



“Swine flu parties are a daft idea; what do you put in the party bag?” Jennifer Howze

From The Times

January 31, 2009

After 25 years as a strict vegetarian, I came out as a meat eater

Slow-cooked lamb tingled a whole different set of taste buds



Tessa Williams

Being a non-meat eater had always made me feel special. As a teenager growing up in Glasgow I was the only veggie in my school. At college my confident cooking became legend among friends. I successfully made vegetables taste... quite nice. And in my twenties my food shopping bills were teeny-weeny, leaving me more money for wine.

But here at almost fortysomething, on a French holiday with my husband, children and our friends all tucking into robust peasant food, I suddenly felt as pale and wan as the chickpeas on my plate. My old vim and vigour seemed to be missing. I was always hungry and, without a daily iron tablet, I felt tired and down in the dumps.

Back in the UK I thought that the urge to sink my teeth into something meaty would leave me - after all, I had been a vegetarian for 25 years. But my desire simply intensified. I made a deal with my husband to "trial" meat for three months. My plan was to see how it suited me. I finally "came out" about six months ago.

I am not the only staunch veggie to give up a lifetime devotion to pulses and tofu in the past year. The Food Standards Agency in Britain states that the number of people eating a partly or completely veggie diet fell from 9 per cent in 2007 to 7 per cent in 2008. However, we are, on average, eating less meat per head, as Su Taylor from the Vegetarian Society points out. "In 2006 the average person consumed 74.3kg. In 2007 that figure was 74kg - only a slight reduction, but a downward trend. People are realising that plant-based diets are better for the environment."

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I see my decision to return to meat as part of a bigger change in Britain's food culture. We've shifted away from the old-school "meat is murder" approach, and now well-sourced meat is seen as healthy and natural.

We've been swayed by Jamie, Hugh and Gordon. They seem to love animals, yet have no trouble killing well-brought up specimens and putting them in a pie.

Recent advances in food labelling have also made it easier to understand where our meat is from, and how it is raised. The Soil Association stamp means that animals have been reared under strict organic guidelines on welfare. Guilty former vegetarians are also reassured by Freedom Food labels, which guarantee that animals have been kept in RSPCA-approved conditions.

Moving to the country also changed my outlook. I now live near a village butcher, who rears much of the meat he sells. I can see his happy pigs snuffling in their field from my office window. And I walk past his cows and sheep every day. Their journey to his shop window, via the abattoir, is shorter than my school run.

Some people who revert to meat eating say that they feel instantly rough. For me it was the reverse: I felt my energy levels steadily rising, and something incredible was happening. Shreds of slow-cooked lamb stirred into ratatouille seemed to tingle a whole different set of taste buds. I ate chicken in a leek and mushroom pie and loved it.

While intensively farmed meat may be murder for the environment, food experts generally agree that a little meat is good for human health. Judith Wills (www.thedietdetective.net), author of the The Food Bible, isn't surprised that I started feeling more rosy cheeked by changing my diet. "Meat gets a bad press, but small amounts of well-brought up meat is good for you. People focus on saturated fat, especially in red meat, but lean beef has less saturated fat and total fat than chicken."

Most red meats are an excellent source of high-quality protein, B vitamins (for a healthy nervous system), iron (for proper use of the energy in food, healthy blood and aerobic capacity) and zinc (for immune system and fertility).

But is it fattening? Wills says: "Lean beef contains only around 5g of fat per 100g meat so lean meats aren't a problem for people trying to watch their weight." And I felt full-er for longer so I ate less. "Because meat takes a long time to digest, it offers satiety over a long period."

I have also learnt to love cooking meat again. In my vegetarian days when I prepared chicken for my husband and kids I would pull on Marigolds and tip a tray of diced meat into a curry sauce. Now I get properly stuck in.

Last month my allotment-loving neighbours Jane and Adam brought me a brace of pheasants. When it was time to turn the hanging pheasants into dinner I hopped around the kitchen squealing while Adam gave my husband a five-minute lesson in how to debone and skin a bird.

We ate the meat in a rich pie, cooked with red wine, orange, peeled chestnuts and leeks: a feast that was delicious but cost next to nothing. And another step on my meaty rehabilitation. Rabbit pie is next.

HOW TO BE A BORN-AGAIN CARNIVORE

To begin Nutritionist Judith Wills recommends small amounts of easily digestible chicken mixed with lots of vegetables. Don't launch into steak.

How much? About 120g at each serving, the equivalent of a small chicken breast, a little lamb chop or a very small steak.

How often? No more than three portions a week. Leave room in your diet for lots of veg, pulses and fish.

Buy organic It usually takes longer to mature, it has a lower water content than meat from intensively farmed animals and this can increase its nutrient-to-weight ratio.

Get inspiration Discover the 1990s classic Roast Chicken and Other Stories (Ebury Press) by Simon Hopkinson for homely, meaty recipes that will get your juices flowing.

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meat is still murder, and while maybe you'll feel better for a while, long term meat is not the best choice. Humane meat is an oxymoron. There is no such thing. If a living, breathing, sentient creature had to die for you to get your meal, there is no justification. Think about the flesh on your plate

dianne, Eugene, USA

Unfortunately, RSPCA Freedom Foods is NOT a guarantee that animals have been treated well. Hence, the recent exposure of a freedom farm and disgusting conditions. Have you considered the long term effects of eating saturated fat, growth hormones and anti-biotics from meat and dairy? I'd rethink.

Lindy, Nottingham, England

Jane - you do sound nice.

Lindy, Nottingham, England

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