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M

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DAVID
BAILEY
ON HIS WOMEN
'I always liked girls
who looked like boys'

David Bailey
photographed
by Patrick
Lichfield in 1969

WHAT AREN'T WE EATING TONIGHT, DARLING?

Esther Walker loves a burger, and her husband, restaurant critic Giles Coren, eats anything and everything for a living. So what happened when they tried to go vegan?

PHOTOGRAPHS John Carey

Giles Coren and
Esther Walker
photographed at
home in London



Are you or aren't you? Lily Cole is. So is Brad Pitt. Beyoncé and Jay-Z were (for 22 days). Chris Martin and Gwyneth Paltrow are (on and off). Jamie Oliver is rumoured to have dabbled. And Jamie Hince was (until he walked in on Kate Moss in her knickers making him a bacon sandwich).



I'm talking about veganism, obviously. Along with the 5:2 diet, it's the new food mantra. The off-duty A-list accessory used to be a milky Starbucks to go; now it's a green juice.

Veganism was once just for crazy hippies or obsessive-compulsive Californians, but now it's busting into the mainstream. You can join in with Veganuary – going vegan for January – the Movember of the dieting calendar. There are even glossy vegan cookbooks. Once they were just cheap, picture-less paperbacks. Now they have actual photos and shiny paper. Last year's *It's All Good* by Gwyneth Paltrow and the new *The Vegan Pantry* by Dunja Gulin and *Leon: Fast Vegetarian* by Henry Dimbleby and Jane Baxter are all glossy, all lifestyle.

And if vegan is just too hardcore, you can mix'n'match. *The New York Times* food writer Mark Bittman wrote *VB6*, a book praising a "flexitarian" diet – ie, eating only vegan food before 6pm and then whatever you like.

The strict diet once based on an animal-loving ideology (no honey, no leather shoes) has been hijacked by the A-list, and veganism is now well and truly a fad.

So I decide to do it. One week as a vegan. How hard can it be? My husband, Giles Coren, restaurant critic of *The Times*, is game for anything, though he has always found vegans or vegetarians or any extreme dieter sinister. Hitler, he always points out, was a vegetarian.

"It's a short step from nut cutlets to Belsen," he will say loudly to anyone who will listen.

But if he had his way he'd eat mostly plants at home. If I ever go out in the evening, he

will make himself a bowl of edamame beans or braised kale – and nothing else – for dinner. He is fanatical about not getting fat, which as a restaurant critic is a major occupational hazard. "Veganism isn't about eating sugar and bread in the place of meat," he says. "It's about just eating lots and lots and lots of veg. And adding more salt. You just have to think like a vegan. It's like being kosher – it's a diet that emerged from working with what's available. The trouble with being vegan here, now, is that there's too much available. Imagine you live in a forest surrounded by mostly nuts and berries..."

I am a self-taught cook and one lesson I learnt early on was that almost anything is delicious if you cover it in a lot of butter and salt and cheese. I like eating meat but I think I could eat less and not miss it. It's butter, yoghurt, cheese and milk I will miss. Frothy coffees, bircher muesli – farewell, dear friends.

It's all right for Beyoncé and Jay-Z, who went vegan briefly towards the end of last year: they don't have to think about the practicalities of whatever new diet they fancy. They can just skype their personal chef and say, "We're vegan now," and then be presented with completely edible, thoughtful, vegan food three times a day. If I'm going to be vegan, I can't just do an "instant shop" at my online

From left: Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Jamie Hince, Brad Pitt and Gwyneth Paltrow are all fans of veganism

grocery shop. I am going to have to make an effort. Urgh.

So I know being vegan will be hard, but I don't think it will be awful. I am a good cook. I am creative. I can do this.

I didn't think I would find myself, as I do, sitting at my kitchen table at 7.15pm on my first day of veganism, crying (just a tiny bit) and eating a bagel covered in cream cheese, while drinking a (non-vegan) beer. Yes, there are some non-vegan beers. Didn't you know? There's a fish oil, used in beer's clarification process, called isinglass, and so for the truly vegan, these are out.

