

VEGAN VOYAGE

The UK has overtaken Germany as the most vegan-friendly country in the world. Rita Lobo hears from the businesses leading the meat-free charge

“How can you tell if someone is vegan?” - goes the old joke - “They’ll tell you.” The joke plays on the derision that meat-eaters have typically reserved for supposedly self-righteous vegans in the past. But as up to one-third of Britons now deliberately avoid consuming animal-based products, gone are the days when vegans were the butt of the joke.

Research from Waitrose has found that one in eight people in the UK now identifies as vegetarian or vegan and a further 21% of us claim to be ‘flexitarian’, that is, consuming a mainly plant-based diet and only occasionally indulging in animal products. This year a record-breaking 250,000 people joined in ‘Veganuary’, a movement encouraging people to give up meat and animal products for the first month of the year. Even celebrities have joined the movement, with some, such as naturalist Chris Packham, becoming quite vocal about their veganism. “I was one of the record 250,000 people who signed up to Veganuary this year,” he wrote in a piece for *The Guardian*. “I haven’t actually eaten meat for 30 years, although I occasionally ate fish and felt bad about it.” Now, finally, supermarkets, restaurants and food manufacturers are taking notice.

Unlike vegetarianism, which has been a conventional lifestyle for decades (the UK’s Vegetarian Society has its roots in the reforming spirit of the early 19th century) veganism has only erupted into the mainstream relatively recently. Vegans don’t consume any animal products in their diets, which excludes dairy, eggs and even honey, and some beers and wines (because they may contain animal enzymes). So-called ‘lifestyle vegans’ are committed to avoiding animal products altogether and won’t buy products containing leather, silk, glue or wool. It can be a radical and restrictive choice, but it is on the rise. One of the defining ideas behind veganism is that of consent, whereby vegans don’t eat or use anything produced by other animals. Therefore, while no bees are killed through the consumption of honey, they have not given their consent for humans to eat it and so it is not considered a vegan food. >





LEFT, GREGGS LAUNCHED A VEGAN SAUSAGE ROLL TO HUGE FANFARE EARLIER THIS YEAR

RIGHT, VEGAN CHAIN BY CHLOE HAS RAPIDLY EXPANDED INTERNATIONALLY SINCE LAUNCHING IN NEW YORK IN 2015

BELOW RIGHT, VEGAN BRANDS LIKE THE GOODNESS PROJECT ARE INCREASINGLY POPULAR



“People are more conscious of what they eat and how they live”

Recently, high street bakery Greggs dominated the news cycle when it launched a vegan version of its popular sausage roll. Though provocateurs online expressed outrage at the traditional baker, figures released by Greggs showed that, thanks to the fanfare around the new vegan product, it had seen “an exceptionally strong start to 2019”, with sales climbing nearly 10% in the seven weeks to 16 February.

In 2018, the UK had so many new vegan products hit the shelves that it has overtaken Germany as the most vegan-friendly country in the world for the first time. “Back in 2013 there weren’t many options for organic, gluten-free or plant-based options in the supermarkets and free-from food wasn’t easily available,” says Anna Szanto, Co-Founder and Managing Director of The Goodness Project, the UK’s largest vegan subscription delivery box. “We are seeing people getting more conscious about what they eat and how they live. Eye-opening documentaries like *Blue Planet II* helped businesses and households become more aware of the environmental impact of our choices. More people are trying to reduce plastic waste, and following a vegan lifestyle also contributes to a sustainable tomorrow.”

RISING INTEREST

The reasons why so many more of us are choosing to forgo meat and animal products are complex and unique to individuals. A 2018 survey by Mintel suggests that animal welfare, environment and health are the biggest reasons why UK adults choose to stop eating meat. Indeed, scientific research does suggest that veganism is better for the environment – a 2006 UN report concluded that the combined climate change emissions of animals bred for their meat accounts for 18% of the total worldwide, more than all forms of transportation put together.

Additionally, the rampant use of antibiotics in factory farming has largely been blamed for the widespread alarm over drug resistance. Recent research done in Italy drawing



on the results of 10 previous studies suggests that veganism and vegetarianism are indeed better for overall health and are associated with lower risks of heart disease and cancer.

