

GET SLIM AND STAY THAT WAY! p.40

JULY 2010



Women's Health

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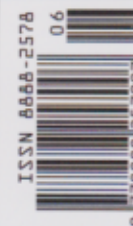
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& Boost Your
Persuasive Powers**

**Hot
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Sex!**
Why It's
Healthy

**Defeat
Dieting
Side
Effects**

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FOR
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of Her
Success



P125 July 2010



The Bright Side of Being Green



No longer afraid of
spinach.

If you're intrigued by the idea of adding more greens to your diet but remain mystified about the hows, wheres and whys of the vegetarian world, practitioners and nutritionists share insights to get you started

By Sunshine de Leon and Lara Parpan

PHOTOGRAPHS (THIS PAGE AND NEXT PAGE) BY KAI HUANG. MAKEUP BY SAM GALLARDO-UNSON. PHOTOGRAPHS IN SPIDERMAN COURTESY OF ISABEL RIVERA. MILENA KRAMULCOVA, AND PATRICIA GALLARDO

As a 5-year-old, the sight of veggies made Pilates instructor Sheila Zapanta (left) cringe so much that she painstakingly picked out the minced spinach in her cheeseburger, much to her mother's frustration. "I picked all the green out of that patty until it was basically cold ground beef with a side of buns with sticky melted cheese on it... You should have seen that plate. It was sad," she recalls.

Zapanta relaxed her revulsion for vegetables as she grew older. Living in Sydney exposed her to vegetarians and yoga. But it was only when she returned to Manila in 2003, quit smoking, and then years later saw her mom (fitness guru Vivian Zapanta), take on a no-beef, no-pork diet, that she decided to go vegetarian. "I was a pollo-pescetarian (fish and chicken eater) for two years. By this time, I became a certified Pilates instructor," she says. "It was all a slow process of changing my lifestyle to something healthier that made me choose to be wiser as well about the things I eat," adds Zapanta, 29 but looking years younger.

If your definition of the perfect meal conjures up images of a tender rib-eye steak or breaded pork chops, the idea of replacing the color brown with green in your diet might seem as ridiculous as not finishing the meat on your plate. But if you peel back the layers and get to the heart of being a "vegetarian", you might find that there are more ways than one to satisfy your appetite.

Becoming a vegetarian or simply starting to eat more vegetables, offers many benefits—from ensuring your body has the right nutrients and keeping you energized, to keeping you fit and protecting yourself against certain illnesses.

Why Go Green

It's nutritious. Mom wasn't just making things up to get you to open your mouth and take that bite of squash and string beans; nor was her cajoling about carrots-giving-you-good-eyesight a ploy. A predominantly vegetarian diet packs a powerful punch in terms of nutritional values. "Aside from being low in calories, vegetables are high in vitamins and minerals which is associated with increased vitality: a healthy plate with vegetables and fruits will lead to a higher

energy level," says Czarina Silva, RND, of St Luke's Medical Center at Global City.

The "You Are What You Eat" mantra was enough to spur a change in diet for Tin Achacoso, a bosom buddy of Zapanta's. "I stopped eating pork about eight years ago when one day I realized, 'If I don't want to get fat, why eat fat?'" Achacoso, 29, solidified her commitment to eating more vegetables after a month-long trip to India and Nepal in 2007. "I was influenced by their practice of not eating beef. The food there was amazing and in all restaurants they had a 'vegetarian' and 'non-vegetarian' menu," she recounts.

If vegetables get a bad rap for example, in leafy green salads with calorie-laden salad dressing, it's because of how it's prepared. By themselves, "vegetables have little or no fat, they are cholesterol-free. It's only the toppings or preparation method that increase the fat content," says Nieves Serra, chief dietitian at Asian Hospital and Medical Center in Muntinlupa.

It's healthy. Recent studies show that vegetarians following a well-balanced, low-fat, high-fiber diet have lowered incidence of coronary artery diseases, hypertension, obesity and some forms of cancer. Fiber-rich vegetables are particularly important in helping to lower cholesterol in the body.

