

The vegans are coming! What's fueling the interest in plant-based eating?

October 3 2019, by Matthew Ruby and Tani Khara



Interest in veganism has never been higher and the old pale stereotypes are receding. Credit: www.shutterstock.com

Between the rise of plant-based sausages and [veggie burgers that "bleed"](#), vegan protesters [at supermarkets](#), and [Disney adding hundreds of vegan items](#) to its theme park menus, veganism is in the news. Not to mention the woman [trying to sue her neighbors](#) for their meat-grilling ways. For a group once perceived as placid and potentially anemic, vegans have sure been making a lot of noise.

Who are the "new vegans" and what is behind their rise in prominence?

Origin story

The term "vegan" was coined in 1944 by a group of people in the UK to describe a diet excluding meat, fish, dairy, and eggs. In 1988, the [UK Vegan Society](#) settled on a definition of veganism that described it as: "... a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose."

For many years, veganism had relatively few adherents, and was largely dismissed as a fringe movement, if not met with outright hostility.

In his 2000 book, [Kitchen Confidential](#), Anthony Bourdain, didn't mince his words: "Vegetarians, and their Hezbollah-like splinter faction, the vegans, are a persistent irritant to any chef worth a damn. To me, life without veal stock, pork fat, sausage, organ meat, demiglace, or even stinky cheese is a life not worth living."

Bourdain was by no means alone in his view of vegans. An analysis of [stories run in UK national newspapers in 2007](#) that used the words "vegan," "vegans," or "veganism" found that 74% of articles portrayed veganism negatively—describing vegans as hostile, oversensitive, or ridiculous.

Despite an initial bad rap, interest in veganism has been growing, particularly in the past decade. Data from Google Trends indicates that the relative frequency of Google searches for "vegan" has approximately quadrupled since 2012.

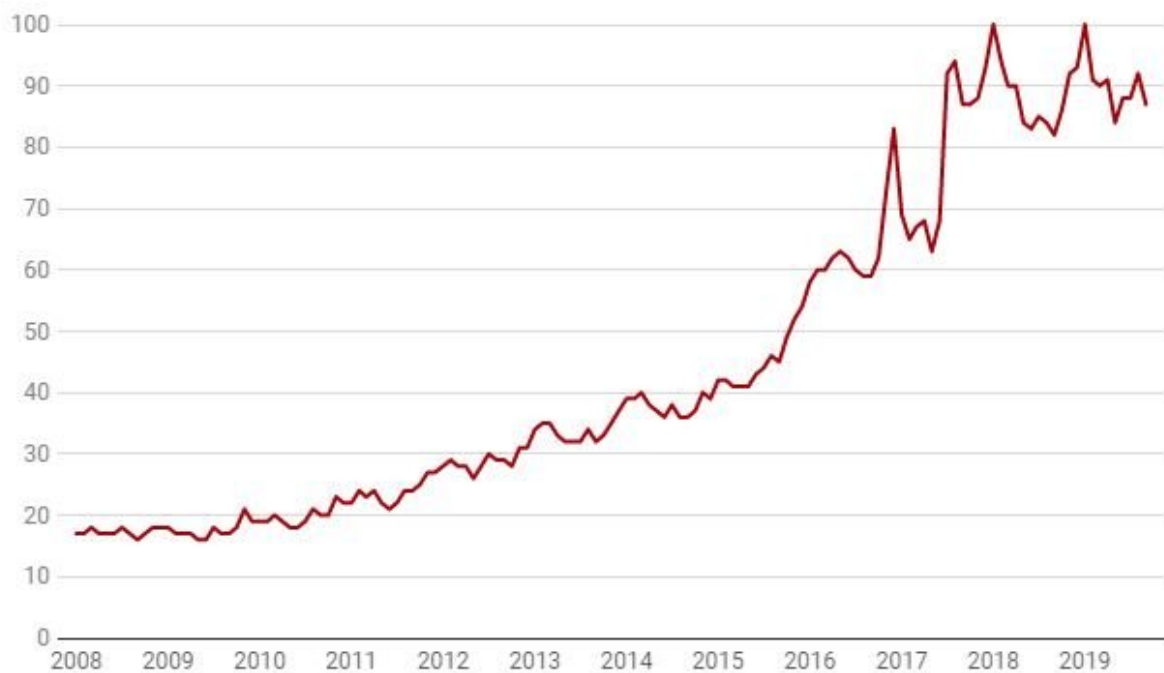
A number of prominent public figures, such as Moby, Angela Davis, Bill Clinton, and Ellen Degeneres, have drawn attention to veganism. At the

same time, numerous [studies](#) and [reports](#) have discussed links between meat consumption and health and environmental outcomes.

