribly or to have a horrible life."

For when it comes to meat, you gets what you pays for.

Below is a selection of your comments:

Welsh Rarebit has meat in it now? I thought it was overly elaborate cheese on toast?
Rob Walker, Kidderminster

I think I've been to the restaurant in question and Megan is right - it's Welsh rabbit as in bunny from Wales.
Jodie, east London

Welsh Rarebit usually has Worcester sauce in it - that isn't vegetarian as it contains fish.
Peter Cliff, Bath

I totally agree. I hadn't eaten meat for nearly 15 years, not because I actually cared about animals but simply because of the state of the so-called meat with all it's additives and chemicals. Since it's been easier to buy 'proper' meat I have been tucking in.
Lee Rickler, London

This article entirely misses the point for most ethically-minded vegetarians - a cruelty-free chicken is a well-treated live chicken, not an organic dead chicken. Please don't justify bored taste buds by claiming organically-raised meat is cruelty-free. That doesn't involve slaughter.
Amanda, Middlesbrough

How many people wear clothes from a factory in a poor country? The fact is that without causing pain or harm to any other living person or animal at some point in the system of survival, we wouldnt be alive in today's modernised world. A sad but true fact.
Chris Handley, Salford Quays, Manchester

A more useful issue to pursue might be the case for supermarket v fresh from the farm food. I notice a huge difference in flavour and quality between the locally-produced (non-organic) meat and "dirty vegetables" we buy at the local farmers' market compared to the polished, packaged rubbish I can buy in the supermarkets. I'd much rather eat non-uniform, unpackaged local vegetables, straight out of the ground, and fresh meat from the local market any time. Supermarkets may be convenient but do you really want to buy stale food that has been flown halfway around the world?
Allan Copland, Paisley, UK

I also became a vegetarian because of the cruelties of factory farming. While I have no problem with the notion of eating animals, especially those caught in the wild, I still choose not to. Organically farmed animals may have a better life than their factory counterparts, but the slaughtering is still production line style and the process is no less stressful or painful, in my opinion.
Chris Haslam, Bury

Organic meat is all very well. However, the stark reality is that eating meat is selfish in terms of exploitation of precious resources. Countless more vegetarians are fed on produce such as soya from the same amount of land and water that it takes to raise a few cows or pigs to produce the meat for a few. Whilst I concede the point that organic meat is superior to conventional farming in terms of more humane treatment of animals, the animals are still slaughtered to produce Megan Lane's (and baby's) meals. A hefty price to pay for better tasting meat?
Erica, Cambridge

I think it is great that people are getting more involved in the organic market. I have been only buying organic meat for a long time now and believe that animals deserve the right to be outdoors, to roam and forage and to lead a happy life. I am from Germany and the organic meat is becoming very big over there, so I encourage people to explore this option and to be considerate and respectful to animals which we eat. Awareness is the key to changing the situation and if organic is too expensive, why not eat less meat?
Moritz Buescher, Bristol, UK

The vegetarians that don't eat meat because of the killing animals reason are quite often the ones wearing leather shoes, leather handbags, leather jackets or eating products with gelatine in so end up being total hypocrites. Very few of those vegetarians are strict about everything.
Thurstan Johnston, Liverpool, England

I used to love meat. I ate it every day and actively avoided most vegetables. Shortly after my 14th birthday I stumbled across some research on factory farming and turned vegetarian. That was 13 years ago and I couldn't possibly bring myself to ever eat meat again, be it organic or otherwise. The very idea of eating a dead animal turns my stomach.
Lisa, Osaka, Japan (originally from Glasgow)

Perhaps Megan would like to look the "happy" pig in the eye, tell it about her low iron levels (and how every single vegetarian suffers with this) and the single occurrence of a dodgy tofu sausage (this never happens with meat, of course) and then put a bolt in its head and take it home for the oven.
Shepherd, Staffs

Not all vegetarians remain veggie out of hobby, I continue to question/challenge my belief system. I personally cannot eat animal organs and muscles which function in the same way as my own. My main reasons for responding to this article are to highlight that people whom are veggie, are veggie for issues pertinent to themselves. I find Megan's article is blinkered to peoples' diverse ethical/moral/spiritual reasons for undertaking a vegetarian approach to living. Not all veggies believe everyone should be vegetarian, after all, the planet is balanced with carnivorous and vegetarian species.
Maria, up north!