Fashion model Isabel Rocas, who has been vegetarian since she was 12 and looks anything but the stereotypical anorexic mannequin, credits her strict plant-based diet, consisting of a variety of foods such as beans, nuts, whole grains and vegetables—for keeping away any extra weight: "It helps me stay in shape without having to slave away at the gym. Even if I consume as many calories as meat eaters do, I won't be getting the saturated fat that animal products are full of. Avoiding these foods also helps clear the skin," says Rocas, 30.

Milena Krahulcova, 25, a Manila-based Czech model who became vegan after 10 years as a vegetarian, just like Rocas, isn't skinny in build, but voluptuous. "Eating veggies keeps me fit, feeling fantastic and full of energy," she says.

It's environmentally friendly. If you think greenhouse gases, which are responsible for global warming with devastating consequences for human beings, are all because of millions of cars spewing carbon monoxide and toxic fumes into the air, think again.

"Global livestock production is responsible for about one-fifth of greenhouse

gases—more than transportation," says *New York Times* columnist and self-confessed foodie Mark Bittman, quoting a UN Food and Agriculture Organization report titled "Livestock's Long Shadow."

As Achacoso removed more and more sources of meat from her diet and sought appropriate protein replacements without having to starve herself with just salads and fruits, she started educating herself by watching videos on food issues. And what she learned shocked her. "Having my eyes open to the domino effect of eating meat and fish—the health hazards, what these companies do to the animals, what it does to the environment causing global warming—I know now that I can live without it," says Achacoso, who also teaches Pilates.

There are those who give up meat for ethical reasons. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and a non-governmental vegetarian support group that promotes indigenous vegetables, Nurturers of the Earth, are the main advocates of the vegetarian movement here. "If people were aware of the issues—like how animals are bred, raised, force-fed and prepared for the slaughterhouse—they would make more compassionate choices," says Rocas, a member of PETA.

Krahulcova sounds a more militant tone: "The way animals are raised today has turned into a massive industrial system that has little regard for animals' feelings. I feel great knowing I am not contributing to the suffering of animals," she adds.

Getting Started

Nutritionist Serra emphasizes that it's important to eat a mix of different vegetables because they each supply varying amounts and types of nutrients. She recommends eating 3-5 servings of vegetables daily. If you have trouble remembering to mix up your plate, think of a rainbow. Silva says: "Each color found in fruits and vegetables focus on building the immune system in its own way. It is important to get a variety of colors."

Deep yellow and dark green leafy vegetables, such as carrots, sweet potatoes, kale and spinach are good sources of beta-carotene, which forms part of vitamin A.

Early Warning

54% of Filipino adults have low levels of HDL (or high-density lipoprotein, also known as good cholesterol) because of low consumption of fruits and vegetables and a lack of physical activity.

Source: Food and Nutrition Research Institute

Others such as Brussels sprouts, bell pepper and tomato, have more vitamin C whereas peas, have less of these vitamins, but are good sources of complex carbohydrates and supply fiber.

Bittman, in his eye-opening book *Food Matters*, gives an encouraging nudge to meat eaters by emphasizing a simple principle: "Eat less meat and junk food, eat more vegetables and whole grains." He makes the case for healthier eating without overstating the case for environmental awareness or tugging at heartstrings by discussing the maltreatment of animals raised for food. "The results will make you healthier while you do a little toward slowing climate change—much like trading in your gas guzzler for something more energy and cost-efficient," he adds.

It's important to notice that there are shades of being "green" and knowing what you are willing to give up and what your body needs to feel healthy is essential to choosing the right diet. The lactovegetarian diet includes plant foods plus cheese and other dairy products. The ovo-lactovegetarian (or lacto-ovovegetarian) diet also includes eggs. Semi-vegetarians don't eat red meat but include chicken and fish with plant foods, dairy products and eggs. A vegan diet means not eating any products or eat any food made or derived from animals, including honey, eggs and dairy products like milk, butter and cheese.

