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Confessions of a Reformed Junk-Food Vegan

***By Bettina Rosmarino
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When I first became a vegetarian years ago while in college, I had no concept of nutrition. A box of crackers would sometimes suffice as my sustenance for the day. Sure, I'd read the literature about complete proteins and mixing your legumes with your grains. But hell if I knew what a grain even was. I was in college; ergo, I was poor, at the mercy of the dining room, and I got most of my calories from beer. I tried. I did. I combined cottage cheese with Cap'n Crunch cereal. That was a complete protein, right?

Even after college, when I was working and earning a living wage, I didn't take the time and opportunity to educate myself about healthful eating. I wasn't healthy at this time, and I was also overweight. When people learned that I was a vegetarian, they were always surprised. I did lose weight after I gave up cheese and started working out, but I still suffered from bouts of lethargy and dizziness.

When I moved to Colorado in my mid-twenties, I became a vegan. I lived with my sister who, to this day, continues to be a self-professed junk-food vegan. She showed me the wonders of fake meats, processed vegan food, and vegan cookies chockfull of chemicals. I loved it all and truth be told, I found it easy to be vegan on that kind of diet. I still ate fruits and vegetables, just not enough. I knew that I was probably slightly anemic and that I sometimes failed to get enough protein. I had almost a completely carb-based diet with some occasional tofu and fake meat products thrown in. And I only eliminated about three times a week.

When I moved to California a few years ago, I realized that my diet needed an overhaul. My hair was thinning and, unfortunately, it sometimes takes an aesthetic problem to wake you up to underlying issues. I had my Total Binding Capacity and ferritin level checked, and although they were within the normal range, they were on the low end. I also realized that according to the formula used to determine the daily recommended amount of protein grams (for someone who exercises, it should be between .5 and .7 grams per pound of body weight), I was deficient. Also, I was probably deficient in Omega 3s (even meat eaters are typically deficient in this essential fatty acid).

So I overhauled. I incorporated a protein shake in the morning with flax, wheatgrass, sunflower seeds, and fruit. I started eating brown rice, veggies, and tofu or a salad with legumes for lunch. I eat fruit daily, and I eat a salad or greens and veggies (including sea vegetables) at night. I moved away from processed foods, and I instantly saw improvement. I have more energy, I'm happier, I can run faster, I eliminate more than once a day, and my hair grew. I now realize that although I felt like I was healthy because I gave up meat, eggs, and cheese products, I still had to work to achieve true health.

When people ask, "So what do vegans eat?", I tell them. Eat flaxseeds for Omega 3s and sunflower seeds for Omega 6s. Eat wheatgrass and greens. Juice 'em if you have to, but I like

them steamed with lemon juice and garlic. (Raw is always best, though.) Eat a variety of fruits, but try to stick with what's in season. Strive to only eat organic products. They are becoming easier to find and are cheaper than a few years ago. My last piece of advice for vegans is to supplement with a vitamin and maybe even an iron pill because iron is very difficult to absorb unless it comes from heme sources (read: animal flesh). You should seek advice for supplementation from a nutritionist or a doctor, but I think educating yourself is important too.

List of Essentials

- Wide variety of vegetables: greens (collards, kale, chard, spinach, lettuce), tomatoes, carrots, celery, cabbage, potatoes, yams, onions, garlic, etc.
- Fruits: in season, but I eat apples, oranges, grapefruit, bananas, and grapes year-round
- Grains: brown rice, quinoa, bulgur, amaranth
- Legumes: tofu, tempeh, garbanzo beans, kidney beans, lentils, split peas, miso, brown rice protein powder
- Seeds and nuts: peanut butter, sunflower seeds, flaxseeds, cashews
- Sea vegetables: dulse, wakame, arame.

Even though I still eat an occasional fake meat or processed item, my diet is pretty much devoid of the chemicals that are part and parcel of standard grocery fare. I am blessed with year-round farmers' markets and easy access to organic grocery stores, and I've also noticed that organics and fruit-sweetened items are appearing on the shelves of my local Kroger's.

The process of educating oneself on eating well and being a vegan is a daunting one, I know. I wish that when I first decided to take the ethical and enlightened path in life, someone had stressed to me how important the nutritional aspect was. Convenience is easier but far less rewarding. And anyway, eating foods made from chemicals or stripped-down versions of plant products is really just buying into the industry that's making sickness a way of life for most people on the planet. So while you're out there protesting the murderous fur industry or evil vivisectioners, do it with a shot of wheatgrass and a carrot juice chaser. Hopefully, we'll outlast them.

~ Author Bettina Rosmarino uses her high energy levels to further animal rights and save the planet. She can be reached at brosmar@hotmail.com.