



# I ♥ POTATO

## *The trials and tribulations of adopting a plant-based diet in Malta*

*Plant-based diets are going mainstream all over the world. **Cassi Camilleri** sheds light on the local vegan movement and how reducing our meat consumption can benefit us all.*







Some label the rise of plant-based living as evidence of 'trend culture'. And they're not all wrong. Traditional media bombards us with countless headlines on the topic's pros and cons. Hard-hitting advocacy films like *Cowspiracy* and *Forks over Knives* expose the horrors of the meat industry. Social media influencers share their experiences with the diet, turning it into lifestyle content. And now the market is following suit with vegan and veggie lines and options popping up everywhere.

In 2016, an Ipsos MORI survey for the Vegan Society identified that 3.25% of adults in the UK never eat meat in any form as part of their diet, equating to roughly 540,000 people. Vegan January—commonly known as Veganuary—is growing in popularity. This year, a record-breaking 250,310 people from 190 countries registered for the month-long vegan pledge. And Malta is no exception.

While the official number of people following a plant-based or vegan diet are unavailable, interest is clear. Facebook pages Vegan Malta and Vegan Malta Eats have a combined following of over 16,500 people.

The reasons behind people's decision to take up veganism are various, however three main motivators keep being cited: health benefits, ethics, and environmental

concerns. For vegan business woman Rebecca Camilleri the process was natural and gradual. 'There was no real intention behind it for me. But after a couple of months of following this diet, I noticed that my energy levels were better than before, and this encouraged me to learn more on how I needed to eat in order to nourish my body with the right nutrients to sustain my active lifestyle.'

Researcher and nutritionist Prof. Suzanne Piscopo (Department of Health, Physical Education, and Consumer Studies, University of Malta) confirms that 'moving towards a primarily plant-based diet is recommended by organisations such as the World Health Organization and the World Cancer Research Fund, for health and climate change reasons.'

Oxford academic Dr Marco Springmann has attempted to model what a vegan planet would look like, and the results are staggering. According to his calculations, should the world's population switch to a vegan diet by the year 2050, the global economy would save \$1.1 trillion in healthcare costs. We would also save \$0.5 trillion in environmental costs, all while slashing greenhouse gas emissions by two-thirds.

Despite all this, veganism has earned itself quite a few enemies along the way. The vitriol thrown back and forth across both camps is shocking. Relatively recently, UK





## A NUTRITIONIST'S TIPS FOR STARTER VEGANS

1. Variety is the name of the game. You need to hit all the veggies and fruits to target the nutrients you need: carbohydrates, fibre, vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients.
2. Essential amino acids are essential. They are the building blocks of our body and the enzymes which keep it running. Get these from a variety of plant sources: cereals, beans, peas, lentils, nuts, and seeds.
3. Calcium is key. The usual suspects still apply. Oat, nut, and soya milks as well as fortified soya-based yoghurts; also turn to dark green and leafy vegetables like spinach and kale.
4. Pair iron with Vitamin C. When having high-iron foods like pulses and dark green vegetables, add Vitamin C-rich items in the same meal to boost the body's iron absorption. Chickpeas, lentils, and beans work great beside green or other sweet peppers, peas, or tomatoes. Have strawberries, citrus, or kiwi as dessert.
5. Vitamin B12. The troublesome one found only in meat or meat extracts. Try finding fortified foods such as breakfast cereals, soya milks, soya/veggie burgers, and vegetable margarines—or, pop a supplement.

Prof. Suzanne Piscopo



1. Rebecca Camilleri and her mini-stall at an Artisan Market.
2. Rebecca's all natural range of nut butters and spreads.
3. Raw vegan treats made by Rebecca.
4. Rebecca's newest addition to her nut butter range.
5. Rebecca's golden breakfast topped with her home-made hazelnut butter

supermarket chain Waitrose came under scrutiny after magazine editor William Sitwell responded to plant-based food article ideas from writer Selene Nelson with a dark counter offer—a series on 'killing vegans'. Sitwell was since forced to resign. Nelson posited that the hostility stems from 'a refusal to recognise the suffering of animals. Mocking vegans is easier than listening to them.'

Abigail Higgins from American news and opinion website Vox agrees that guilt plays a role in the hatred aimed towards veganism, but also proposes that the whole movement 'represents a threat to the status quo, and cultural changes make people anxious.' This notion is based on research on intergroup threats and attitudes by US researchers Walter G. Stephan and Cookie White Stephan.

It however remains a reality that some of the loudest voices in veganism

in the past have been militant. Some have invoked hatred and threats towards those that they perceive not to be sufficiently aggressive in promoting the cause. Piscopo calls for a respectful discussion. 'Food is not only about sustenance and pleasure, but has symbolic, emotional, and identity value. Take meat for example. Some associate it with masculinity and virility. Others link it to food security as meat was a food which was scarce during their childhood. Some others equate it with conviviality as meat dishes are often consumed during happy family occasions. What is important is that we do not try to impose our beliefs, thoughts, and lifestyle on anyone.'

The way forward is a 'live and let live' approach, according to Rebecca Galea. When her journey started she had people 'staring strangely at [her] food'. Even her family didn't take her

seriously. 'They were very sceptical as their knowledge on veganism was very limited at the time,' she remembers. Now, seeing the effect the switch has made to Rebecca's life, her positive choices are naturally impacting theirs. 'Everyone is free to make their choice,' she says. Embodying the philosophy of leading by example, Rebecca has even set up her own business making delicious vegan nut butters, spreads, and more, to great success. 'The more vegan options are available [in Malta], the more people will be attracted to learning and accepting the benefits of veganism. This might also lead to them following a vegan lifestyle!'

With that, and sharing valid, up-to-date research-based information, as Piscopo suggests, it seems there is no stopping this 'trend'. And who would want when veganism can lead to a lower carbon footprint and better health for everyone? **T**