Advice from the Greenest

For those who dream of a green diet but have a hard time giving up all meat at once, corporate social responsibility executive and long-time vegetarian Patricia Gallardo, 30, offers some practical advice: "Moderation is key." She adds that becoming one, or learning to eat more fruit and vegetables is something that should come naturally and slowly. Allocate two vegetarian meals first each week. "Try to dedicate 1-2 meals a week of just vegetables, tofu, fruits. From there, progress to 2 full days and then maybe give up just pork. Then beef. The secret is never deprive yourself of anything."

Roces says that years ago, there were very few restaurants carrying vegetarian dishes. For her, vegetarian meant eating a lot of french fries (hardly healthy) and plain oatmeal. But it's now possible to experiment with a new diet when dining out. "More Filipinos are becoming aware of



Bosom buddies Zapanta (left) and Achacoso enjoy vegan treats like dairy- and egg-free chocolate cupcakes.

the benefits of healthy living. You're likely to have a vegetarian dish in every restaurant," says Roces. (Visit spot.ph and click on the "Eat+Drink" tab to find a list.)

It also helps if you've got a supportive network. Your friends may still want their steak, but they won't give you a hard time with your move to go green. Just as in sticking to a fitness routine, a workout becomes achievable and sustainable when your friends share your outlook too. Achacoso and Zapanta, who sound each other off on their vegetarian adventures, agree. "The time I decided to give up beef was about the time Tin returned from India. She and I become pollo-pescetarians without planning it. That made things easier," says Zapanta.

Banishing Myths

The myths that circulate the non-vegetarian world regarding negative effects of a vegetarian diet are more rumor than fact.

Myth #1: Vegetarians do not get enough protein because they don't eat meat. There are lots of protein sources that are vegetarian-friendly, including whole grains, oatmeal, beans, peanut butter, brown rice, peas, lentils, nuts, seeds. Nutritionist Silva recommends tofu, beans, gluten chops (made from gluten flour), soybean



Model Isabel Roces (left) swears that going vegetarian upped her resistance to sickness and made her more energetic.

Manila-based Czech model Krahulcova (right), hosts once-a-month vegan dinners to introduce people to delicious vegan fare while promoting the environmental benefits of going green.



Business executive Gallardo, an avid practitioner of yoga, suggests a gradual approach to going vegetarian: "Never deprive yourself of anything."

“Questioning where my food comes from has significantly **changed my life.** I feel happier, healthier, lighter, and glad to be part of something bigger.”

products, broccoli as protein substitutes.

“Studies have shown that poor meal planning is the cause of nutritional deficiencies in vegetarian diets, not the absence of animal foods,” says Silva. A vegetarian diet can be unhealthy if it has too many calories, saturated fat and not enough important nutrients such as vitamin D and B12, which are present in pork, beef and chicken. You can find these in oranges, bananas, peaches, lentils, broccoli, spinach, and asparagus.

Roces says, “The food I eat provides me with more than enough vitamins to get through the day. I don’t need vitamin pills. I have hardly gotten sick since turning vegetarian.” Feeling lighter, she clarifies, doesn’t mean she gets sluggish: “I sail through the day and even have energy to spare for nights out with friends.”

Myth #2: Vegetarian fare is boring. Rocés shares why it’s not as difficult a lifestyle change as people might imagine. “It’s as simple as selecting a different menu option that many restaurants and even airlines provide. You can also prepare food at home. There’s always a choice.” Gallardo adds: “It’s amazing to discover what you can do with some vegetables; puso ng saging behaves like meat and it’s the best alternative to adobo or giniling.”

Zapanta’s passion for her newfound diet prompted her to start a blog called The Fickle Kitchen (<http://theficklekitchen.tumblr.com/>). “I love tastes that make me feel alive and am excited about incorporating as much nutrition into my food,” she says. Her blog bursts with colorful photos and seemingly easy-to-prepare mouthwatering vegetarian dishes she and friends exchange with each other like “Veggie-loaded Pasta with Herbed Tofu ‘meat’ Balls” and “Muddy Muddy Raspberry Cupcakes.”