Media outlets such as [The Guardian](#), [NBC](#), and [The New York Times](#) have run stories on the mistreatment of animals on factory farms. Furthermore, popular movies such as [Okja](#), about a young girl and her pig-like best friend, have been credited with [turning people toward plant-based diets](#).

The increasing popularity of veganism

Global Google trend data for the word "vegan" , Jan 2008 to Sep 2019.



Note: Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term. Credit: Google Trends

Challenging stereotypes

As veganism becomes more prominent, a number of people are challenging conventional beliefs, particularly the idea that one needs to eat animal products to be strong and healthy.

Touring at film festivals in 2018, and reaching mainstream Australian cinemas in August, [The Game Changers](#) draws on a mixture of dramatic footage, scientific studies, and celebrity glamor.

Executive produced by a team including James Cameron, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jackie Chan, Lewis Hamilton, Novak Djokovic, and Chris Paul, [The Game Changers](#) bills itself as "a revolutionary new documentary about meat, protein, and strength," and challenges the [old stereotype of vegans as weak](#).

The film follows combat instructor and [UFC fighter James Wilks](#) as he travels around the world meeting people like world surfing champion [Tia Blanco](#), eight-time US national cycling champion [Dotsie Bausch](#), and strongman [Patrick Baboumian](#). Sitting down with the chair of nutrition at Harvard University, [Dr. Walter Willett](#), Wilks discusses the benefits of plant-based diets.

Motivation and location

Although vegans are often motivated by some combination of concern for [animal welfare, animal rights, health, and environmental sustainability](#), individuals often emphasize particular motivations more strongly than others.

Chef and activist [Bryant Terry](#) has written and spoken extensively on the health and food justice aspects of veganism. Youth climate activist [Greta Thunberg](#) adopted a vegan diet for environmental reasons. The [Forest](#)

[Green Rovers Football Club](#) transitioned the food in their stadium to be 100% vegan in 2015, out of concern for animal welfare and environmental sustainability.

Other common motivations are [religious and spiritual beliefs](#), [adherence to social norms](#), a preference for the [taste, smell, and texture](#) of plant foods, and an explicit rejection of mainstream industries that [treat animals like commodities](#).

East meets West

Although veganism is often discussed through a Western cultural lens, several Eastern philosophies—such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Taoism – [favor plant-based diets](#). Hinduism, [practiced by the majority of India's population](#), has a [history of plant-based diets](#) extending across thousands of years.

While in many Western countries, vegans may be [negatively stereotyped](#) or face [social alienation](#), responses to those following plant-based diets in other cultures differ markedly.

In India, for example, the present day food hierarchy places a [plant-based diet at the top](#) as it is associated with a higher status. The slaughter of animals and meat-eating is associated with a certain [baseness](#) and physical and spiritual [pollution](#).

Similarly, many people in China regard plant-based eating as central to [physical, mental, and spiritual well-being](#). In 2016, the Chinese government released [updated dietary guidelines](#) encouraging their population of more than 1.3 billion to reduce their meat consumption by 50% between now and 2030 for primarily health-related reasons.

Reaction to veganism in other cultures is not always positive though.

Japanese media has expressed concern about how vegan tourists and locals can maintain their diet in a nation "[hooked on meat](#)".

Is the future plant-based?

Today, countries with traditionally meat-based diets—such as Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and South Africa—are among the world's top ten when it comes to the global share of [vegan product launches](#).

The adoption of plant-based diets and lifestyles is projected to keep rising. For example, the percentage of Italians who identified as [vegan nearly doubled from 2016 to 2018](#), and the number of vegans in the UK [quadrupled between 2014 and 2018](#).

In 2017, the [global plant protein market](#) was valued at US\$10.5 billion (A\$15.65 billion) and this number is predicted to increase to USD \$16.3 billion (A\$24.3 billion) by 2025.

In the future we can expect to see and hear more from those who choose not to consume animal products.

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