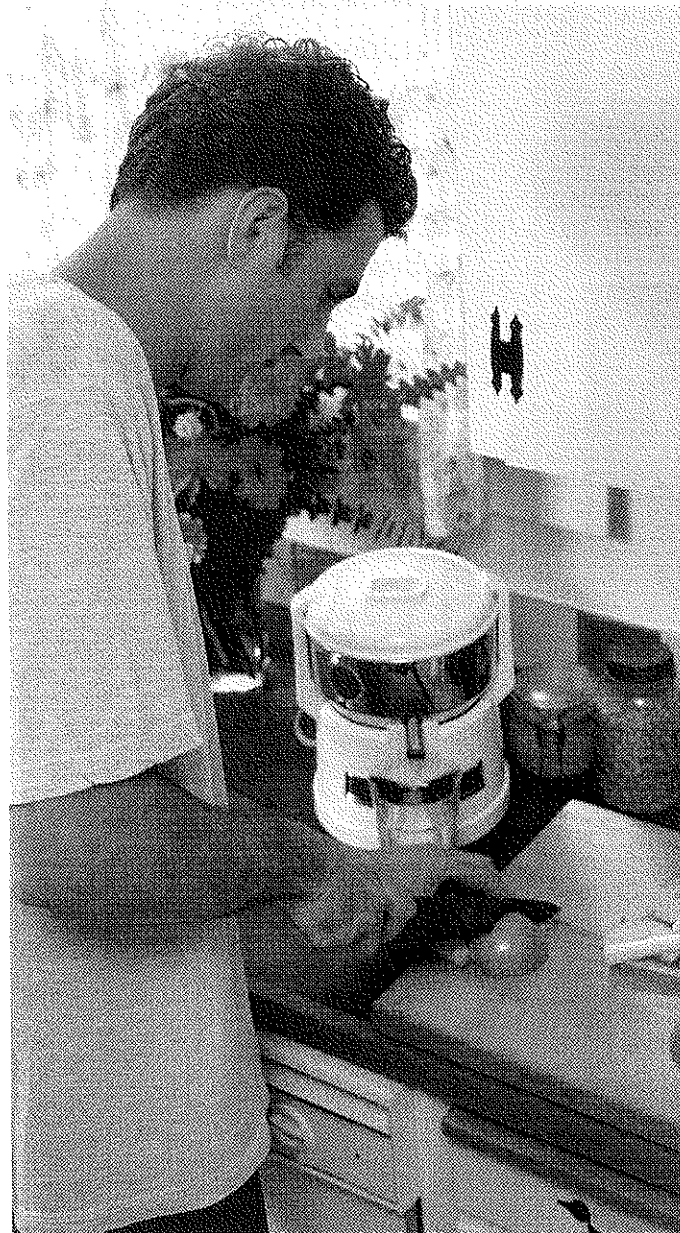


Surviving the

Born Again Vegan

A wife's reluctant odyssey

BY DEBBIE LEAMAN



It came without warning. None. Howard had always eaten animal products. And then he turned fifty. A month before the change, at his birthday party, my husband feasted on filet mignon, a variety of French cheeses and cream-filled delicacies. After the celebrations he informed me that he felt disgusting. Little did I know what was in store just a few weeks later.

Thin, lean and six feet tall, Howard is an avid hiker and expert skier; he works out regularly. Still, he lives with the misfortune of high cholesterol. He didn't take it seriously until he turned 50. Eating high fat foods was part of his upbringing and always his weakness. Concerned about his cholesterol, I constantly suggested he eat less meat and more vegetables. He finally realized he needed to change his diet.

But did it have to be so extreme?

On a hot Saturday afternoon in August, Howard returned from shopping, beaming with excitement, armed with his latest purchases. Not paying attention, I assumed he was holding a bag from Home Depot (perhaps another power tool) or that sausage stuffer he had been eyeing from Williams-Sonoma. Imagine my surprise when he hauled in two shopping bags from Wild Oats, filled to the

brim with everything soy.

Up until then, we only shopped at Wild Oats when we wanted to feel virtuous and pesticide-free. "I am now a vegan," he announced. Loading leftover steak encrusted plates into the dishwasher, I replied, "And just where do you plan to live?" That day was a defining moment for our whole family.

