

Front page coverage for PCRM's Kickstart in the Sunday edition of this paper. Congrats to Susan and to Jessica, who pitched this story.

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BODY:

Mark Juers hangs spread-eagled on a two-story rock-climbing wall, fingers and toes searching for holds that will support his wiry, 6-foot-4-inch frame as he climbs.

His wife, Kelleigh, works on her rock-climbing skills nearby. Down at floor level their 10-month-old daughter, Moxie, mimes climbing, but she's mostly just trying to stay upright .

The Juers did not stop for Sausage McMuffins at McDonald's to fuel their morning workout at Climbnasium near New Kingstown. Instead, they shared a tofu frittata made by Mark in the kitchen of their Carlisle home.

This young family is vegan, even little Moxie, whose favorite food (after mother's milk) is tofu. The Juers, who grew up in central Pennsylvania but lived in a vegan-friendly Oregon town for two years, have eliminated meat, milk and eggs from their diet in favor of fruits, vegetables, grains, fungi and seeds.

"We started it as an experiment," Mark Juers, 24, said.

"Once we did," added Kelleigh, who is 26, "we didn't feel like there was any turning back."

The Juers are part of a new wave of meat-eschewers who might have embraced a vegan lifestyle after watching films like "Fast Food Nation," "An Inconvenient Truth" or "Meet Your Meat," but have stuck around because they like the food and the way it makes them feel.

"My energy level increases a great deal as I consume more whole foods," said Mark, who rides his bicycle about 30 miles a day going to and from his job at World Cup Ski and Cycle near Mechanicsburg.

The good news is that it's probably easier to be a vegan in central Pennsylvania than ever before. Vegans are benefiting from larger social movements toward organic and locally grown foods, and an increasing number of people who think of themselves as part-time vegetarians.

As a result, most supermarkets have vegan and organic-food sections. Natural food stores and farmers' markets offer lots of fresh produce, organic products and exotic flavorings and spices. There are many vegan cookbooks, and recipes abound online.

"I love being vegan," said Marshall Galinsky, a member of Harrisburg's Green Street Vegetarian Club, which formed in 1999. "The food is so much better once you get used to it. It's an amazing change to me. I'm not a thin guy. I go about 240. I was always a big eater who could knock down a few hamburgers at a time or empty out a buffet."

A variety of restaurants, including Chalit's Thai Bistro near Mechanicsburg and Sasha's Hideaway near Linglestown, offer vegan dishes on their regular menus. At the Broad Street Market in Harrisburg, the Capital Box offers vegan breakfasts every Saturday morning.

"It's getting better," Kelleigh Juers said. "When Mark and I first started dating, it was definitely a challenge. We would go to a restaurant and mention 'vegan.' They had no idea what we were talking about."

A vegetarian's world

The vegetarian world is fragmented. It includes meat-eaters who regularly have vegetarian meals, ovo-lacto vegetarians who consume dairy products and eggs, and others who pass on dairy and eggs but will eat fish.

In a world where people are following vegetarian, semi-vegetarian, Mediterranean, Asian, Greek, low-carb, high-carb and even paleolithic diets, it's getting harder to divide people into neat groups.

Vegans are the Spartans of this landscape. Fully committed, they take a pass on all animal products, including dairy products, eggs, fish and even honey. Most won't wear leather, and the most devout, the so-called raw vegans, eat nothing but uncooked fruits, vegetables, seeds and grains.

The vegan philosophy is summed up neatly by a line in the book "Food Rules" by Michael Pollan: "If it came from a plant, eat it. If it was made in a plant, don't eat it."

It's hard to pin down exactly how many vegans there are in the United States, but polls by Time, CNN and Harris have consistently pegged them at about 1 percent of the population. That translates to some 3 million vegans in the country now, or a million more than there were in 1970.

"When I saw 'Meet Your Meat,' I just couldn't eat meat anymore," said Rin Royer, a vegan who works at The Healthy Grocer, a natural foods store on Trindle Road near Camp Hill. Royer was referring to a film produced by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals on the meat industry.

That's typical. Most vegans are drawn into the lifestyle over environmental and animals rights issues. That has led more than a few meat-eaters to express contempt for their vegan counterparts, whom they consider smug and elitist. There's even a group you can join on Facebook called "I Hate Vegans!"

But many of today's newer vegans are more interested in their path than they are in yours.

"For a long time I was a preachy vegan," Royer admitted. "My mother knocked that out of me. At this point, I'm just trying to live my life as an example. I have meat-eating friends, but if they come over to my house they know they won't be getting meat."

Most Americans remain committed carnivores, however.

