

## The vegan question: Is there a cure for our meat and dairy addiction?

by May 11, 2012

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Chefs at the Taj-sponsored vegan cooking demo/lunch in Graze, Bangalore. Image credit:Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organizations

"Vegan fine dining?" snorts an avid masahari friend in amusement, "That's an oxymoron!" The notion of gourmet food without plates heaped with mouth-melting steaks, succulent kebabs, or buttery lobster is unthinkable. Even the vegetarians among us expect a generous serving of cream at a high-end restaurant.

And yet here I am on a Saturday afternoon, at a Taj-sponsored vegan cooking demo/lunch in Graze, Bangalore, sampling a beet salad drizzled with walnut oil; pumpkin risotto served with cashew sour cream; chocolate mousse made with tofu with coconut milk ice cream. The menu is fairly predictable. The real surprise here are my fellow guests. Of the eight others who've paid Rs 1,200 for the privilege of learning how to cook haute Western cuisine minus the dairy and meat, most are not practising vegans (this writer included).

"I come from a meat-dominated background," says Sabiha, a culinary enthusiast and businesswoman. "We are Kutchi Muslims, and in fact, I own a meat-packing business." She's brought along her young son to "learn something new. I believe you should have an open mind. And if you can do something in a different way, then why not?"

Her curiosity is a common theme among the guests. But this is a globe-trotting crowd, well-versed in culinary trends in the West.

"Most Indians don't know what vegan means," notes Graze manager Ashvin Singh. So why test-drive a vegan menu? "Many of our guests complain about the lack of vegetarian options," he replies, acknowledging the reality of upscale dining in India. For someone who doesn't eat meat, the options on a high-end restaurant menu in

Mumbai or Delhi - especially those serving Western cuisine - is about as limited as in New York.

Gnocchi at the Taj vegan demo. Image credit: Susmitha of Veganosaurus



As my colleague, Sandip Roy, [notes wryly](#), it is easier to be a shakahari at a mass restaurant chain than a chi-chi eatery.

One reason is that our wealthier citizens are now voraciously carnivorous in aspiration, and increasingly so in their diet. Meat is a basic food group in the urban professional meal plan-bacon for breakfast, burgers for lunch, kebabs for dinner. And among the UMARs (upper middle and rich Indians), meat-eating has become a competitive sport. Armed with their uber-expensive Weber grills, the elite routinely stage barbecue cook-offs, their tables groaning under the weight of creatures imported from corners of the world.

Is this yet another symptom of the 'ape the West' mentality? Not so, argues Olive Beach chef Manu Chandra who points out, "[F]or the longest time the ones with disposable incomes to go and eat out and be patrons of establishments were non vegetarian, who enjoyed eating things like tandoori, curries and kebabs which were impossible to make at home. These very people graduated to seared fish and roasted chicken with time and exposure."

Besides, contrary to popular Western perception, the land of Gandhi has never had a predominantly vegan or vegetarian culture. "As a peninsula all coastal areas have eaten fish. So does the whole north east, a very large part of the northern belt, all of the south and east," says Chandra, "It's not only the Muslim or Christian influence that created a non-vegetarian food culture. It has always been around - beef included."

So it has, but thanks to rising incomes, ingredients that were an occasional indulgence in the past are now a daily staple. With urban middle class Indians eating out or ordering in almost every day, consumption of all animal products is spiralling ever upwards.

"With the markets opening up, India has seen a massive rise in consumption. As with most countries, with prosperity comes an upward swing toward animal protein-heavy diets," says FIAPO's (Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organizations) Himani Shetty, "Even vegetarians are consuming huge amounts of dairy products. More cream, cheese and butter has become the mantra." When it comes to eating out, vegan options are at best minimal today. Even vegan tourists from the West have to resign themselves to breaking the no-dairy rule, thanks to the ever-ubiquitous ghee.

The irony here is that ghar ka khana in most middle class households is often vegetarian, even vegan. "Indians have always had access to great fresh veggies and grains that were cooked at home," points out Chandra, "But to go out to a restaurant and eat, say cauliflower or beetroot, is just not cool. That's what they had with daal the night before."

Hearts of Palm. Image credit: Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organizations



Veganism is hard to sell in a society where large segments of the population can now finally afford to indulge their appetite for cuisines that were once considered luxuries reserved for the rich - be it a steak , paneer makhani, or just plain eating out. Besides, in India, food is not just aspirational, but also political. As the recent Beef Festival in Osmania University revealed, debates over diet can raise incendiary issues of caste and religion.

And the anti-cruelty argument which resonates in the West can often fall on deaf ears in India. "We are used to seeing hens in cages, goats tied outside butcher shops and cows limping on the road. This has impacted our sensitivity to animal suffering in a lot of ways," says Shetty. In her experience, vegetarians may be against killing animals for food, but can be just as resistant when asked to recognise the cruel treatment of dairy animals. More striking is the fact that while vegans have been increasingly in the news as [the new trendy lifestyle](#), almost none of the media stories detail the actual farming practices that spur their decisions.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, spiralling consumption has promoted the spread of inhumane meat and dairy farming practices. A recent Humane Society [International report notes](#) that 140 to 200 million egg-laying hens in India "are confined to barren, wire battery cages so restrictive they cannot even spread their wings. Each bird has less living space than an A4 sheet of paper... Factory farms that confine more than 50,000 birds within a single shed are increasingly common in the country."

Coconut milk ice-cream and Chocolate mousse. Image credit: Susmitha of Veganosaurus



And whatever one's opinion on PETA, the evidence revealed by their [undercover sting](#) at mega-dairy farms - beaten, bloodied cows, buffaloes standing in their feces, starving, chained calves - is damning, perhaps more so in the land of the holy cow.

That said, the nascent vegan movement does indicate an increased sensitivity to animal cruelty. And if we won't respond to appeals to our conscience, vegan activists hope that events like the Graze demo will tap into our vanity. "A big hospitality business being proactive about it is a sign of acceptance in the mainstream," says Shetty, "And

the very fact that Taj was the first to introduce vegan food as a permanent feature in their restaurant could put cruelty-free food in the aspirational bracket."

In new India, aspiration is indeed the ultimate marketing pitch for everything from shampoo to cashew yogurt. But in the end, a new Taj menu will do little for those calves or chickens unless we learn to eat more consciously - and eat less - every day and at every meal.