Vegans eat no animal products—no meat, poultry, fish or dairy. So, how many vegans are there? In a 2003 Vegetarian Resource Group survey conducted by Harris Interactive, 2.8% of Americans polled said they were vegetarian (never eating meat, poultry, or fish). About half of those also avoided dairy, eggs and honey and were considered vegan. My husband is apparently on the cutting edge.

Interest in vegetarian foods has been gaining momentum, and the trend is growing. Just look around. Wild Oats and Whole Foods markets are springing up everywhere. Local supermarkets carry soy milk and tofu. Most restaurants, even Burger King, now offer vegetarian options. And, the use of plant-based diets to prevent disease continues to grow. At least this wasn't a midlife crisis. But a diet of nuts and grains was such a profound change from his meat and dairy eating past.

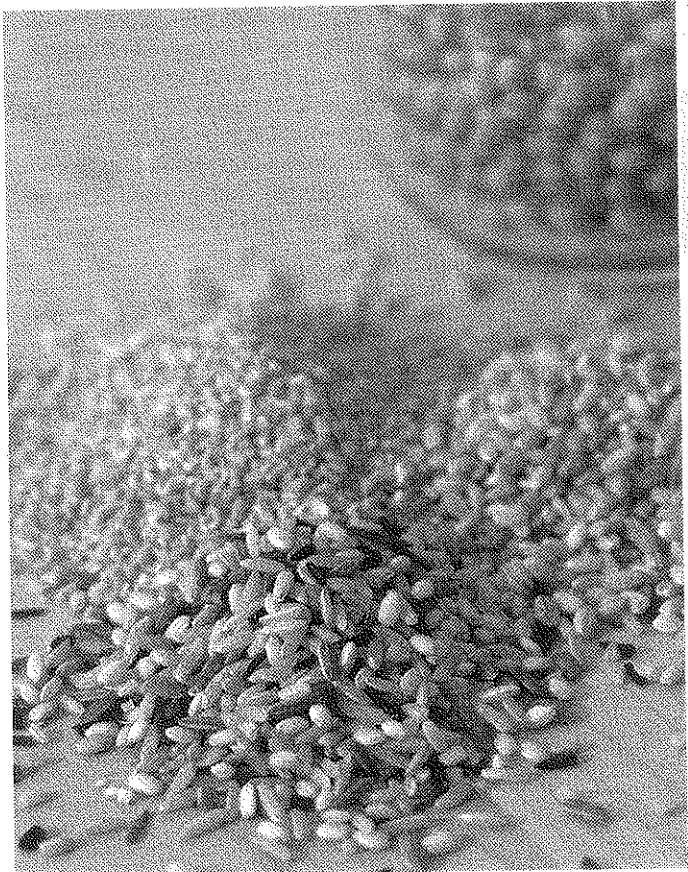
When I met Howard in New York City over 13 years ago, we

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shared a love of food and cooking. But, given our backgrounds, it was a wonder we could boil water together. He grew up on Manhattan's Upper West side, where rich foods were standard fare. I was raised in Connecticut where my family's cuisine was influenced by our cardiologist father. I learned at an early age to avoid lots of red meat, butter and fried anything.

As a new couple, we could not negotiate in the kitchen. We had what we referred to as "kitchen incompatibility." We both loved to cook, just differently. For me creating a hearty pot of soup is relaxing. For my husband, a physician, cooking is an edible science experiment. Trying to cook together, squeezed into our galley kitchen, we were constantly monitoring each other's culinary styles. Eventually we reached a settlement. I would make salads and vegetables. He would cook the meat, chicken and fish. I made unusual ethnic dishes. And he baked the bread. Accepting each other's strengths, we had our division of labor down pat.

