



Alia Almoayed

Ancy Mariya explores a diet that is as healthful as it is compassionate and eco-friendly – the vegan option.

When the Alia Almoayed Approved Burger was launched at Burger Lounge in January this year, the arteries of many burger aficionados in the kingdom must have heaved a sigh of relief.

(Me)Eat Bahrain's very own celebrity vegan burger – a grilled patty of brown rice, lentils, mushrooms and sundried tomatoes flavoured with Indian spices, topped with grilled onions and wrapped in crunchy romaine lettuce. It comes with a side of guacamole and sweet potato fries.

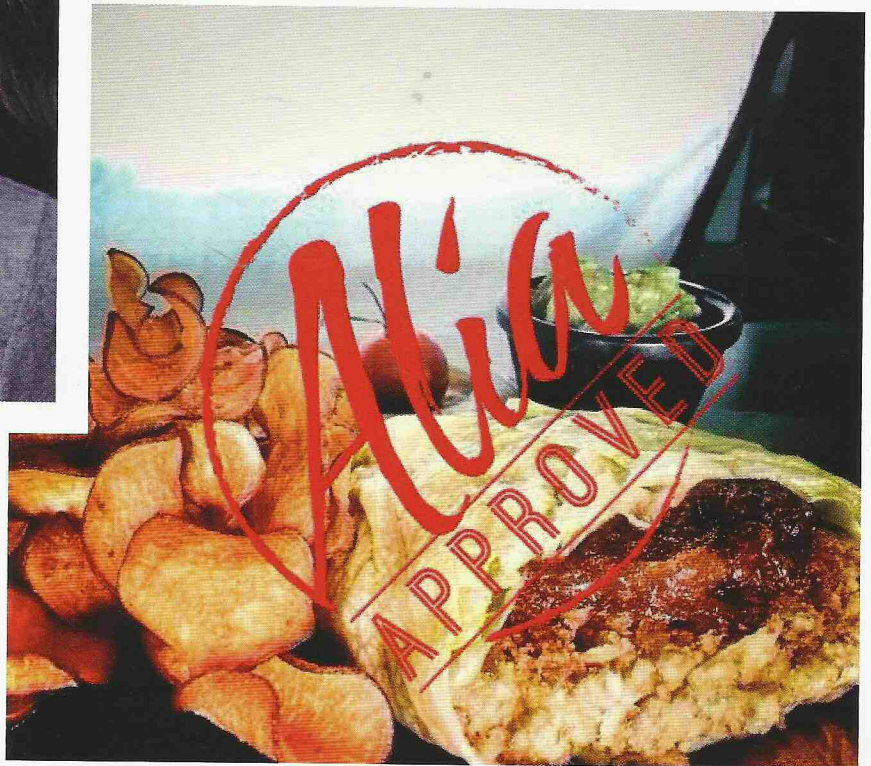
A refreshing tinge of green among the conventional menu options in Bahrain, this limited edition burger seems to have struck all the right flavour chords, "It has been very well received and what is even more, children seem to be enjoying it. The texture of the patty is very similar to that of meat and it has lots of flavour. Healthy options while eating out is so important - now it is possible go out and indulge without guilt", says

Alia Almoayed, the celebrity nutrition expert and author, who concocted this vegan delight for Burger Lounge.

The vegan burger seems to be a step in the right direction, for a population grappling with the extremely high rates of diabetes and other lifestyle diseases - a disturbing phenomenon associated with over indulgence in processed and meat-heavy convenience food. "These high rates of diabetes are among the most compelling reasons to move towards a plant based vegan diet. The countries in this region consume a lot of meat. Veganism is still a very new concept here, hopefully it will catch on", says Dr. Nandita Shah, the founder of SHARAN India, an NGO that has been at the forefront of lifestyle disease prevention and reversal in India. A homeopath, she has presented the Peas vs. Pills workshops in India, and around the world including Bahrain,

cuisine

The Vegan Way



Dubai and Abu Dhabi, inspiring others to make dietary and lifestyle changes resulting in positive health and disease reversals.

Before rolling your eyes and dismissing veganism as a fringe movement - hippies, animal right activists, niche religious groups, health freaks – take note that it has been making serious inroads into the mainstream, taking in its fold some mighty names like Ellen DeGeneres, Biz Stone, Usher, Al Gore, Mike Tyson and Bill Clinton (though he does indulge in an occasional fish and egg). The latest to join this glittering line-up was the power couple Jay-Z and Beyonce, albeit only for 22 days in December 2013. However this was long enough to give vegan diets more credibility as a cleansing choice, if not as a lifestyle decision.

