

The Socially Well-Adjusted Vegetarian ©

The aim of this report is to help you to be vegetarian in the real world, with minimal friction and maximum enjoyment.

When we first become vegetarian, often we're bursting with zeal, and try to convert everyone we know to our new religion. It's one thing to be right, but quite another to tell everybody else. As Mark Twain said, "Few things are harder to put up with than a good example." Miss Manners adds her bit: "Ideological differences are no excuse for rudeness." This report is about advancing the cause through good manners, diplomacy, and public relations.

People are social beings.

Most of us want to be part of a group, and we gravitate toward people who are most like us. When we become vegetarian, we don't always have a group of other vegetarians to belong to, especially at work, or school. So, we get busy transforming your current group, or groups to fit your new needs.

However, people are fond of their own beliefs and habits, so pretty soon most of the non-vegetarians start running away when they see us coming, gossiping about us behind our backs, laughing at us, or being hostile, argumentative and insulting to our faces. That isn't what we want, is it? Surely, admiration, respect, and empathy are more to our liking.

Integrate your vegetarian lifestyle with the non-vegetarian world and achieve harmonious co-existence.

That's not so easy, as you've no doubt discovered, because you have to do all the work! But don't be discouraged. Think about smokers. They're in the minority, and everybody knows they're killing themselves. Soon they won't be able to smoke anywhere in public. As it is, they have to huddle together uncomfortably away from the virtuous non-smokers.

When I grew up, in the fifties and sixties, most people chain-smoked everywhere, in restaurants, offices, stores, public buildings – you couldn't get away from it. They would light up in your home, even if you asked them not to, because it was their God-given right. And you were considered a weird, pathetic loser if you didn't smoke.

Soon, vegetarian diets will be considered normal.

Most restaurants will offer a variety of vegetarian and vegan foods. Vegetarian restaurants will be common. Restaurants that cater to meat-eaters will be hard

to find. Warnings from the surgeon general will be on all packages of meat in grocery stores. Meat won't be illegal, but it will be prohibitively expensive, (as it is now, only the costs are hidden in agricultural subsidies paid for with our taxes). You'll have to be 18 years or over to buy it. Think I'm fantasizing? Talk to me in five years.

We're half way there, so be patient, and allow me to give you some tools to make your present existence much easier. There are many effective ways to be a vegetarian without strife.

"The best way to predict the future is to invent it" - Alan Kay

Seven Principles of Savvy Vegetarians:

Building the harmonious co-existence mentioned above:

Modesty. Vegetarianism isn't a religion. It's a dietary preference, which will almost certainly enhance your religious experiences, but isn't in itself a path to God. It is possible to become enlightened as a meat eater, and being vegetarian doesn't make you part of a moral minority. There are probably areas in your life that you might not want to be made public.

Tolerance. There's no reason why everybody has to be just like you! Other people have the right to eat meat if they want to. It's true that they're harming the environment, and themselves, by eating factory-farmed animals. However, things would be vastly improved if they went organic and reduced their consumption of beef, chicken and fish by 75%. It isn't necessary for anyone, including you, to become completely vegetarian if they don't want to.

"Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else" - Margaret Mead (1901-1978) American anthropologist.

Discretion. You don't need to hide, but it isn't necessary to go around announcing to everyone in sight that you're a vegetarian. Those folks who haven't yet seen the light about eating animals are not going to change because you tell them they're wrong. To them, that's exactly what you're doing when you say that you're a vegetarian. Just mentioning it makes them feel defensive, and angry with you and all vegetarians.

Don't explain.

**"Silence is argument carried out by other means."
Ernesto "Che" Guevara (1928-1967).**

If asked by someone who notices you ordered the Pasta Alfredo without the chicken, say the minimum, such as, “ I like it this way,” or, “It’s kind of personal.” If you’re pressed, say “It’s a long story. Why don’t we talk later?” You don’t owe anybody an explanation about your diet, unless you think so, and really, most people don’t want one. They’re just expressing alarm that you’re behaving differently from the group.