According to a recent study by scientists at Bard College and the University of Chicago, the average American adult consumes about eight ounces of animal protein a day, more than twice the global average and far more than even the most pro-protein doctor or dietitian would recommend.

The United States Department of Agriculture recommends that adult men consume between 5 1/2 and 6 1/2 ounces of protein a day, but that amount combines meat, poultry, eggs, beans, peas, seeds and nuts.

Our love of meat -- and the cholesterol that comes with it -- also might help to explain why the United States has the world's highest rates of obesity and heart disease.

Nevertheless, meat is big business globally.

According to a New York Times in 2008, the world's total eat supply in 2007 was an estimated 284 million tons, up from 71 million tons in 1961. Worldwide meat consumption is expected to double again by the year 2050, the newspaper reported.

Fitness and going vegan

Vegans are making their presence felt in the worlds of sports and fitness. Many belong to an organization called Organic Athlete, which formed in 2003.

Founder Bradley Saul said he got the idea when he was sprayed by pesticides from a crop duster while riding his bike near Tucson, Ariz. Bradley said he thought, "There's something wrong with this."

Organic athletes are vegans who ride, run and paddle at elite levels. They might have soft hearts, but that doesn't mean they believe in soft bodies.

"Moving to a raw vegan diet was the best choice I've ever made as an athlete," Tim VanOrden, a 42-year-old mountain runner from Vermont, wrote at organicathlete.org. "My endurance has dramatically improved, and I recover from hard training and races in less than half the time. "

Most pro athletes remain committed meat eaters, so don't expect NFL teams to stop consuming piles of meat during their annual two-a-day training camps anytime soon.

But results compiled by VanOrden and other vegan athletes have helped lay to rest long-standing notions that vegans are missing vital nutrients or have less energy than their carnivorous counterparts.

"Meat slows you down," said Royer, who is not an athlete but has become far more physically active since becoming a vegan. "That's why a lion sleeps for 10 hours after eating a zebra."

Athlete Pam Boteler, who in 2000 became the first woman to race a sprint canoe at the U.S. National Sprint Canoe/Kayak Championships, said her physical reserves have increased since she became a vegan two years ago -- after several years as a vegetarian.

"It honestly has been a quiet, slow and private evolution," Boteler, 42, of Alexandria, Va., said. "It has been nothing but a positive, and transformative, change. Relying on fruits as my fuel, I honestly felt I could dig deeper and stay there longer than ever before. As if there was a new reservoir of energy I could tap into."

One of the more conspicuous vegans in the United States is Kevin Eubanks, the former "Tonight Show" bandleader who was once named "World's Sexiest Vegetarian" by PETA. He spoke to The Patriot-News earlier this summer before performing at the annual Gettysburg Festival.

Eubanks, a bodybuilder who has been vegetarian since age 18, laughs when people suggest plant-eaters can't keep up with their meat-eating counterparts.

"Do I look like I can't keep up?" asked Eubanks, still svelte and muscular at age 52. "A lot of my friends have trouble with food intake. I encourage them to try a new way. Being a vegetarian changes the way you shop and the way you eat. It changes everything."

Health implications

Mary Hope, a longtime vegan who founded the Green Street Vegetarian Club in Harrisburg in 1999, has been able to keep her type 2 diabetes at bay since going vegan.

"I haven't had to go on medication in 11 years," said Hope, who gets her exercise by walking and gardening.

That's in line with a recent book, "Dr. Neal Barnard's Program for Reversing Diabetes," which has attracted thousands of diabetics to a vegan diet. Barnard's book holds that the best way to control the disease is through a type of vegan diet that emphasizes low-glycemic carbohydrates.

"As those who participated in our study learned," Barnard wrote, "blood sugar levels that creep steadily upward can also fall. The road to diabetes is in fact a two-way street."

That runs counter to conventional wisdom about the disease, which generally recommends a mix of medications combined with a diet that avoids complex carbohydrates such as bread and rice because of their impact on blood sugar levels. Levels that are too high for too long can lead to serious complications such as kidney failure, leg amputations or blindness.

Not so fast, counters Barnard, who cites extensive research on the subject done in conjunction with scientists at George Washington University and Georgetown University. Diabetics who followed a vegan diet saw their blood sugar levels drop, as well as cholesterol levels and blood pressure. Many were able to reduce or eliminate medications they took for the disease.

Other studies have found that in Asian and African cultures where rice, grains, starchy vegetables, bean dishes and noodles are staples, the incidence of diabetes is far lower than in North America. So are high cholesterol, heart disease, high blood pressure and certain forms of cancer.