We have since moved to the mountains of the west and have a kitchen about the size of our entire New York apartment. We have a family now: Ian, our ten-year-old son and

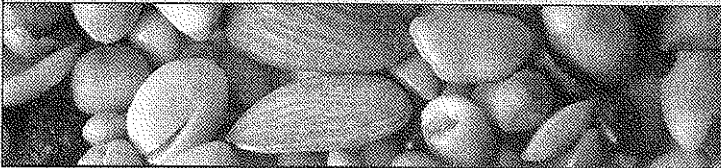


VEGAN EATING:

Seven Common Myths

Courtesy of Julie Metos, MPH, RD, CD
University of Utah Division of Nutrition

1. *Vegans are anemic.* Vegans typically have a high intake of iron. Even though iron from plants may not be absorbed as well as iron from animal sources, the incidence of iron deficiency anemia among North American vegans remains similar to non-vegans.
2. *Vegans can't be strong athletes.* Athletes can get adequate protein from plant sources without special foods or supplements. Special attention to adequate calorie and fat intake is needed for vegans who are highly competitive or teen athletes.
3. *Vegans must carefully combine foods at each meal in order to get "complete proteins."* As long as a variety of protein foods are eaten throughout the day (soy, legumes, nuts), vegans don't need to combine proteins at each meal.
4. *Vegan diets lead to eating disorders.* A vegan diet may mask an existing eating disorder but rarely leads to an eating disorder by itself.
5. *Vegans never have to struggle with their weight.* While vegans are slimmer as a group, it's still important to limit highly sweetened and fatty foods in order to maintain a healthy weight. Like all Americans, vegans need daily physical activity for long-term health and weight management.
6. *Vegans need to take lots of vitamin and mineral supplements.* Vegans with well-planned eating styles need vitamin B-12 supplementation, and possibly vitamin D, if exposure to the sun is limited.
7. *You have to "go all the way" to get the health benefits of veganism.* Eating more fruits, vegetables, soy foods and whole grains is a great theme for anyone concerned with improved nutrition.



Rebecca, our eight-year-old daughter, both of whom like to cook with us. And, although our kid's school projects are haphazardly strewn about the counters in piles, I make sure that our spice cabinet is stocked, ready for any cuisine. Howard is in charge of the requisite kitchen gadgets for our creations.

Only months before he became a born-again vegan, Howard enthusiastically came home armed with his prized acquisition—a rotisserie attachment for our grill. He and our children watched, fascinated by the slow, automatic circling of the poultry. He delighted in trying different marinades, rubs, and spices for the juicy chickens he proudly served. Between chickens, he'd grill his special garlic burgers, nearly half-pound monstrosities, each considered a meal for a family anywhere else.

We all savored those garlic burgers, so why the sudden switch? The week Howard transformed himself into a vegan, he had read an intriguing article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. A study from the University of Toronto, called the Portfolio Diet, had shown that a strict regimen of foods high in soluble fiber, soy protein, and plant sterols significantly reduced cholesterol by up to 35% without medication. According to the Portfolio plan, one should eat soy, beans (legumes or lentils), barley, red pepper, eggplant, onions, okra, almonds, oat bran bread and fruit. He took this very seriously.

As long as I have known him, Howard had never been into any type of fad dieting. His habit was to eat pretty much anything. Given his cholesterol situation, this was a concern to me. I thought, "This will be good for a few days. We'll cook up some beans, stir fry a little tofu, eat some nuts, and everyone will think this was a nice try." Wrong. The moment he dumped his Wild Oats bags on the kitchen counter that hot August afternoon, things in our house changed.

First he tackled the bread. Being a scientist by training, creating the right dough for this high fiber bread was an experiment he simply couldn't pass up. For weeks he and the kids experimented with new batches. Our children hovered over the Kitchen Aid mixer, absorbed in the rhythmic drone of the beaters. Dough adhered to the front of Rebecca's Barbie nightgown and flour lightly coated Ian's arms. Finally, after many

weeks and many loaves, he perfected his recipe.

There were other, more frustrating, ramifications. Since the Portfolio Diet requires specific amounts of each soluble fiber food, Howard bought a scale and methodically weighed his portions. Eating out became an issue. Unless soy was on the menu, he wouldn't go. His plan impacted our social life. "We'd love to have you to dinner but we can't," friends told us. "We just don't know what to cook for you." And, to make matters worse, he felt everyone over forty could benefit by this program. As if proselytizing, he spoke ad nauseum about his diet, to family, friends or anyone who would listen. He was becoming...obnoxious.