Resist the urge to preach. When given a sympathetic audience, and the opportunity to hold forth, say something like, “I’m new at this. If you really want to know more about it, I recommend such-and-such books, or websites. Maybe after you read or go there, we can talk about it.” Then change the subject. Your modesty will intrigue them, and if they’re really interested, they’ll follow up. Books or websites for you and others are listed in Resources, below.

Be gentle with your family and friends. For the most part, they’ll find your new diet puzzling, annoying, and even hurtful. “ Too bad!” isn’t an appropriate response. Refusing to spend holidays with your family because you’re vegetarian is unkind. You can let them know you’re vegetarian, with whatever explanation you want to give, but don’t make a big deal out of it. It won’t help your cause if your family and friends think you turned into an insensitive clod when you became vegetarian.

Keep your sense of humor. If you can’t laugh at yourself, others will do it for you. If you can make or take a joke about being vegetarian, people won’t feel nearly as threatened, hurt, or skeptical. If, at Thanksgiving dinner, your Uncle Joe booms, “Vegetarians ain’t nothin’ but a bunch a’ sissies eatin’ rabbit food!” don’t get mad; do your Bugs Bunny imitation. Remember that your Uncle probably feels threatened (never say that out loud, of course).

Stories illustrating the Seven Principles of Savvy Vegetarians

Travel:

While on a day trip in the Midwest (yes this really happened), a veggie couple is looking for a place to eat. They cruise a Holiday Inn restaurant. Only to discover that it’s strictly meat, potatoes and frozen veg buffet. Not a pasta dish or salad bar to be found. In response to a polite question from a food service employee, Mr. Veggie shouts out, “No! We’re not having lunch! We’re vegetarians, and there’s nothing for us to eat here,” then stomps out. What do you think the couple should have done?

1. Insist on complaining in person to the manager, about the restaurant not serving anything a vegetarian could eat
2. Walk out of the restaurant quietly, with a polite thank you and a smile, because food workers are already sufficiently abused.
3. They should have known better than to try that restaurant in the first place, and continued looking for a Taco Bell or Subway.
4. They should have avoided the whole scenario by bringing their own food, to eat in the car while hurtling down the freeway at 75 mph.
5. They should have fasted for ten hours, and waited till they were home to eat.

Here's my view:

2) and 3) are sensible options, which avoid both personal embarrassment and giving vegetarians a bad name.

As to 4) and 5), eating while driving isn't great for digestion, and fasting should only be done with quiet activity or rest. Bringing your own food works, if you can stop to eat. Gas station/convenience store/restaurants almost always have microwaves, and I've never been refused when I asked permission to heat food for my "restricted diet" in their microwaves.¹ The same gas stations often have sitting areas that you are free to use, if you buy a beverage. And there's always the (parked) car.

Restaurant menus at big chains are set at the corporate offices. Thus, a reasonable variation on a) is to send a polite letter to the President and VP of Holiday Inn telling them that you couldn't eat at their restaurant because there was no vegetarian alternative in the lunch buffet. To corporations, if one person takes the trouble to write, it means there are ten more like them out there who don't write.

Eating with friends or co-workers:

During school lunch break, a group of teens gather in the cafeteria. Some are vegetarian, and some are not. One person sits down with a plate of chicken. A girl vegetarian throws a fit, saying, "Ew, gross! I can't eat with that chicken in front of me. It's making me sick! How can you even eat that? Take it away." The offending party gets up and moves to another table. How could this scene have played differently?

¹ Microwaves are convenient, but destructive to the environment, and the nutritional qualities of food. When food is heated in plastic, toxic chemicals transfer to the food. So use microwaves only when unavoidable, and try not to heat food in plastic – paper is okay, and ceramic or glass.

My view: Chicken could easily have told vegetarian to get stuffed, or leave if she didn't like it. But perhaps her victim was lower in the social order, in a minority, or was humiliated/insulted/disgusted enough not to want to stay. The point is that if you're in a public or communal place, where veg and non-veg are eating together, it's rude to make negative remarks about what others are eating. The vegetarian should have kept quiet, or moved. Her outburst spoiled the meal for others, who were embarrassed or resented her behavior.

Feeding Non-Vegetarian Guests:

A girlfriend cooked dinner for her non-vegetarian boyfriend. She made a rice and vegetable dish with chunks of fried tofu. The boyfriend ate, pronounced it good, then found out he was eating tofu. He spit it out and wouldn't eat anymore. Indeed, he never again ate anything the girlfriend made, bringing his own meals instead.