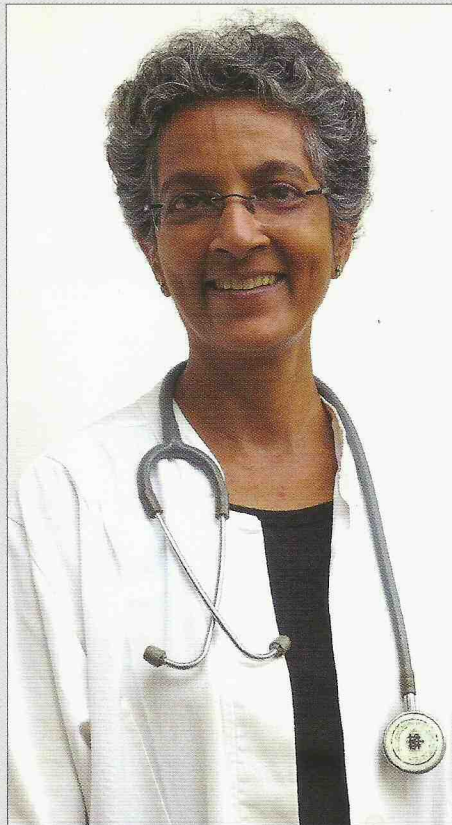
Vegan Rationale

At its simplest, veganism is a

dietary choice; an extreme form of vegetarianism where along with animal meat, everything derived from animals including milk, eggs and even honey is eliminated from the diet. An apparently healthy choice and one better suited for the human constitution, it lowers the risk of cardiovascular diseases, Type 2 diabetes, hormone imbalances and certain types of cancer, in addition to helping with weight loss and maintenance of a healthy BMI. Veganism is increasingly making sense, with most of the available foods that use animal meats and products, dripping with a cocktail of chemicals and hormones. The higher up the food chain our dietary choices, the more is the variety and intensity of toxins that snakes its way into our body.

At its zenith, veganism is a moral choice, a categorical refusal to hurt sentient beings. And its not just about killing animals. The inhumane conditions in which farm animals are bred and reared today for meat and for animal products - where entire lifecycles are tweaked to suit human consumption whims - exacerbates the core issue: institutionalised mass slaughter of helpless creatures that can feel pain, and want to live - perhaps as intensely as our own species.

The third argument in favour of veganism is that, it is the most environment friendly and only sustainable food option for the future, so much so, that a shift to a plant-based diet has been urged by United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). According to a UN Report, agriculture, particularly meat and dairy products, accounts for 70% of global freshwater consumption, 38% of the total land use and 19% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. The over dependence of affluent nations on meat and dairy comes with a heavy price tag of world hunger. And with the urgent need to increase global food production by 70% in 2050 to meet the needs of the predicted 9.1 billion humans, meat and dairy are understandably the least



Dr. Nandita Shah

efficient and most polluting foods available to mankind.

Nutrition Equation

Even when debates on whether we are herbivores or carnivores or omnivores rage in the background, even as our canines are analysed and gut lengths measured and stomach acidity compared, there is one statement that evokes universal consensus: food is fuel. So how well does a vegan diet deliver on the nutrition front?

When any shift to a plant based diet is discussed, protein seems to be the biggest concern area. "Protein deficiency would be among the least of our worries these days," says Dr. Nandita Shah, "If a good variety of natural soy, beans, legumes, nuts, seeds, pulses, lentils and vegetables are included in the diet, protein and almost all other nutrition needs are easily taken care of. Actually today, in most affluent societies and meat based diets, an excess of protein is being consumed increasing the load on our digestive system and kidneys."

Any discussion on removing dairy from the diet generally puts the spotlight on calcium. "Milk is the best source of calcium and protein, is a story churned by the dairy industry", contends Alia Almoayed, "Almonds, seeds, chickpeas, and pulses are all good sources of calcium and protein. Actually the proportion of calcium and magnesium in almond milk is better suited for human absorption than in dairy products. Due to the presence of xenoestrogens and its proven side-effects on human body, I would however caution against excessive use of soy milk."

Though zinc and iron are abundantly present in plant sources, it is more readily absorbed by the human body from animal sources. But by simply pairing the iron and zinc rich plant foods with a source of Vitamin C, the body can absorb more of these minerals. Also soaking or sprouting of grains and legumes increases the amount of absorbable zinc.

