

Part-Time Vegetarians

Advocates call it flexitarianism, but critics say being a little bit vegetarian is like being a little bit pregnant.

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For the last 15 years, Dawn Jackson Blatner has been what's now called a "flexitarian" or "almost vegetarian." She eats lots of fruits, vegetables, nuts, barbecued tempeh and veggie burgers with guacamole. But she sometimes indulges in a pork chop or her grandma's pot roast.

It might seem like being a vegetarian of convenience isn't particularly inspiring, but a growing number of experts and even some famous foodies are fans. They say that cutting back on meat, rather than abstaining completely, may be a practical compromise that benefits our bodies and our environment.

"It gives you the health benefits of a vegetarian diet without having to follow the strict rules," says Blatner, a registered dietitian and author of "The Flexitarian Diet: The Mostly Vegetarian Way to Lose Weight, Be Healthier, Prevent Disease, and Add Years to Your Life" (McGraw-Hill, October 2008). "We know that people live longer and live healthier when they eat vegetarian, but it's just too darn hard to do it 100 percent of the time."

Even gourmet food writers, used to nightly courses of filets and pates, are advocating the eat-less-meat movement. In January, Mark Bittman, author of "How to Cook Everything" (Wiley, 1998), is coming out with new book called "Food Matters," (Simon & Schuster) about how our diet affects global warming and "globesity" (global obesity). Bittman has been very critical of what he calls America's "meat guzzling" tendencies. "I am an advocate of what I like to think of as a much saner diet—a largely plant-based diet," he says. A meat-based diet is, he says, "not even close to sustainable." Last year, Bittman published "How to Cook Everything Vegetarian," (Wiley, 2007), though he is not a vegetarian himself.

Bittman notes that Americans eat about 200 pounds of meat, poultry and fish a year—twice as much as the global average. He argues that not only is a heavily vegetable diet healthier for us physically, but that it's also true that the industrial production and processing of grain-fed livestock consumes a huge amount energy and has a [negative impact on the environment](#).

It's unclear how many people are official "flexitarian" converts, but nutritionists believe there are a growing number of people who are simply eating fewer meat entrees whether it's for health, or economic reasons or because there are more good meatless dishes on offer. Think how many Americans regularly eat peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches, pasta, bean burritos and cheese pizzas as their main courses, says Blatner. "I do feel like that is a shocking thing, when you think about how much vegetarian food we eat without even trying."

And while only 2 to 3 percent of Americans are traditional vegetarians, who shun anything that ever had a face, according to the Vegetarian Resource Group, vegetarian foods have become increasingly popular among non-vegetarians. "If you look around at every regular, mainstream grocery store, you have soy milk right next to regular milk, you have veggie burgers in the frozen section, and tubs of tofu sitting there in the produce section," says Blatner. She suggests that

many of those who buy these products may be flexitarians and not even realize it. Even dedicated vegetarians say they are somewhat flexible. A 2003 study in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition found that two out of three vegetarians say they can't stick to a pure veggie diet all the time.

Some vegetarian advocates hope that a movement that begins with eating less meat might lead to more people embracing a no-meat, no-fish and no-fowl lifestyle. Vegetarian Resource Group co-director Charles Stahler, calls it a "step in the right direction." It should also inspire even more restaurants to create veggie options, and more people to realize that it's "easy to be a vegetarian," he says. In fact, it already has become a bit easier for gourmet food lovers to find good meatless entrees. Last year a National Restaurant Association survey found that more than 50 percent of chefs rate vegetarian entries among their top 10 trendiest menu items.

Still, not everyone agrees that it's a great idea to be mostly vegetarian instead of going whole hog—so to speak. "Given the environmental, cruelty and health impact of a meat-based diet, going vegan is best, going vegetarian is good, and being a flexitarian is like smoking two packs of cigarettes instead of ten, beating one pig down the slaughter ramp instead of two, and pouring a pint of gasoline down a drain instead of pouring down a gallon," says Kathy Guillermo, director of research for the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

Blatner disagrees with the meat-is-immoral crowd. "It's not that meat is some sort of evil," she says. "It's just that we eat excessive amounts of it." She does agree that a plant-based diet is healthful, decreases the risk of cancer, and increases longevity.

Many big-name vegetarian cookbook authors like the idea of flexitarianism—though they tend to dislike the name. "How about just moderation?" says Deborah Madison, author of "Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone." Though she eats mainly a plant-based diet, she indulges in meat about once a week. "I've always had a hard time saying, 'I can't eat that meal you made for me,'" she says. "I just think it's rude." Many of her readers, too, are not strict vegetarians. "They want to be able to have a vegetarian meal a couple times a week," she says.

Mollie Katzen, author of the well-known veggie bible "Moosewood Cookbook" (Ten Speed Press, 2000) says she, too, is a flexible eater—indulging in occasional bites of her mom's brisket. "I'm very happy that people can make the definition of 'vegetarian' be a positive statement about vegetables rather than a negative statement about meat—I don't eat this, and I don't eat that.' I'm sick and tired of the no's." That said, she believes a plant-based diet is good for people and for the environment. "The environmental impact of meat and livestock raising is severe," she says. "I'm not against eating meat or salmon, but I believe people should be responsible and limited in their consumption."

It's important to remember, as well, that it's possible to be vegetarian and unhealthy. "If you fry tempeh and fry tofu, and eat baked goods, you're going to be less healthy," says registered dietitian Mary Russell, director of nutrition services at the University of Chicago. But a diet that emphasizes fruits and vegetables, done properly, should help protect the heart and lower blood pressure, she says.

Many former vegetarians turn to fish or meat because they feel they need more protein. Katie Petersen, 25, a personal trainer, became a vegetarian when she was 14, largely because she didn't like the texture of meat or the way it made her feel. But about two years ago, she started adding tuna and salmon to her diet. She participates in "figure" competitions, a type of lightweight bodybuilding, and felt she wasn't getting enough protein from veggie burgers.

Sometimes people start adding a little fish or meat to their diets because the entrée their friend or roommate is cooking in the kitchen simply smells too good to resist. Katelin Domanski, 21, a senior at Northwestern University, gave up meat completely when she was 13—after she had some pieces of chicken with "blood veins" in them, she says. But just this month, she started eating a bit of chicken prepared by her gourmet roommate. Domanski also thinks it may be easier, when she graduates in June, to be flexible about her diet when she is in the workplace. "You don't want to be the person at the business dinner who only eats salad," she says.

Of course, if vegetarians and gourmets like Mark Bittman have their way, most restaurants will someday offer enough meatless entrees to satisfy vegetarians whether they're part-time or 100 percent committed. The good news is, the days of veggie lovers being confined to the 'tofu surprise' are over.

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Part-time vegetarian. Famous vegetarians like Betty White, Bill Clinton, and Diane Keaton may be on to something. A well-planned, plant-based menu is linked to lower rates of cancer, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes. And that's not all: Many vegetarians are thinner than their meat-eating friends. But not all vegetarian diets are healthy (think endless pasta bowls and cheese pizza). Becoming a vegetarian requires careful planning to ensure you're getting all the proper nutrients from plant-based food. The Part-Time Vegetarian. Recipes, experience and advice from someone who cooks and eats as vegetarian most of the time, but still hankers after meat. Follow. Andrew Burns. May 22. Mac and Greens: Messing with a classic, or improving it forever? It is hard to justify messing with a comfort food icon, but Jamie persuaded us. Read more.