

Food & Drink

Eat and drink your way through town

No milk. No eggs. No meat.

We go vegan for a week

Photograph by Parikshit Rao.



Planter's punch

Carnivore **Neha Sumitran** gives up meat, honey and all things dairy for a week.

I love bacon. I think of it once every 60 seconds. In my world, there isn't a better way to wake up than to the aroma of a dozen bacon rashers gently sizzling on a pan. Throw in a sunshine-happy fried egg, some buttered toast and a steaming cuppa coffee, and there it is – my ideal breakfast. As you can imagine, the thought of going even vegetarian would be a daunting task for me. Turning vegan? Impossible – especially in a country where mothers force-feed their kids glasses of milk every morning and grandmothers measure their love in dollops of ghee. But in the interests of investigative journalism, I decided to bite the bullet and go vegan for a week.

Of course, vegans don't eat meat. But they also don't consume milk, honey, eggs or use any products derived from anything that was once an animal. The term was coined by Englishman Donald Watson in 1944. Watson grew on a farm in Yorkshire surrounded by animals that he loved dearly. When, at 14, he realised it was these very animals that put food on the table every night, he turned vegetarian, and then eventually gave up on all animal products. He created the word vegan from the first and last letters of the word vegetarian because, he said, "it was the beginning and end of vegetarian". Would turning vegan be the end of me?

By noon on Monday – my first day – I was already calling upon my only vegan friend for company (and moral support). Breakfast, a glass of pulpy orange juice and one very sorry slice of dry toast had my tummy growling pretty soon. So for my first meal out of the house I chose Subway. With its trays of fresh veggies and air-brushed pictures of tomatoes and springy lettuce; it seemed like a good place to start. Plus, the transparent counters ensured that I knew exactly what went into my sandwich. At Andheri's Infiniti mall, I walked past Kailash Parbat, Baskin



Greet but no meat Participants at Nandita Shah's vegan get-together

Robbins, Shamiana, TGI Friday's and a very tempting hot dog stand and made my way to Subway's vegetarian section. This was a first.

I was prepared to pass on the turkey, ham and chicken breast. But no honey-oat or parmesan-oregano bread, no mayo, no Southwest dressing, no cheese, not even that mint yoghurt I never cared for anyway – this I wasn't ready for. "Do you feel like some coffee?" my friend asked as I made the most of my aloo-tikki sub with

'Who is a mother dog's milk meant for? A puppy. Even a child knows that.'

sweet onion and barbecue sauce. "Coffee Day has a vegan shake that isn't half-bad." It turned out that the coffee-flavoured vegan shake (with soy milk) wasn't just palatable, it was very good. Over the course of my week, whenever my craving for meat got too hard to handle, I would go looking for a CCD.

The next day after a breakfast of

poha, I decided to stock my kitchen with stuff that wasn't taboo. "Watch out for products with milk solids and honey," my friend warned as we trawled Food Bazaar. But suddenly those were the only products I could see. Baskin Robbins had a one-on-one free offer. There was some fresh feta at the dairy counter and GO Dahi had new fruit infusion flavours. It was the longest supermarket visit I'd ever made. It was also my most informative. I piled my trolley with bread, baked beans, the nicest jam I could find, soy milk, tofu, coconut milk powder and lots of vegetables and fruit.

Now for the snacks. Careful scrutiny of the miniscule list of ingredients on the labels revealed that most of Parle's biscuits (Magix, Monaco, Nimkin and Hide and Seek) are all vegan, as is Bourneville chocolate (no milk, just cocoa butter) and Pickwick cream wafers. "But the best way to turn vegan is just to cook at home," said my friend as we parted ways. I made myself Thai curry, a tofu stir-fry and rice for dinner that night. Day Two without cheating, I thought, reasonably pleased with

myself. That's when I spied a golden box of Lindt dark chocolate thins on the nightstand as I tucked myself into bed. After staring at the box for a good five minutes, I had half of one thin.

At work on Wednesday, full from baked beans on toast from breakfast, I came across The Green Stove while looking for internet recipes. The blog and catering service is 26 year-old Thane resident Rithika Ramesh's way of celebrating all things vegan. Ramesh says she grew up vegetarian, developing a taste for meat in college because her friends loved chicken. "At the beginning of January 2008, I decided I didn't want to eat meat anymore," said Ramesh. "There was no real reason. It was just a thing." Then she learnt about the vegan philosophy. "That's when I read about and attended Nandita Shah's workshop," she added. "It had everything I needed to know about veganism – I was sold."

