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Food & dining

FOOD

Confessions of ex-vegetarians

It can be hard to follow a vegetarian diet, but those who give it up found themselves craving meat protein or eating only humanely-raised animals.

By Anna Marden | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 17, 2012



ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

Rita and Bob Mott were vegetarians for 40 years. After spending more than half their lives meat-free, the couple decided to become omnivores again when Bob Mott realized he was getting headaches after eating meat substitutes.

"He did some research where he found that a lot of people have problems with soy, and mostly all of the vegetarian analogues are made from soy products," says Rita Mott. "We feel that was the main problem." When he began eating meat and stopped

eating meat substitutes, the headaches went away.

The Motts, who had believed the vegetarian diet was truly healthier, fixed a health problem by going against their beliefs. Since the back-to-the-land movement in the 1960s, when vegetarian diets became common, meat-free lifestyles have steadily gained popularity over the years. Vegetarian Times magazine reports that 3.2 percent of US adults choose a nonmeat diet. But maintaining a diet without meat or other animal products can also pose a number of social and nutritional challenges.

Some former vegetarians say they didn't feel strong enough for rigorous physical activity, some felt they had incomplete diets, others left home and found themselves living or dining with meat eaters. Eventually, these vegetarians decided to cross the line and reintroduce meat into their menus.

The Motts, formerly of Lancaster and now living in New Mexico, were members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which encourages vegetarian diets. Their daughter, Roberta Mott, 47, a resident of Marlborough, ate meat as a child until her parents converted. She was a strict vegetarian for a few years, but when she was a teen - though never at home - she ate meat with her friends. To this day, she has a taste for meat substitutes, such as soy steak or veggie burgers.

"If you were to go in my cabinets right now, you would see a mixture of the vegetarian products alongside the nonvegetarian products," Roberta says. "If you go into the freezer, there's frozen veggie chicken next to a real chicken."

It can be easier for people to maintain a vegetarian diet if it's a family-wide decision, or if you are doing it with a partner. The Motts had no problems, since the family ate meals together.



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Roberta Mott of Marlborough grew up with vegetarian parents, but today none of them are vegetarians. She holds out a selection from her refrigerator of meat and veggie meat.



ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Matthew Barber of Watertown, a former vegetarian, uses organic free-range chicken to make his dinner. He began craving meat when he started working out regularly. "To build

Emily Murphy, 22, of Cambridge, was a vegetarian for six years, living among a family of meat eaters. But she had a problem getting enough protein and other nutrients. She ate mostly carbs. Ultimately, her doctor recommended that she try eating meat again. "I didn't have very much energy and I was definitely feeling a lag in terms of feeling healthy," Murphy says.

Murphy admits that she's a picky eater. She has never consumed red meat. She became a vegetarian because of taste preferences. When she started eating chicken and turkey again, she faced an unexpected challenge. As an ex-vegetarian, people assumed she would eat anything.

"I think it's more difficult now to say 'I'm not a vegetarian,' and I suddenly get steak or pork or something in front of me that I don't eat," Murphy says. "It's trickier."

And then there are the former vegetarians who abstained from meat for moral reasons. Nancy Newark, of Medfield, became a vegetarian while traveling in Europe, because she was horrified by the animal brutality she witnessed there. She ended up breaking her vegetarian diet nine years later when she was exhausted from getting lost on a bike trip, and someone handed her a hamburger.

Patric Barbeiri, 47, of Acton, stopped eating meat because he just didn't feel right about it. His wife, Rena, 43, was a vegetarian for a few years, but when she became pregnant, she decided to eat meat again. Shortly afterward, Barbeiri began wondering if he was missing some essential nutrients and made the difficult decision to quit vegetarianism after 10 years of a strict meat-free diet.

Many vegetarians say they are protesting meat produced on factory farms. Matthew Barber, 35, of Watertown, started a veggie diet in college because of that.

Newark, Barbeiri, and Barber all say they faced some challenges when eating family meals with omnivores. It can be difficult for vegetarians to explain why they cannot eat the meal and manage to avoid offending hosts or making them feel awkward. "It was a challenge just being around family who weren't completely supportive of my decision," Barber says. "Coming home for the holidays and not even being able to eat the stuffing because it had chicken broth in it was kind of tough. I was stuck eating bread with margarine on it, and whatever vegetables were available."

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On his own, Barber made a conscious effort to maintain a balanced diet with plenty of protein, he says. But he began craving meat when he started working out regularly. "To build muscle, you need more protein," he says. "The vegetarian diet I was eating didn't seem to satisfy those cravings for meat protein."

One day, walking in Downtown Crossing, he says, "I just smelled the smell coming out of McDonalds and it sucked me in."

In the 10 years since quitting vegetarianism, Barber has become educated about ethical meat-eating. He usually buys local, humanely-raised, grass-fed animal products. "Whenever possible, I try to get meat from a farmers' market," Barber says. "I have considered [becoming vegetarian again] as an ethical protest of sorts."

He's considered it - but not right now. "I don't see myself doing it any time in the near future."

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