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## Vegan movement makes strides in India, as entrepreneurs devise cruelty-free food, e-retail products

[Living \(/category/living\)](https://www.firstpost.com/category/living) **Shivya Nath**  
(<https://www.firstpost.com/author/shivya-nath>)  
Jun 25, 2019 09:58:08 IST



I'm sitting by a large glass window at Earth Café (<https://www.instagram.com/earthcafewaterfield/>) – the latest addition to Mumbai's culinary scene – admiring the green canopy outside. The aroma of a crisp, hot pizza is in the air. I quickly catch a glimpse – thin rice and jowar crust, home-made pesto base and a rainbow of veggies, covered in a generous helping of gooey cheese.

As I wait for my own order, the chatter on the table beside me gently subsides. A few minutes later, I hear the couple who just finished devouring their pizza, ask the café owner, Vicky Khatwani, if the cheese on their pizza was cheddar or mozzarella. The cheese is nut-based, he says, made without milk or any animal ingredients.

Welcome to the new India, where plant-preneurs are shaking up urban lifestyles with healthier, cruelty-free, vegan alternatives.

## The world of vegan cheeses

Nearly four years ago, I transitioned to a vegan lifestyle and pledged to cut out all animal products from my diet and life, including meat, seafood, milk and milk products, eggs, honey, leather, silk, etc. Truth be told, my motivation against animal cruelty was strong, but my fickle tastebuds still craved comfort foods, like cheese and dark chocolate.

As I stepped into the universe of plant-based eating, I learnt that cities around the world are flooded with healthier alternatives to dairy cheese and milk, and India is quickly catching up. At a vegan cheese tasting workshop in Bandra – attended largely by meat eaters and vegetarians who were curious about nut-based cheese and wanted to eat healthier – I happened to meet Anushi Patel, the 30-year-old entrepreneur who runs SoftSpot Foods (<https://www.softspotfoods.com/>).



Pasta with nut-based SoftSpot parmesan cheese. Image courtesy of SoftSpot Foods (<https://images.firstpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Pasta-with-nut-based-SoftSpot-parmesan-cheese.-Credit-SoftSpot-Foods-1.jpg>)

“I have personally spent over 15 months formulating each (vegan) cheese and tasting 90 percent of the existing vegan cheeses around the world, to develop products that can melt and give the same sensory experience as dairy cheese,” she says proudly, and her cheddar cheese block, melted on a toastie, nearly brought me tears of joy! A joy she now shares by supplying blocks of vegan cheeses – made primarily with cashew and coconut oil – to cafes across Bandra, including Earth Café.

## A host of food options

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At the weekly Juhu and Malad Organic Farmers Market, farmers sell fresh fruits and vegetables to discerning urbanites, and many home-based plant-preneurs offer a range of culinary delights: curd rice and whole wheat brownies by Simply Vegan (<http://www.thesimplyvegan.com/>), seasonal mango *lassi* by Rare Earth (<https://www.rareearththeorganicstore.com/>), and Belgian chocolate ice cream by Vegan Heart (<https://veganheart.co/>), to name a few. Although less than 1 percent of India's population is estimated to be vegan, these markets are abuzz with a diverse range of health-conscious foodies.

The farmers markets are just one of the many avenues where Sharan (<https://sharan-india.org/>), an organisation started by Dr Nandita Shah, one of the pioneers of the whole foods plant-based lifestyle in India, offers its services. "I think the vegan movement in India is driven mostly from the heart and not because of commercial interests," she tells me candidly. Yet Sharan's cooking classes, health retreats and disease reversal programs are often sold out, a testament to the growing demand for healthy, affordable, more compassionate food options.

### **Making e-retail cruelty-free**

On my vegan journey, I learnt along the way that the carbon footprint of a plant-based diet (<http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2018-06-01-new-estimates-environmental-cost-food>) can be up to 73 percent lower than a diet that includes meat and dairy products. Scientists believe that our planet could be spared an impending water crisis and the dangerous effects of climate change, while feeding the world's population, if we collectively transitioned to a vegan diet.



(<https://images.firstpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Eco-friendly-non-leather-wallet-from-The-Eco-Trunk-online-store.-Credit-The-Eco-Trunk.jpg>) An eco-friendly non-leather wallet from The Eco Trunk online store. Image courtesy of The Eco Trunk

Ardent animal (and planet) lover, Monica Chopra found a way to channel this love, by establishing India's first and only online vegan store, The Eco Trunk (<https://www.theecotrunk.com/>), which stocks everything from vegan ghee, buttermilk and homemade cakes to leather-free bags and wallets, sourced from small scale plant-preneurs across the country.

"I realised there is no dedicated space for cruelty-free and vegan products, and people like me had to browse over 10 different websites or stores to find something," she tells me, "I put together everything I'm passionate about - cruelty-free, organic, upcycled, vegan and fair trade - and started an e-commerce platform."

### **Transforming a farm into a sanctuary**

At a vegan potluck in Mumbai, I happened to meet Mahafrine Powell, whose vegan journey ironically began just after she and her husband bought a farm outside of Mumbai. They were gifted a cow by a friend, but her concerned daughter showed them some material on animal cruelty that changed the way they looked at a glass of milk. The farm space gradually turned into Elsa Cleo Retreat, a sanctuary that currently homes rescued cows, calves, geese and hens.



Mahafrine Powell at her sanctuary. Image courtesy of Veganology. (<https://images.firstpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Mahafrine-Powell-at-her-sanctuary.-Credit-Veganology-1.jpg>)

Her face lit up as she spoke of her sanctuary, and I soon found out her skincare secret – her own brand Veganology (<https://www.instagram.com/veganology.in/>), where she makes a range of skincare products, including body butters, lip balms, soaps, bath salts and scrubs. Free from animal ingredients like bees wax and honey (commonly found in ‘natural’ toiletries and cosmetics), the products get their texture and sensual aroma primarily from shea and cocoa butter as well as essential oils, and are manufactured without any plastic packaging.

### **India’s first vegan conference**

*The Economist* declared 2019 as the “year of the vegan (<https://worldin2019.economist.com/theyearofthevegan>)”, a prediction that holds true for India as well. This year will witness the Vegan India Conference (<https://www.veganindiaconference.com/>), the first conference of its kind, organised by *Vegan First* (<https://www.veganfirst.com/>) (India’s first digital vegan magazine) and the World Vegan Organisation (<https://worldveganorganisation.org/>). Global pioneers of the plant-based lifestyle – including Keegan Kuhn (Director, Cowspiracy and What the Health), Maneka Gandhi and Kuntal Joisher (the world’s first mountaineer to scale Mt Everest on a vegan diet) – and many celebrities, culinary experts, lifestyle brands and impact investors will come together to redefine urban living in India.

As my pizza arrives – hot, crisp and mouth-watering – I can’t help but marvel at the strides the vegan movement has made in India over the past few years. At the forefront of this revolution have been plant-preneurs who are changing our consumption patterns, with products that are healthier for our body, better for the planet and kinder towards the animals that share it with us.

*Shivya Nath is the author of the bestselling travel memoir, The Shooting Star, and a passionate vegan who advocates for slow travel. Connect with her on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/shivya>) and Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/shivya/>), or follow her blog (<https://the-shooting-star.com/>).*

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