Shah's name popped up many times over the course of the vegan week. The founder of Sharan or Sanctuary for Health & Reconnection to Animals & Nature, is from Auroville, near

Pondicherry, but travels across the country to convince people that dietary and lifestyle changes can result in better health. Shah's most popular lecture, Peas vs. Pills, has been conducted in India, Europe and the US. As I sipped on hot herbal tea at her workshop in Lower Parel later in the week, I learnt that vegans rack up karma points for more than being kind to animals. A 2006 report by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation says our omnivorous diets generate more greenhouse gases than all the cars in the world. It blamed meat production for contributing 14 to 22 per cent of this toxic smog. It turns out that vegans, with their soy-lattes, Pickwick wafers and aloo-tikki subs, are actually saving the world.

But many vegans in Mumbai haven't give up animal-derived products just because it is a dearly-held cause. They do it because they believe a vegan diet is healthier and to help them lose weight. Shah's 50-person workshop was filled with people who would never hoard Pickwick wafers in their bags, as I had. Groups of middle-aged women exchanged vegan recipes and talked about their weight loss, the energy they'd gained and how their skin and hair was glowing more than ever. Shah, a doctor of homoeopathy, has been vegan for over two decades herself. She claims that a healthy vegan diet (one that even eliminates vegetable oil) will not only control but reverse diabetes, hypertension, obesity and auto-immune diseases.

"Who is a mother dog's milk meant for?" she asked at the start of her workshop. "A puppy. Even a kindergarten kid can answer that. So why are cows any different?" One might ask, what about the vitamins and calcium and protein we get from dairy? According to Shah, a cup of kale or spinach leaves, or



Cotton green No animals will be harmed for Rithika Ramesh's wedding

two tablespoons of sesame seeds, has double the calcium in a glass of milk. The only essential vitamin that vegans can't get from food, she claimed, is B12. The debate over whether we should be dietary hunters or gatherers is the religion vs science argument of the food world, and it was clear which side Shah and her crew were on.

Thankfully, Shah's workshop included a session on more practical things: the basics of vegan cooking. We learnt how to make curd using wheat and soy milk, butter-milk from groundnuts, how to temper spices with no oil at all and just how much of a difference unpolished rice makes. "But making brown rice at home takes very long," one participant complained. "Six-seven whistles instead of one or two and even then it doesn't get done." Shah nodded sympathetically, and replied, "That's because it isn't fast food".

Ramesh attended a session like this one over a year ago. She never had a bowl of curd or a glass of milk again. "I did it for the animals - I'm crazy about them," said Ramesh, a Tamilian, who's now

busy planning her vegan wedding. Her mother is aghast that she refuses to wear silk, let alone Kanchivarams. She says she doesn't even crave chocolate anymore. "Luckily for me Bourneville came out around then," she said. Now, her catering service substitutes butter with oil and skips the eggs.

Lunch at Ramesh's home was one of the best vegan meals I had. There was a lush salad of three greens, peppers and tofu mince, pasta with lots of broccoli and peppers in a cashew-based white sauce and seared soy salami (it wasn't bad at all). The best part, the one that changed how I looked at veganism, was dessert: chocolate cupcakes with chocolate ice cream topped with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles.

With food like that on offer, being vegan doesn't necessarily mean a life of deprivation. (It was around Day Five that I realised veganism did not mean abstinence from alcohol, and promptly hit the bar.) Whether you buy the arguments for veganism or not, it's certainly become easier over the past year to be vegan in Mumbai.

Instead of breaking down dishes into ingredients - something I found myself doing with a whole lot of menus - Mumbai now offers a growing number of food services for vegans. Like Ramesh, macrobiotic food expert Shonaalii Sabherwal, Marissa Paolilo and nutritionist Vijaya Venkat offer vegan tiffins and catering services. Paolilo's company Angel Foods, offers chickpea tarts filled with zucchini rosemary, soups that range from minestrone to unusual combinations like almond, pea and leek, and desserts like crème brûlée and peanut-butter chocolate-mousse pie.

"I preserve the natural flavours of the ingredients," said Paolilo. "And since I love vegetables and nuts, there's lots of it in the food I make. The fact that it's vegan is secondary." There are also smoothies (made from soya or almond milk), bean pates, cheeses made from nuts, mayonnaise (which she claims is fat-free as well) and dark-chocolate ice cream. A beautiful balance between rich cocoa and the lingering taste of jaggery, Angel Foods' dense and velvety smooth ice-cream was so creamy I didn't believe it contained no milk.

On Day Seven, the last day of my diet, I tried to get hold of every vegan indulgence I could. I got myself a bag of French fries, a packet of peppery banana chips, Angel Foods' chocolate ice cream, Ramesh's choco-chip brownies, non-dairy whipped cream with strawberries dunked in sugar syrup and a slab of Bourneville. Then I turned on Season Two of *Modern Family* and spent my last vegan hours in complete bliss - never once thinking about milk, cheese or chicken. But I can't say I didn't smile, just a little, at the thought of breakfast the next day. *For vegan caterers, see page 49.*



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