Myth #3: It’s hard to be a vegetarian in such a meat-loving country. It may be daunting to find certain ingredients that may or may not be available. Vegetarian fare might have been hard to find in

restaurants 15 years ago but thanks to a growing community of vegetarians, more and more markets are selling a variety of greens and fruits. Different cuisines, whether Asian, Indian, Mexican, American or Mediterranean, offer vegetarian-friendly fare (see sidebar).

Life-changing Effects

Most vegetarians agree that their diet has had only positive effects on their lives, from giving them extra energy to inspiring them to innovate. There are those like Gallardo for one, who meticulously takes her cooking to the most basic level of her ingredients. “I cook a lot to make sure that the broth is vegetable stock. This puts me in control of what goes in, and gets me very creative. I even made my own yogurt,” she says.

There’s no doubt that in the long run, eating more vegetables makes you healthier. But it eventually brings you to another plane of “green”-ness: becoming an environmentalist. Bittman reiterates this. “For our own sakes, as well as for the sake of the earth, we need to change the way we eat...we can make food more important, not less, and save ourselves and our planet (and some money) by doing so.”

Krahulcova summarizes the benefits of going vegan: “It helps the planet, the animals, and one’s own health,” she says.

Zapanta said it’s become easier to incorporate earth-saving measures in her own way. “Questioning where my food comes from has significantly changed my life. I feel happier, healthier, lighter, and glad to be part of something bigger. When I shop I always carry recyclable bags. I am switching to earth friendly products for cleaning the house and doing the laundry. I unplug all electrical outlets, and switched to energy saving bulbs,” she says. Certainly a far cry from her veggie-cringing days, and she, along with a small but growing legion of vegetarians in the country are doing the world, not to mention themselves, a huge, healthy favor. ■

FRESH VEGGIE & FRUIT SOURCES

- Legaspi Sunday Market
Open Sunday, 7 a.m. to 2 p.m.,
Parking lot, Salcedo Street cor. Herrera
Street, Legaspi Village, Makati City
- Lung Center Organix Market
Open Sunday, 6 a.m. – 1 p.m.,
Quezon Avenue, Quezon City 1104
- Nepa Q-Mart
Open Daily
EDSA, Cubao, Quezon City
- Salcedo Saturday Market
Open Saturday, 7 a.m. to 2 p.m.,
Jaime Velasquez Park, Salcedo Village,
Makati City
- Taj/Assad Market
Open Daily, 9 a.m. – 8:30 a.m.,
#1 Guijo, Bagtikan Street, San Antonio
Village, Makati
7573992
- Isip’s Biodynamic Vegetables
<http://isipphilippines.multiply.com/>
- Renee Araneta-Perrine
via <http://www.mypersonalfarmer.net/> – from farm to customer organic
vegetables in a box in one day. Village-
supported agriculture
- Dr. Tam’s Vegan Haus & Wellness
Center, Metrowalk
and at Living Foods Phil. located at
F.Legaspi St., Maybunga, Pasig City
(near Rainforest Park)

THE FIVE-A-DAY FRUITS & VEGGIES DEBATE

Nutritionists and doctors were abuzz three months ago when the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* published a report that higher fruit and vegetable intake consumption had a small impact on reducing cancer risk. “High intake of vegetables, and fruits and vegetables combined, was associated with a small reduction in overall cancer risk,” the report said. However, it added a caveat: “Given the small magnitude of the observed associations, caution should be applied in their interpretation.” *The Lancet*, a leading general medical journal, replied to the study citing other research that backs up the recommended five-a-day (or more) servings of fruits and vegetables. It helps reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, it said, adding that the high fiber in “fruits and vegetables helps control weight, and obesity is a major cause of cancer.” “Our results provide strong support for the recommendations to consume more than five servings of fruit and vegetables per day, which is likely to cause a major reduction in strokes,” it added. So don’t hold back. Scarf those veggies and fresh fruits!