It all started out fine. The first morning I have muesli with soy milk and then soy milk in my tea. Not terrific, but never mind. The rest of the day was a lot like being on any old tedious weight-loss diet. Handfuls of nuts here and there, fruit, chopped veg and miso soup for lunch.

"It's going to be a long old week," I think at about 4pm as I am cling to my children's tea: fish fingers in butter for Kitty, 3; sweet potato, spinach and cheese purée for Sam, 6 months. Lucky them. It all smells amazing. Normally, I fall on their leftovers like a fox on a bin. Not tonight.

Tonight, dinner for Giles and me is a seaweed salad with ponzu dressing and then a vegetable broth of my own creation made with garlic, chilli and soy. It will be plain, I tell myself, but delicious. I always order seaweed salad in Japanese restaurants because it is my favourite thing.

But the seaweed that I have bought from my local health-food shop, and which is now boiling in a pan on my stove, is just an evil, stinking, horrible mess. It's like alien intestine. Not food. Simply not for eating.

"Phew, what's that smell?" says Giles, coming into the kitchen.

"Seaweed. It's disgusting," I say, carrying the still steaming pan out into the garden, dumping it on the compost and returning to the stinking kitchen.

The broth is no better. It tastes of nothing, like spicy hot water with some veg floating in it. The rice noodles I add at the last minute taste like very fine shoelaces. Giles covers the whole lot with salt and declares it "perfectly OK. It's just underseasoned, that's all."

But Giles, as discussed, will eat pretty much anything as long as it is hot and he can cover it in salt.

I can't finish mine; I still have the death stench of the revolting seaweed in my nostrils. "I look forward to my dinner all day long," I whine to no one in particular. "I am tired. I've got two children. Having a nice dinner and a glass of wine is pretty much what keeps me going during the 800th rendition of *Itsy Bitsy Spider* and bloody bathtime."

I feel cheated and upset. So I gobble down

a huge onion bagel, covered in cream cheese, and wash it down with the beer. As soon as Giles is out of the room I let out a few tears of disappointment and frustration. Then I chase the feeling away with a bar of Dairy Milk. Then I hate myself for the rest of the night.

It's just an emotional attachment to animal fat, I think next morning as I spread Flora on a piece of rye toast. It's like trying to give up smoking. You think cigarettes are your friends. Cheese and cream are not my friends!

Just as elevenses rolls around I happen to be eating an apple and wheeling Sam past a Pret A Manger; from inside I can hear a flat white and a pot of bircher muesli jumping up and down and screaming, "Drink me! Eat me! Yummy yummy!" I resist. But only just. Giles often looks horrified at how much dairy I consume – he would turn green at the thought of drinking a huge frothy coffee followed by a pot of yoghurt. "All that sloshing around in you. No wonder you're knackered all the time. And, you know..." He pats his hips. Maybe he's right.

I feel trapped without animal fat to fall back on. It's a simple, essential building block of taste, of flavour. I didn't think I cared much about food. I didn't think I had an emotional relationship with it. I pride myself on being

GILES STARTS TO GET COMPETITIVE. MAYBE HE IS A NATURAL FANATIC, LIKE HITLER

unfussy, on eating anything from a cold jellyfish salad in an obscure Chinese restaurant to a McDonald's cheeseburger, and finding merits in both.

When I'm on a diet I can tune out the world and snack on hazelnuts, apples and carrot juice. But not all day long. Not for ever. At some point I will go insane and shoot up the high street in search of a cheese sandwich.

"Just make a big salad," nags Giles. "A big crunchy salad. Your salads are delicious." Yes, I want to reply (but don't, because I value my life), my salads are delicious because I make the dressing with about a pint of mayonnaise and snip in bits of bacon or chicken – or, at the very least, some cheese.