And according to the Vegetarian Society, a typical British meat-eater consumes over 11,000 animals in their lifetime, but as the realities of meat, dairy and egg farming have frequently been exposed in the media more people are considering the ethical impact of their diets. Indeed, concerns over animal welfare are often cited as the number one reason for going vegan.

Veganism has become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more we talk about it, the more people are interested, and when there is interest, there is a market.

Then, when more vegan products become available, more people talk about it, perpetuating the cycle. Greggs is a perfect example – a non-vegan brand diversifying its offering to cater to a growing market demographic.

The rise in demand for vegan options has also presented an opportunity for investors if they are prepared to take the risk. The Vurger Co., a vegan burger company that started as a market stall two years ago and now has two permanent sites including a restaurant in London’s trendy Shoreditch, was launched after years of struggling to find vegan fast food in a supposedly progressive city like London. In 2017 it set out to raise £150,000 through Crowdcube for its first physical restaurant but got so much positive attention that in just 77 hours it

“Long gone are the assumptions of bland, tasteless and plain vegan food”

had raked in £300,000 in investment.

“In a society where we have everything we want, whenever we want it, it’s so easy to mindlessly pick up your products in the supermarket without thinking twice about the impact of that decision,” says Co-Founder of the Vurger Co. Rachel Hugh. “We couldn’t understand why Londoners who chose to eat vegan food couldn’t find a lovely environment to feel at home in. It was a lightbulb moment – we thought if we’re looking for a restaurant like this, we guarantee others are too.”

Others have been keen to get in on the craze too. A hugely popular vegan restaurant chain called ‘by CHLOE’ recently launched in two central London sites to much fanfare. Social media ‘influencers’ descended on the restaurants, sharing photos on Instagram of their plant-based meals, while queues were reported round the block for weeks after launching. The business has serious backers too, including investment firm Bain Capital and RiverPark Ventures, raising \$31m additional funding in 2018.

Photography: Alamy, Greggs, The Goodness Project



Crunching the numbers

Veganism in the UK is on the rise

Vegetarians and vegans in the UK:

1,684,000

Dietary vegans:

542,000

Lifestyle vegans:

360,000

Demand for meat-free food increased

987%

in 2017

1 in 3 people in the UK have stopped or reduced their meat consumption

The global market for vegan products was worth

\$51bn

in 2016

All according to the Vegan Society

The huge influx of vegan products into the market isn’t a flash in the pan either, says Kasia Bigda, Marketing and Communications Director for Mr Lee’s Noodles, who believes that the more brands challenge the stigma and stereotypes still associated with being vegan, the more people will choose to change the way they eat. “Modern consumers have seen the endless health and environmental benefits that plant-based diets have to offer,” she says. “Long gone are the assumptions of bland, tasteless and plain.” Mr Lee pioneered vegan instant noodle flavours in the UK and maintains its vegan flavours are as popular as its conventional options.

CYNICS REMAIN

There is still some way to go, though, particularly when it comes to changing the image of veganism among more traditional consumers. Last year, *Waitrose Food* magazine’s long-term editor William Sitwell felt confident enough to make a joke about killing vegans and “exposing their hypocrisy” to a vegan freelance writer pitching him an article about such foods. This is not an isolated incident. In early 2019 NatWest was forced to apologise after a customer who called to apply for a loan to cover a £400 diploma in nutrition was told by a bank employee that “all vegans should be punched in the face”. It’s a sign of the times, however, that NatWest apologised swiftly and publicly, and that Waitrose did not tolerate Sitwell’s outburst and he resigned from his role.

Ultimately, veganism is about choice, and as consumers we should applaud brands making these options available, even if we don’t choose to partake. “The whole reason we began was because of the really low quality of products available to the general public only two years ago,” says Hugh. “Nobody was paying attention to this growing sector, and most brands out there producing vegan food concentrated solely on making tofu or fake meats.

“Now the product ranges are more exciting than ever. You can pretty much pick up your favourite ‘veganised’ comfort food in your local supermarket, and the level of

innovation is increasing by the day. Being able to walk in and pick up items that are clearly labelled, delicious to eat and convenient is a revelation! Times are changing, and it feels more exciting than ever to be a part of this movement.” ■