A proper vegetarian is a veggie for life and I would question you ever having any ethics in the first place and jumping ship when your meat-free fad was no longer en vogue.
Steve Burdekin, vegetarian for 19 years, north London

I have been a veggie for over 30 years, on ethical grounds. I find it unacceptable to kill the animals. My choice and others need to make their choice too. Few people realise that organic farming is grossly inefficient. If Britain were to switch to all organic there would be a food crisis. Pre-WWII Britain was wholly organic and could not feed itself with 40m people. It certainly could not now there are over 60m. We could have to become an net importer. That blows away the idea that organic is somehow sustainable.
George Baxter, Bedford

Mr Baxter, Britain hasn't been self-sufficient in food since 1760, so I don't think we have to worry about lower-density farming methods too much. I'm an omnivore, vegetarian at home with the family. We went organic last year to avoid chemical and hormone residues etc and the effects are well worth the money. We've lost weight, improved health and fitness and eat food which tastes so much better than non-organic.
Andrew, Aylesbury, UK

I applaud your decision to override your veggie principles in favour of the health of your child. Well done you!
Ian, Worcester

Two very good friends of mine gave up their desk jobs to become ethical pig farmers a year ago. One was a vegetarian but now makes an exception for his own happy and tasty pigs.
Murray, London

This misses the point on global warming caused by eating meat fed on soya produced from former Brazilian rainforests. The writer appears to have been one of those wishy-washy faux vegetarians who became one purely because they are attention-seekers, now seeking to justify their lack of commitment by attacking those with a true cruelty-free ethical value set. I'd like to know what the working classes are supposed to eat while the writer and her middle class friends are gorging on organic meat... Oh I forgot that will be the Solient Green.
Stephen, Edinburgh

I buy all my groceries from the organic section, budget allowing, but it does make me angry that we have to spend more to eat quality foods. This should be standard to everyone, not just the ones that can afford to.
Claire, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

I am not a vegetarian. Given the level of exaggerated zealotry espoused by a few of the above vegetarians, I am glad I am not. And I thought the "eating meat is selfish as it is more resource-heavy than eating grain" nonsense had finished. Without the waste of all those millions of cows and pigs, we wouldn't be able to grow an eighth of what we do now (unless, of course, you prefer to use synthetic fertilizers and GM crops... I didn't think so).
Neil, Chester

Vegetarianism isn't trendy like it used to be in the 80s and early 90s. Most of the people I knew who went vegetarian probably did it to be cool, and now most of them are back eating meat, because that's fashionable now. A bit sad really, as they were usually the most vociferous proponents of vegetarianism (you know who I mean - the dreadlocked brigade). I have been vegetarian for 18 years and have stuck with it mainly for ethical, ecological and health reasons. Most people seem surprised when they find out that I don't eat meat, probably because I don't tend to make a big deal out of it - unless I'm mentioning it on BBC News of course.
Gary Boyd, Bristol

I'm interested that you think people are leaving vegetarianism due to improvements in farming practices. I find myself increasingly aware of, and sensitised to, the horrors of modern farming and slaughter. Seeing what lives these animals lead when allowed to behave more naturally just increases my awareness of how awful the lives of most production animals are. I find it increasingly difficult to justify even the small amount of local-reared, free-range meat that I manage to eat.
Pippa

I became vegetarian aged 16 for moral reasons and was vegan at 23. Like Bella Jacobs, after 16 years I realised I was vegetarian more out of habit than because I had a passion. I had started to think that there was nothing wrong with eating meat if the animal was ethically reared and not mistreated. True, the slaughter and transportation to the abattoir can be stressful but it's a far more big kill than those of the predators in the wild. It was still a clinical step to eat animal flesh for me personally, much more than eating fish. I will only eat organic meat a few times a month and only fish a few times a week from sustainable stocks. It's worth paying the extra to support ethical farming and for the better taste. I have also noticed the health benefits since eating fish and meat. I often felt weakness when vegan, no matter how many vitamin B-rich foods I consumed, and was ravenously hungry sometimes before meals.
Robert Kelly, London

Vegetarian cheese is produced using a genetically modified enzyme (chymosin) which does not require labelling. All other cheese is made using rennet, from the stomach of a calf... Choose your evil carefully, but don't be sure that even with the strongest will in the world, you will actually know what you're eating!
Dagmonger, Londinium

Actually, cheese can be made with naturally occurring vegetable rennet. It is difficult (if not impossible) to purchase in a typical grocery store, but cheesemaking supply stores offer it. I imagine making one's own cheese to be but a small inconvenience for the morally zealous.
Shannon, US

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