Giles has become competitive about all this. I explained at the start that he didn't have to be vegan all day, just that he would have to eat vegan dinners with me. But now he is coming home declaring, "Well, I had a fully vegan day today. I feel great." I don't want to say that I had a fully vegan day, too, and I just feel empty and bored. Maybe

he is a natural fanatic, like Hitler. (I don't say this, either.)

We are having some friends round for dinner, who are warned that it will be vegan. I was going to wing it again with tofu curry but I have lost my nerve. I ring up a friend and beg for his two best vegan curry recipes.

Both use, in the place of animal fat, a lot of nuts; both use curry pastes of the usual garlic, chilli, ginger and spices with additional sesame seeds, cashew nuts or peanuts. I am so down on veganism by now that I am convinced both will be disgusting and that I will have to run out for pizza. But they are both absolutely terrific. We all clean our plates and drink some strong red wine and talk about how, actually, this vegan thing is OK. "This is great stuff," declares Giles. "We should eat like this all the time."

But, later, I find him eating a ham and peanut butter sandwich by the light of the fridge. "Look," he says, licking something off a greasy finger, "you can't possibly be a vegan if you're pissed." He burps richly and then heads towards *Match of the Day*.

After the successful vegan curries, I make vegan tortillas. I am pleased as punch with these, which use a fresh tomato, cucumber, avocado and sweetcorn salsa. I make a batch of Gwyneth Paltrow's famous "Mexican green goddess" dressing – an entire herbaceous border put in a blender with some vegan mayonnaise, which is not as nasty as it sounds. Giles is not as crazy about these because he is an even bigger carb-dodger than me. After four flour tortillas he boings his hands off his tummy and says, "I feel like I've been blown up with a bicycle pump."

Overconfident now, for the next dinner I make a different nut-based curry (as a vegan, without nuts or curry you are a bit lost), but something goes wrong. Although it works well and is more than edible, I feel bloated and perfectly sick for the first half of the next day. I can barely face my falafel lunch until about 2.30pm.

At the end of the week I don't feel better and I've put on weight. Before I started I was 9st 9½lb; now I am 9st 10lb. Cheers for that.

Veganism is, if you ask me, just not necessary. We should all be more mindful of what we consume, eat more plants and less meat. And, if you do feel non-specifically ropey all the time, then an exclusion diet such as veganism can locate gluten or dairy as the culprit.

But the faddism and freakiness (real or invented) of celebrities and their diets knows no bounds; it is just an externalisation of their rampant solipsism. This kind of craziness is simply not meant for the likes of you and me. The key to a healthy life, as everyone knows, is everything in moderation. And that's the hardest thing of all. **ESTHER WALKER**



THE VEGAN PANTRY'S SEED FALAFEL

Here's a fry-free and chickpea-free falafel that's easy to make.

- 130g pumpkin seeds
- 130g sunflower seeds
- 50g walnuts
- 5 tbsp chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 5 dried tomato halves, soaked
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 3 tbsp olive oil
- Juice of half a lemon
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 1 tbsp water, if necessary
- Sea salt and crushed black pepper, to taste

Makes 24

1. Grind the seeds, in a food processor or blender, into a fine flour, making sure you don't process them for too long, otherwise they might turn into seed butter.
2. Finely chop the walnuts, as they'll give the falafels a nice crunchy texture.

Add them and the remaining ingredients (except the water) to the seed flour and mix well with your hands or silicone spatula. Taste and adjust the seasoning if necessary – it should taste strong and full of flavour.
3. Try squeezing the seed mixture in your hand; if it doesn't fall apart it's moist enough. If it feels dry and crumbles immediately, add the water and mix again.
4. Form into walnut-sized falafel balls and either serve or keep refrigerated before use.

Extracted from *The Vegan Pantry* by Dunja Gulin, which is published by Ryland Peters & Small (£16.99) on February 13

Giles Coren's restaurant review is on page 68