The area where vegan diets seem to be lacking is with regard to Vitamin B12, a vitamin essential for normal red blood cell formation and nerve function, it is almost exclusively available from animal sources like milk, meat and eggs. Hence, vegans need to take supplements or consume food fortified with Vitamin B12 like nutritional yeast. "Vitamin B12 is produced by bacteria and micro organisms, however with the excessive use of pesticides, cleaning products and increasing microwaves in the atmosphere, the plant sources are no longer rich in Vitamin B12. Even in diets where animal products are used, the absorption of Vitamin B12 is not optimal, hence there is a need for supplementation across the board", says Dr. Nandita Shah.

Vegan in Bahrain

It was at Dr. Nandita Shah's 2012 workshop in Bahrain, that Amber Lokhandwala was first introduced to veganism. She reinforced it with SHARAN's 21 day residential disease reversal holiday at SwaSwara, Gokarana,

Healthy Vegan Strawberry Ice Cream



Amber Lokhandwala

India and started following the vegan diet in 2012. "Even before I had started the vegan regime, I had eliminated milk from my diet and had started feeling better and less bloated. So the connection between food and well being had been clear to me from the beginning. It has been a long journey," says Amber, "Veganism as advocated by SHARAN is a lot more than dietary change. It is about going back to the fundamentals, the basics of good health. When we start being conscious of what and why we eat, we start appreciating nature and our own body. The workshop went beyond shifting to a plant based diet; the emphasis is on eating whole foods prepared in the healthiest way. We are encouraged to choose organic produce or when that option is not available, choose the local options. There is no compromise on flavour actually, when prepared with care and attention without masking the natural flavour of the food, every morsel starts tasting better."

Being part of a non-vegetarian household, her transition to vegan diet

INGREDIENTS

- 3 bananas
- 3 cups strawberries

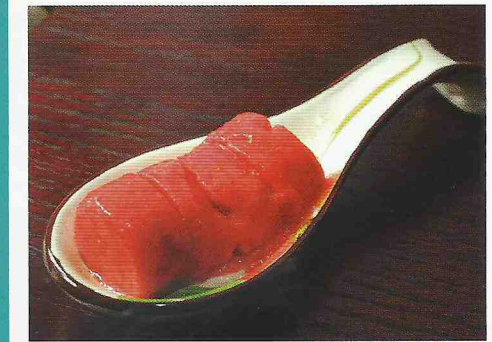
METHOD

Freeze peeled diced bananas and hulled strawberries.

Blend the frozen fruits in a blender or food processor until it becomes smooth and creamy.

Return to freezer and enjoy chilled.

(Variations For a nutty banana treat, blend frozen banana pieces with walnuts/ almonds or cashews and cinnamon to taste. Substitute cinnamon with cocoa powder for a chocolaty twist.)



Healthy Spinach and Potato Bake

INGREDIENTS FOR POTATO BASE:

- 4 potatoes cooked and mashed
- 2 finely chopped green chillies
- 1 tbsp minced coriander leaves
- A pinch of roasted cumin and pepper powder
- 2 tbsp cashew cheese/ vegan cheese*
- Salt to taste

INGREDIENTS FOR TOPPING:

- 3 bunches of spinach – cleaned and finely shredded
- .5 cup corn
- 1 large tomato chopped
- 1 finely chopped green chilly
- 4 garlic cloves minced
- 2 tbsp cashew paste
- 1 tsp cumin powder
- A pinch of white pepper powder
- Tomato slices
- Cashew cheese/ vegan cheese *
- Salt to taste

METHOD

Mix well all the ingredients for potato base and line the baking dish with this mixture

In a wok, sauté chopped garlic, followed by tomatoes, green chillies and corn kernels.

Once softened add the shredded spinach and the spices along with cashew paste.

Stir the mixture well and place on the prepared potato base.

Garnish with tomato slices and cashew / vegan cheese.

Bake in the pre-heated oven at 180° Celsius for 20 – 25 minutes or until the edges have browned slightly.

*Available at all major supermarkets



cuisine

has been a predictably bumpy one with some compromises along the way. But the support of her family and friends made it easier. As most large supermarkets in Bahrain are well stocked with vegan substitutes, Amber finds that vegan cooking at home is easy, but finding vegan options while eating out is still a challenge. "The biggest incentive for sticking to the programme is how it has helped me remain disease free and healthy. Beyond the conventional, processed food choices, I now know that there are a plethora of real and flavourful options in nature. I feel younger and have tons of energy."



