

# Millennials and restaurants alike jump on the vegan food trend

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vegan kitchen

What started out as friendly competition turned into a lifestyle for Richard Lister. The 35-year-old content writer in Los Angeles has been vegan for eight years.

“A friend bet me that I couldn’t watch “Earthlings” without giving up all meat and animal products after...and I’m happy to say she was right,” Lister said.

Lister’s switch to veganism seems to be part of a larger food-trend among millennials. According to a report by GlobalData, only one percent of U.S. consumers claimed to be vegan in 2014. In 2017, that number increased by 600 percent.

“In the last five years there has been a spike in veganism, it’s increased significantly,” said Matt Ruscigno, 40, a registered dietitian who became vegan at age 17.

A vegan diet excludes animal products – meat, fish, dairy, eggs and honey. People who follow a vegan or cruelty-free lifestyle may also abstain from using leather goods and products tested on animals.

“There’s a trend for foodies to try vegan dishes but not necessarily live a vegan lifestyle,” said Kawani Brown, 42, organizer of the Long Beach Vegan Festival and Vegan Cookie Con. Brown has been vegan for eight years and a vegetarian for 26. “Food is just one part of a vegan lifestyle.”

Brown describes the Long Beach Vegan Festival as a food fair and marketplace for ethically-produced goods. There’s also a vegan chili cook-off and live music. Brown says the event is popular among vegans and people who don’t identify as fully vegan.

“If jumping on the vegan foodie train is what excites you and exposes you to veganism then good for you,” Brown said.

Even if attendees are not fully vegan, studies suggest that the trend of eating less meat is here to stay. According to a report by The Hartman Group, 12 percent of millennials say they are “faithful vegetarians”, versus four percent of Gen-Xers and about one percent of baby boomers.

“For a long time, veganism was fringe but there are a lot of different ways to be vegan,” said Ruscigno. “People approach veganism from many different perspectives like social justice, environmental reasons, and a health perspective.”

## Restaurants join the vegan trend

Restaurants and businesses are capitalizing on the vegan trend. According to a forecast report by restaurant consultancy group Baum + Whiteman in New York, “plant-based” will be the food trend of 2018.

“If businesses are pushing out vegan products just to increase profits, I don’t have a problem with that,” Lister said. “It’s fine because it gets more people interested in veganism.”

He cited vegan options at chain restaurants and the explosion of vegan ice cream, as one of the benefits of the increased interest in veganism.

“One of my favorite indulgences has always been ice cream. It’s great to see brands like Ben & Jerry’s and Haagen Daaz hopping on the non-dairy train,” Lister said.

Although Ruscigno feels cities like L.A. and San Francisco may be leading the vegan movement, he’s noticed an uptick in veganism across the country.

“I think in another ten years, it will be completely normalized,” Ruscigno said. “I want to see more access to vegan food period. it’s Burger King that’s offering it then that’s great.”

Veganism is becoming more popular than ever. NBC reported that Google searches for “vegan” increased by 33 percent from 2015 to 2016 and searches for “non-dairy” went up by 222 percent. Not surprisingly, one of the most common related word combinations was “non-dairy ice cream.”

Despite the rising popularity and visibility of vegan food, vegans agree that there are still many misconceptions about veganism from the cost of a vegan lifestyle to the food itself.

“In L.A., the hardest part isn’t the food, it’s people’s misconceptions about vegans and veganism,” Lister said.

Ruscigno agreed adding that, as a dietician, many people wrongly assume vegan diets lack nutrition and calories. He is the co-author of “No Meat Athlete” and says that books help counter the idea that vegans are frail.

“People think it’s a nutrient-poor diet but fruits and vegetables and some of the most nutrient-dense foods you can eat,” Ruscigno said. “Actually, the best way to be healthy is to eat a variety of whole fruits and vegetables.”

As for the food itself, Brown says many people assume salad is the only option.

“People think that vegan food is boring or that there’s no variety. But pretty much any food you eat as an omnivore you can eat a version of it that’s vegan,” Brown said.

Or, as Lister put it, “Once you realize that vegan food is not just grass, it’s a lot easier to continue down this path.”