



VEGGIE PRIDE

WASHINGTON POST FOOD EDITOR
PROMOTES THE JOY OF
VEGETARIAN COOKING

A FORMER BARBECUE JUDGE from Texas, *Washington Post* food and travel editor Joe Yonan once wrote that he was “just plain hard-wired” to eat meat. After all, he grew up slow cooking brisket over mesquite chips in his family’s backyard. And he made a name for himself in food circles by eating his way through plates of meat at steak houses and county fairs.

But over time, Yonan’s tastes became rewired. He first became aware of the change after his *Serve Yourself* cookbook came out in 2011. Flipping through the pages, Yonan was surprised to find that most of the recipes were meat-free. Then he noticed the meat piling up in his freezer. During an Austin food conference, a visit to a famous barbecue joint failed to excite him: “That’s where I was realizing that something was really different,” he says.

Earlier this year, in a *Post* column headlined “A Former Omnivore Comes Out as Vegetarian,” Yonan announced that he was no longer eating meat. Now with a new “Weeknight Vegetarian” column and the recently published *Eat Your Vegetables* cookbook, he extols the virtues of vegetables and shares recipes that will inspire even the most ardent omnivores to reduce their meat consumption.

In this edited interview with HSUS public relations manager Anna West, Yonan discusses his evolution from king of the grill to promoter of the plant kingdom.

What were some of the influences on your evolution to a vegetarian diet?

I grew up in west Texas and certainly ate a lot of heavy meats my whole life. But I ate less and less meat over the last several years. I think that when I was at home I was trying to make up for all the meat eating I was doing in restaurants by moving more toward a vegetarian strategy. The circles that I eat in—professional food writing circles—those restaurant meals can be pretty over the top. As I get older, I’ve had a harder time handling that. I haven’t had any health crises but just that “food coma” feeling.

MATT ARMENDARIZ

Some people go to the doctor and get a diagnosis or they have a heart attack and they decide right then that they're going to make a radical shift, but for me it was much more gradual.

As a food editor, did you worry about readers' reactions?

Yes, I did. I had been writing the "Cooking for One" column for about five years. Last year, I started saying in the column things like, "Now that I'm eating less and less meat," or "Now that I'm mostly vegetarian," or "Now that I'm pretty much moving toward plants." I think subconsciously I was feeling out what kind of reaction I was going to get. Were people going to say, "I love this stuff, but why aren't you giving us any meat?" But none of that really happened. So when I was thinking about a new column idea, I thought, "You know what, we don't have a vegetarian column in the paper. I should just admit to people that I'm a vegetarian and go for it."

What inspired you to write *Eat Your Vegetables*?

It started when I was promoting the last book, *Serve Yourself*. At events and signings, one of the most common questions I was getting was, "How much of your book is vegetarian?" It kind of surprised me at first, and it also surprised me when I looked in the book and realized that it was almost two-thirds vegetarian. I hadn't realized that my own cooking was so vegetarian heavy. When I started thinking of ideas for the next book, the voices of all those vegetarians who were asking about *Serve Yourself* popped into my head.

Also, I spent last year in Maine on my sister and brother-in-law's homestead. I was curious about how they wanted to grow all their own food so I went up there to immerse myself in that and started falling more in love with vegetables and the different ways of preparing them. When you're growing so many vegetables, you have to think of different ways to handle them, especially when you've got them in spurts. So that was really fun.

What advice do you have for people who want to reduce their meat consumption?

You can use meat to season rather than being a big hunk of protein in the middle of the plate. But if you have a hard time breaking out of that, then I would start by just designating certain meals as meatless. Mark Bittman does a beautiful job of this philosophy with his *Eat Vegan Before 6:00*. Certainly the Meatless Monday campaign is a good way to think about it.

Think about vegetables that you love, that you find really satisfying. Then try to find the best possible iteration of vegetables that you can by shopping locally and in season at the farmers market. Find food writers whose aesthetics you appreciate. If you want recipes that are designed to feel hearty and appeal to meat eaters, then look at someone like Kim O'Donnel, who has written the *Meat Lover's Meatless Cookbook*. If what you're after is more celebratory of the nuances of different vegetables, then someone like Deborah Madison is up your alley. Her latest cookbook is *Vegetable Literacy*. If you're interested in ethnic global tastes, then you could think about the book *Plenty* [by Yotam Ottolenghi] or one of Madhur Jaffrey's books, like *World Vegetarian*.

You encourage your readers to take the time to prepare satisfying meals.

How do you make cooking a pleasure rather than a chore?

It requires some planning. There's no way

you would think I lived alone when you look in my pantry, fridge, and freezer. I've got so many options all the time that it's easy for me to make stuff. I can pick up one or two fresh things from the farmers market, and I would have lots of things to put them with: different kinds of pastas, beans, vinegars and oils, nuts and dried fruits. And in my freezer, I've got frozen beans, rice, tomato sauce, two kinds of vegetable stock in ice cube trays. It's easy for me to reach in and find something that will be the making of a pretty great dinner with precious few new purchases. And that helps you be more adventurous in the kitchen.

What about eating out as a vegetarian?

I wrote a hefty essay in *Eat Your Vegetables* about the changing vegetarian restaurant. I talk about how far we've come from the days of leavened whole grain bread and vegetables and tofu. There's still a long way for us to go. There are some restaurants where vegetarian food is too much of an afterthought. But I have had some great experiences. I'm very enamored with Vedge in Philadelphia. And places like Dirt Candy in New York are really fun. I feel like in America things are coming into their own with vegetarian dining.



With a new cookbook, Joe Yonan is leading his fans to greener pastures.



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