Himanshu Gandhi

For hotelier Himanshu Gandhi, the transition to veganism also happened after the Peas vs. Pills workshop in Bahrain. A diabetic suffering from high blood pressure, the decision to become a vegan seemed a no brainer, after hearing how the diet had reversed many lifestyle diseases. It helped that he was a vegetarian by birth so the primary challenge was cutting out milk. "After the workshop I just decided to go the vegan way, in addition to cutting out all refined and processed food, as recommended by Dr. Shah", says Himanshu. A decision that coupled with an exercise regime seems to have paid rich dividends. He was able to cut his diabetes medication by about 20% and his blood pressure is back to normal. "Yes, sometimes one tends to slip off the plan; the holidays were an especially difficult period for me. Even when not following the plan to the T, I try to ensure that at least lunch, my main meal of the day is healthy vegan. And there is really no need to feel deprived even when going completely vegan, there are substitutes available for milk and butter and my wife makes excellent cheese with tofu. There has been a marked improvement in my physical health and energy levels." Himanshu explains that the restaurants in the Middle East have not started providing more vegan options, simply because the demand has not reached critical levels. As the demand grows menus will automatically start reflecting these preferences.

Small Green Steps

So even if vegan is the healthy, green, flavourful and compassionate option, it is still new. And for a vast majority of us, food is a lot more than fuel, it is a comfort, social glue, memory maker and tradition carrier. Hence even in the face of sensible diets that are overwhelmingly beneficial for us, it is difficult to abandon old food habits at one go.

But what is heartening, is that even moderate increases in the consumption of plants along with a reduction in the intake of animal products, leads to remarkable improvements in health. As Mark Bittman, the best selling food writer, proposed in his book VB6 or Vegan before 6, perhaps a 'flexitarian' approach is what is needed. He demonstrated that by consuming only healthy vegan from the time he wakes up, till 6 in the evening, and then enjoying all types of food without any restrictions, he was still able to lose weight and 'move his blood numbers in the right direction'.

Even if one missed (or chose to miss) the 100% vegan boat, it makes sense to start on the greener road with 'Meatless Mondays' or VB6 or vegan cleanse, for they are all headed to a healthier port.

Chef Shekhawat's Vegan Special



Alia's take on Vegan Diets

"The vegan diet has definite health benefits; in general plant based food is easier on our digestive system. So any shift to veganism, even for a limited period, gives our system a much needed rest and consequently our health improves. Even if it is not vegan for life; then vegan for a little while is still great."

"But there is no universal diet that fits all. Diets need to be personalised based on the individual's age, gender, life stage, health history, stress levels... Our bodies evolve over time, nutrition requirements change over a person's life time so to choose the right diet one needs to be in tune with the body."

"When embarking on any restrictive diet, including vegan, physical and emotional discomfort for upto a week is to be expected, followed by an elevation in energy levels and sense of general well being. It is a part of the natural cleansing cycle of the body – there is a dip before the rise. But if the discomfort persists beyond a week, reassess the dietary choices before pushing on with the program."

"One could live on French fries and diet coke and still be a vegan. The objective is to make healthy choices, in tune with your body. Unless there is an underlying religious or personal belief that supports a dietary choice, we are

free to pick and choose what our body needs at any given time."

"I recommend supplements not only for vegans, but for everyone. For one, the nutrient levels in food are lower than ever, and our stress levels are high, impairing our ability to absorb the already scant nutrients, so unlike previous generations supplements become even more crucial."

"Young children are in tune with their bodies, just ensure that food choices available to them are healthy and let them choose for themselves. I would not recommend putting any dietary restrictions on them and tampering with their intuitive sense."

"Vegan diets have been found most beneficial for people with digestive and weight issues, as well as during periods when one is dealing with emotional issues or stress."

"The first step towards veganism, is to identify healthy substitutes and start introducing them into ones daily diet. For instance beans, lentils and chickpeas to replace animal protein and eggs. Almond, oats, rice milk to replace conventional milk. Hummus, muttabal, mashed avocados and crushed olives as sandwich spreads instead of cheese. Explore other cuisines for instance Idly, Dosa the South Indian staples are vegan and healthy. Start eliminating only after you have built a comfort level with these substitutes."

Tofu & mushroom masala - 2 portions



INGREDIENTS

½ packet	tofu
250 grams	fresh mushrooms
1 tsp	cumin seeds
1 tbsp	garlic chopped
1 tbsp	ginger chopped
4 tbsp	white onion chopped
4 tbsp	tomatoes diced
1 tsp	green chilli chopped
2 tbsp	green coriander leaves
½ tsp	red chilli powder
½ tsp	turmeric powder
½ tsp	salt
1 cup	coconut milk

METHOD

Heat a pan.

Add cumin seed and roast it.

Then add garlic. Let it brown.

Add onion, ginger and green chilli and sauté.

Then add mushrooms. Sauté a little and add chilli and turmeric powder and salt.

Then add coconut milk and cook a little and add cubes of tofu and lastly add coriander leaves.