My view: Leaving aside the issue of whether this relationship has a future: The moral of the story is, when feeding non-vegetarians; don't trick them into eating tofu. Ask first if they like it or would be willing to try it. The same goes for any other foods which non-vegetarians might find strange or scary, such as lentil loaf, tempeh, fake meat, eggplant, quinoa, etc. Always think about the likely food preferences of those you're feeding, and when in doubt, ask. Give a few choices. Check for food preferences or allergies, as you would with any other guest.

Stick with foods similar to those that are known and loved. Here are a few suggestions:

An egg based dish, such as Spinach Quiche, leaving out fake bacon bits, which will arouse suspicion. Good accompanied with baked potato and salad.

Chickpeas and kidney beans are familiar enough to be used in small amounts. Add them to dishes that are already known – such as three-bean salad, pasta salad, minestrone soup, vegetarian chili (good recipe for that in the SV resource guide recipe section)

Go easy on whole grains with non-vegetarians. They generally could care less about the nutritional aspects. Use comfort foods such as potatoes, breads, or spaghetti.

Familiar ethnic foods work well: Mexican, Indian, or Italian – if it's spicy and tasty, they are less likely to notice there's no meat, especially if there's cheese or egg involved.

Desserts like cheesecake will provide that full feeling, which non-vegetarians usually expect from a meal, but keep in mind those who are watching their cholesterol intake.

If you're vegan, you'll have more of a challenge. But, you'll still be okay if you aim for simple familiar food.

If all else fails, order in or take your guest out.

The Flip Side: Non-vegetarians feeding vegetarians:

I could come up with dozens of examples, most funny, and some rather sad.

My daughter attended a barbecue where the hosts, knowing she is vegetarian, insisted on getting veggie dogs for her, even though she begged them not to go to any trouble, she would just eat whatever wasn't meat, etc. When she got to the party, the veggie dogs were of course commingled on the barbecue with the meat. After her hosts proudly and ostentatiously gave her several, she thanked them nicely and snuck off to rinse them under the tap, in hopes that would remove enough of the meat juices that she wouldn't get sick.

I once went to dinner with friends who cooked a big pot of beans, which were undercooked, not spiced or salted, and swimming in the cooking liquid. My friends were obviously put-upon by my new and inconvenient weirdness. I forced myself to eat the beans, but I guess it was obvious I didn't enjoy them. The friendship, already waning, was finished off by this awkward dinner. I wished later that I hadn't told them I was vegetarian, and put them into such a difficult situation. On the other hand, if they had spent hours cooking meat for me, which I didn't eat, it might have been worse.

Sometimes, it's better not to say anything, or do anything. For example, when you're invited to Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma's house. And sometimes it's better to let people know, if you can. You have to decide whether it would cause more distress if you tell them than if you don't.

If you feel that you must tell, make it clear that your one desire is to not cause any awkwardness – *you just don't want the host to be shocked and upset when you arrive and announce your vegetarian state after the meal is prepared.* Make every effort to put them at ease, so they don't worry, get upset, or go to a lot of trouble for you. Try and come across as flexible and considerate, not demanding that they cater to you.

If non-vegetarians are thoughtful and PC enough to try to come up with something for you to eat, even though you may be the only vegetarian in the crowd, you're going to appear very rude and hurtful if you don't eat some. Here are a few hints toward a pleasant experience for all:

Reassure your host that you'll be perfectly happy eating whatever isn't meat. This is often the easiest and safest route for everyone.

Offer to bring a vegetarian dish that will complement the meal, and appeal to the other guests, a platter of nuts or cheese, for example, or soup, or salad. If the host insists on doing all the cooking, offer a favorite vegetarian recipe that will go with their menu.

When asked, give information about your diet, such as what kind of vegetarian you are, and food allergies or sensitivities. Be specific – you'd be surprised how many people think that vegetarians eat chicken and fish. If you are an ovo-lacto vegetarian, say something like, "I'm an ovo-lacto vegetarian – that means that I don't eat any meat, chicken or fish, but I do eat eggs or dairy." If you're vegan, say "Actually, I'm not just vegetarian, I'm vegan, which means I eat no animal products at all, no meat, chicken, fish, eggs or dairy"

Don't give a list of your likes and dislikes, or tell them you will only eat organic food. It's best to be somewhat adaptable when dining out.