"Carbohydrates do not cause diabetes," Barnard concluded. Hamburgers, fried chicken, cheese and other protein-rich Western fare are a far more likely culprit. As such foods have found their way into Japanese culture, for instance, once-small rates of diabetes and heart disease have skyrocketed.

Barnard said the only essential nutrient that might be missing from a vegan diet is vitamin B12, a key to blood formation in the body. That's why he recommends a daily multi-vitamin and B12-fortified foods for people following his program.

To encourage people to try veganism, Barnard's organization and the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine are sponsoring an online campaign called the 21-Day Vegan Kickstart.

The idea is to provide support and encouragement for people who are interested in veganism but might be unsure how to proceed. More than 20,000 people have signed up for the program, which begins Sept. 6.

"We're saying just try it for three weeks," said nutritionist Susan Levin, who works with Barnard and is helping to organize the campaign. "Don't worry about the rest of the year or the rest of your life."

Miss meat? 'Never'

If there's one notion vegans want to share with their meat-eating friends and neighbors, it's this: Once you give up animal products, you won't miss them.

Vegans have moved far beyond hummus and soy milk. With high-quality vegan foods in abundance, a wide and varied diet of simply prepared dishes is quite possible.

Ask Hope if she ever misses meat, and she seems surprised by the question before answering, "No. Never."

But fellow Green Street member Galinsky notes there is no guarantee of being thin, however.

"As someone said, cows get fat eating grass," Galinsky said with a laugh. "You can eat too much vegan food. You can't have an unlimited amount of soy ice cream."

Mark Juers agreed there are plenty of "vegan junk foods" out there, like apple turnovers at fast-food restaurants. And as more vegetarian foods, including textured protein, soy products and frozen dinners, become available on a large scale, concerns about over-processed foods have emerged among some vegans.

"I'm thinking more about what I eat," Mark Juers said. "When I was omni, I ate whatever was around. I still love junk food, but I regulate quite a bit better now."

INFOBOX: TYPES OF VEGETARIANS

* 'Weekday' vegetarians: Follow a vegetarian diet during week, but may eat meat and fish on weekends.

* Pescatarians: Generally follows a vegetarian diet with occasional meals of fish or shellfish. Sometimes called fishetarians.

* Ovo-lacto vegetarians: Consume eggs and/or dairy products (milk, yogurt, cheese, etc.) as part of a vegetarian diet. Rationale: Animals don't have to die to produce milk and eggs.

* Vegetarians: Subsist on a diet composed entirely of plant food, including fruits, vegetables, grains, fungi and seed. Many consume animal products such as honey.

* Vegans: Eschew all animal products, even honey. Most won't wear leather. The most extreme eat nothing but raw fruits, vegetables, seeds and grains.

GO VEGAN... FOR 21 DAYS

More than 20,000 people have signed up for the 21-Day Vegan Kickstart, a national campaign starting Sept. 6 that encourages people to give veganism a try.

Participants can register for free at www.21daykickstart.org where celebrities.

The program is partly sponsored by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine and the organization of Dr. Neal Barnard, author of the pro-vegan book "Reversing Diabetes."

ONLINE RESOURCES

* www.greenstreetvc.com: Green Street Vegetarian Club, founded in Harrisburg in 1999, features regular group gatherings at area restaurants, including vegan breakfasts every Saturday morning at the Capitol Box in the Broad Street Market.

* www.nealbarnard.org: Dr. Neal Barnard is the author of "Reversing Diabetes," a book that cites scientific research in recommending a effects of type 1 and type 2 diabetes.

* www.organicathlete.org: Organic Athlete is a community of diet.

* www.veg.com: VegWeb features lots of vegetarian and vegan recipes, plus many links to related sites.

* www.vrg.org: The nonprofit Vegetarian Resource Group offers lots Try a dish?

Nutritional yeast and tofu stand in for eggs and cheese in this recipe, which you can make in about an hour.

Ingredients:

1/4 cup olive oil

1 onion, chopped

4 green onions, chopped (separate the greens from the bottom)

4 cloves garlic, minced

2 medium potatoes, thinly sliced

1 tsp. salt

1/2 tsp. pepper, divided

12 ounces firm tofu 1/4 cup soy sauce

4 tbsp. nutritional yeast

Preparation

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. In a large frying pan, sauté onions, minutes. Add potatoes, salt and pepper, and sauté for 10 to 15 Blend tofu, soy sauce, and nutritional yeast in a food processor or blender until well mixed. Mixture will be somewhat thick. Add green onions and potatoes and pour into an oiled pie pan. Cook 45-50 minutes, until top is firm and cooked all the way through.