After months of weighing vegetables, eating his strict regimen and forgoing his beloved meat, I realized, he was really serious about this. I felt like a casualty of his new-found veganism. He was finally trying to reduce his cholesterol, but this new diet was more than that. It was drastic. I became frantic.

"It's very common to be intolerable to others during the first two years of making any major dietary change," according to Julie Metos, a nutritionist at the University of Utah. "These individuals become almost evangelical." But, she adds, "after a few years it becomes just part of life instead of the whole purpose of life." Two years of this?

We had to talk. I pointed out that the extremity of his new diet was impacting our family. "Why can't you just eat more sensibly?" I argued. He stared at me as if I were speaking a different language. To him, this was an all or nothing proposition. He reasoned that if he ate a very small piece of meat, he would want more, if he ate skinless breasts of chicken he would go for the crisp drumstick, and ordering a dry turkey sandwich with a side salad and light dressing instead of fries would definitely not work. I listened, trying hard to be compassionate. Explaining that the specific guidelines of this diet must be followed to achieve results, he implored, "Please be supportive. This is very important to me."

I was at a crossroads. While I wanted to support my husband, navigating a vegan lifestyle seemed daunting. "But, what about the garlic burgers?..." I wondered selfishly. He was determined to do this, and either I remained cranky or became cooperative. I knew he needed to take care of himself. After much soul-searching, I decided to help.

In a new frame of mind, I delved into the vegan world. I pored over cookbooks, magazines and online resources to find interesting dishes. We traded our rotisserie for a pressure cooker to cook dried beans. I discovered the wonders of soy. We've tried soy everything: chicken strips, ground "meat," all permutations of veggie burgers and tofu dogs. We eat bean soups, lentil dishes, and tempeh. I buy cases of soy milk and oat bran cereal on my now routine shopping trips to Wild Oats. And, in spite of myself, I am enjoying the challenge of creating new and interesting vegan dishes.

It is one thing to make a personal adult decision, it is another to impose this change on a family. Howard never requested that the family modify their eating habits. However, cooking vegan for one and then trying to plan dinner for everyone else is a challenge. Often I cook two meals.

By default, our children have been subjected to this new way of eating. I've tried slipping chopped soy meat past them in tacos and sloppy joes. There was Cajun gumbo made with almonds instead of sausage and soy cheese pizza topped with tofu chunks. Ian, biting into a tofu bratwurst immediately spit it out, crying, "That's disgusting." Just ask our kids about seitan, a wheat gluten protein-rich substance disguised as meat. Carefully surveying the food on their plates, they are frequently suspect of what I might attempt next. Reluctantly trying our creations, they still prefer real hamburgers and hot dogs.

However, over time, our family has adapted and benefited by eating healthier. One evening, Rebecca was visibly upset because she was looking forward to curried lentils but I hadn't

made them for dinner. Ian, who in the past only ate cheese or pasta, now loves sautéed spinach with garlic. He even eats cauliflower (dipped in ketchup).

Howard has reduced his cholesterol by over 30% and lost a few pounds; he feels great. We have figured out how to entertain again. He will still grill meat and chicken, and when invited to a friend's home for dinner, I'm the one bringing a black bean salad. Howard has also relaxed enough to navigate his way through a restaurant menu, able to adhere to his plan. A straddling vegan (I go both ways), I am truly enjoying eating more beans, soy and vegetables.

We have all come around. Just a few months ago, Howard was helping Rebecca cut her steak. He reached over, skimming his shirt sleeve on his plate heaped with barley, grilled eggplant and Boca Burgers. With purpose, he stuck his fork into a piece of juicy meat. Opening his mouth, he ate it. Frozen in our chairs, we watched with disbelief. His reply: "Sometimes a guy just needs some steak."

We recently hit the two-year mark since Howard's veganism began, and he has loosened up considerably. After that taste of steak, meat beckoned. He fell off the wagon for a few weeks, indulging in sausage pizza and a few chili dogs. Now, no longer feeling as restricted, he's reached a good balance. After stealing a bite of cheeseburger, he'll pile up on the veggies and tempeh. He calls it "vegan style." Now, that's a healthy change we can all live with. ♦

Debbie Leaman has spent over 20 years in financial services and recently retired to explore new pathways as a writer. She lives (as an omnivore) in Salt Lake City with her husband and two children.