If your host asks, give easy suggestions for what to feed you, rather than be vague and self-effacing. Ask what they're serving, and make your suggestions fit the menu. For example, if they are making a dish that has meat mixed with other ingredients, suggest a side portion without the meat, if it's convenient.

Cohabiting:

I don't know of many instances of successful cohabitation between vegetarian and non-vegetarian. I'm not trying to be pessimistic or cynical – it can be done, but it's not easy. Looking on the bright side, a veg/nonveg marriage or relationship has just as much chance of succeeding as any other marriage, i.e. about 50%.

Mostly the vegetarian gives it up, or the non-vegetarian converts, or the relationship breaks up. That's because the one doing the cooking decides on the menu, or cooks to please the other. If the relationship falters, the other's food preferences become a battleground. I know a woman who was married to a vegetarian, and deliberately put meat in the spaghetti sauce, out of spite, as far as I could gather. Needless to say, that marriage didn't last.

If you are a vegetarian living with a non-vegetarian, you need tolerance and compromise to make it work. That means full communication, plenty of patience and good humor, and no angry or passive-aggressive behavior. That's a tall order for any marriage or partnership, let alone one with different diets. Sharing food is a major element in a relationship – just as important as sex. Here are a few suggestions for minimizing the differences, and maximizing the sharing of food:

- For every meal that you share, have a dish or two that you both like.
- The non-vegetarian partner should agree to expand his/her food horizons and try new vegetables, grains and protein sources.
- The vegetarian shouldn't push, or lecture about diet and nutrition.
- Find as many vegetarian dishes as you can that also work for your partner.
- The vegetarian partner should tolerate having the non-veg cook meat, chicken or fish in the family kitchen. Have pots and dishes just for that, if it's an issue.
- At the same time, the vegetarian shouldn't be expected to cook meat, unless he/she doesn't mind (unusual in a vegetarian!)
- Freeze individual portions of each partner's favorite dishes to eat when time is short, or you can't agree.
- Never make negative remarks about what the other wants to eat. Look on your differences as enriching your relationship.

Work:

Working with non-vegetarians is always ---interesting, because of work-place politics. It's a lot like high school. We get to know our co-workers well, but we don't necessarily become friends. Tolerance and sensitivity aren't always abundant. There is competition, territoriality, the inevitable power structure, and pecking order. Those who are different often become the butt of jokes and gossip, or are ostracized. At work, all of the seven principles above come into play at all times. In addition, it may be necessary to guard your tongue, and watch your back. A feat I have yet to master. Form alliances with people whose sensibilities match your own – they don't have to be vegetarian.

Social Events:

This is like going to a non-vegetarian's house for dinner, only on a larger scale. Social events involving food could be company events, seminars, eating with clients, church potlucks, and parties. They aren't nearly as intimate or friendly as dinner with friends or family. The social protocol is tighter.

If you have a say in the venue or the menu, by all means exercise that to your advantage, but not to the clear disadvantage of the other participants. For example, take your clients to a Thai or Indian restaurant, or a restaurant that you know has something vegetarian on the menu. Don't take them to a vegetarian restaurant, unless they're all vegetarians.

If it's an event where the menu is pre-arranged, there are two possibilities. If it's a buffet, just select what you can eat. If it's a sit down, where everybody gets the same thing, you might be lucky enough to get a vegetarian option. Ask the organizers well ahead of time if it's possible.

Once, when I worked for an agricultural finance organization, I went to a company event. It was a sit down dinner, where the main dish was an enormous medium-rare steak with potato and veg on the side. I pushed my steak onto the bread and butter dish, and laid my napkin over the offending spot on my plate. There was a shocked silence. I offered my steak to the table at large, but of course they already had far more than enough. The others were clearly offended, even though nothing was said. The waste of food alone would have offended them, although few of them could eat more than half of their enormous steaks.

