

Nearly vegetarian? Go flexitarian
By Sarah Rainey

All my life, I have tried - and failed - to be a vegetarian. I have whipped up exotic salads that promise to make lettuce "exciting" (they don't). I have lunched on falafel, dined on ratatouille, tried tofu and tempeh (tastes like soggy gravel). I've sampled bean burgers and seitan burgers (a type of vegetarian schnitzel). But I just love meat. Nothing beats hot bacon on a slice of buttery bread, salty crackling on a tender joint of roast pork or a juicy steak.

My passion for meat has always been a barrier to vegetarianism - until now. According to a recent study, commissioned by Linda McCartney Foods (the meat-free company founded by Sir Paul's late wife), we're about to see a surge in "flexitarianism" - vegetarians who sometimes eat meat.

"Twenty years ago, vegetarianism was scoffed at," explains Charles Banks, director of U.K.-based The Food People, which carried out the research. "But there has been a seismic shift in attitudes. ... We expect meat-free eating and flexitarianism soon to be a mega trend."

A flexitarian ("flexible vegetarian," interchangeable with "vegivore") is defined as "one whose normally meatless diet occasionally includes meat or fish." The concept is booming in the U.S. Pat Crocker and Nettie Cronish, authors of *Everyday Flexitarian*, estimate that 30 to 40 per cent of Americans are flexitarians, while a survey by the Vegetarian Research Group found that 23 million people follow a "vegetarian-inclined diet," compared to 7.3 million full-time vegetarians.

By 2015, The Food People predict, there will be a "notable increase in flexitarian - or demi-vegetarian - eating" in Britain. Cutting down meat is cheaper, healthier and, for carnivores like me, a better prospect than going whole hog vegetarian. Flexitarianism started life as a publicity exercise in the '90s to expand the appeal of vegetarianism. The movement has been adopted by more than a million fans, with endorsement by Gwyneth Paltrow, Richard Branson, Cameron Diaz and Joss Stone.

Strict vegetarians can be critical of part-timers, accusing them of sitting on the fence. But Ben Martin, a campaigner at Animal Aid, says: "Anything people can do to reduce their consumption of animal products is a good thing."

Eating less meat has nutritional benefits. Red meat is rich in saturated fats, cholesterol and high in calories (linked to obesity, diabetes and certain cancers), while vegetables contain more fibre, vitamins and minerals. This doesn't, however, mean that you have to cut out meat entirely.

"Meat is still important for children and for people who exercise," Food Doctor nutrition consultant Alice Mackintosh says. "There are pros and cons of total vegetarianism. I tell lots of my clients to try not to have meat every day."

Cutting down on meat can save money, too. Vegetarian meals are, on average, 60 per cent cheaper than meaty dishes. They're better for the environment as well.

"Animal farming is responsible for more greenhouse gas than all motorized transport in the world," Martin says. "There has also been a lot of controversy surrounding animal consumption, such as the recent horsemeat scandal, so people see vegetarianism and veganism as a safer bet."

So what's the downside? Unlike vegetarians or vegans, flexitarians can't use their eating habits to claim the moral high ground.

"Vegetarians can get annoyed that a flexitarian is seen as a type of vegetarian, which it isn't," says Su Taylor of The Vegetarian Society. "Choosing a veggie diet goes one better by making a clear statement."

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