If I had to do it again, I might have come up with a good reason not to go to that dinner. My attending hurt my standing in the company more than it helped. For that event, it wouldn't have been possible to arrange a separate entrée for the one vegetarian among hundreds. If I had thought of it soon enough, I might have arranged to have a plate brought to me without a steak. Or I could have eaten all but the meat (although I really couldn't handle having it on my plate.) My best option was not to take the plate when it arrived. If asked, I could have just said that I couldn't eat the steak because I can't digest meat, and leave it at that.

A Time For Everything:

**“To everything there is a season
And a time for every matter under heaven.”
Ecclesiastes, 3: 1 – 8**

Nature supports a vegetarian diet more than any other. In time, you'll find that being vegetarian is as natural as breathing.

You don't need to try hard, or strain, or be miserable. Don't think of becoming vegetarian as carrying out an agenda on a timetable, like a war plan. Or as having the right set of politically correct attitudes – they are fickle companions. You can spend all your time keeping up with the changes.

One thing is certain. You don't have time to get caught up in making war on meat eaters, or in trying to force them to march to your tune.

Becoming vegetarian is part of the natural evolution of your soul, which goes inevitably in a positive direction. You have the desire, and set off on the journey.

Sometimes it's easy, sometimes not. You may take detours, or long rests, or go backward.

Relax and enjoy the journey. Take your time. Enjoy being alive, loving and being loved. Don't worry about what others are doing, or not doing. Be free to do what's right, for you and those you love, at any time.

Resources:

When it comes to vegetarian etiquette, self-referral is truly your best resource. I've found little practical support for *harmonious vegetarianism*. Most magazines, books and websites have a definite point of view, agenda, or ideals, which doesn't help *you* to live in the world as a vegetarian.

How you put your new knowledge into action is a matter of individual consciousness, personality and ethics. However, there are universal truths, drawn from every tradition, to serve as our ethical guides:

- The golden rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is found with little variation in the moral and religious teachings of every culture, from Hinduism to Christianity.
- From the New Testament, "...whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." (Galatians 6:7)
- Newton's third law of motion says the same thing in different words: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

There are a few books and sites that present balanced perspectives on the subject of vegetarian diet. They support the change to a vegetarian diet, while recognizing the need for flexibility, kindness, and humor:

"Becoming Vegetarian", by Vesanto Melina, R.D - a clear, practical guide to becoming vegetarian. It focuses mainly on diet and nutrition, but there's a good chapter on vegetarian diplomacy.

The Vegetarian Society of the U.K.: <http://www.vegsoc.org/> - the oldest and biggest vegetarian site, slanted toward Great Britain, where vegetarianism is well established, but has useful info for all, which is why they get millions of visitors from all over the world

And, of course, there's www.savvyvegetarian.com. Our purpose in starting the site was to support a sane, moderate, relaxed, approach to being vegetarian - ***sustainable vegetarianism***.

A Little Perspective on Being A Socially Well Adjusted Vegetarian:

We can't always accommodate others, or completely avoid awkward situations. You can't please everyone, and not everyone you meet is your friend. As in the story above, hindsight is twenty-twenty. It's not always easy to do or say just the right thing, and mistakes are inevitable. Sometimes, we can apologize and make it right; sometimes we have to move on and learn from the experience. If you just have the intention to practice the seven principles of savvy vegetarians in your life, you'll get better at it over time. Meanwhile, remember to keep your sense of humor, and please be as gentle and tolerant with yourself as you are of others.

Happy Vegging!
Judy Kingsbury,
Savvy Vegetarian,

P.S. Feel free to forward this report to anybody you like!

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Useful SV Links:

['Organic Food: What Is It and Why Should We Eat It?'](#)

[Vegetarian Protein - Myth and Reality](#)

[Vegetarians, Are You Getting Enough Vitamin B12](#)

[Magnesium is Critically Important to Your Vegetarian Health](#)

[Essential Fatty Acids](#)

['Be Happy, Healthy And Vegetarian While Pregnant Or Breastfeeding'](#)

['Food Revolution' by John Robbins](#)

['Seeds of Deception' By Jeffrey M. Smith, 'Exposing Industry and Government Lies About the Safety of Genetically Engineered Foods'](#)

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