

Sustainable Eating: An Opportunity for Cohousing to Lead the Way

by Linda Spiegler



If cohousing is about sustainability—resource conservation, energy efficiency, health and sociability—can any discussion of sustainability be complete without considering the food we eat?

Sustainable eating, as defined here, is intentionally choosing to eat for the health and well being of ourselves and the planet. The purpose is to help reduce or alleviate the cruel treatment of animals, environmental damage, and health concerns associated with eating animal food. It includes, for example, choosing organic and non-GMO foods, locally grown foods and fair trade foods and, for the purposes of this article, eating a plant-based diet.

Recent statistics indicate that, in the U.S. alone,

- o The demand for meat causes the slaughter of more than 10 billion land animals annually.
- o 99% of the animals we eat or use to produce milk and eggs are factory farmed.
- o The factory farming industry is allowed to create its own definition of “cruelty” because of legal exceptions to the animal welfare laws. For examples of “acceptable” cruelty, watch any of the dvds listed in the Bibliography, or simply visit their web sites.
- o The average shrimp trawling operation throws overboard 80% - 90% of its catch (non-shrimp sea animals, including some Endangered Species), dead or dying.
- o Upwards of 24 million pounds of antibiotics are fed to *healthy* livestock (chickens, pigs, cows, lambs, fish) annually, promoting resistance to antibiotics in both animals and humans.
- o Farmed animals produce 130 times the waste of the human population. This largely untreated waste, including ammonia, methane, hydrogen sulfide, carbon monoxide, cyanide, phosphorus, nitrates, heavy metals, salmonella, streptococci and giardia pollute our air, land and water, and are linked to human illness.
- o Raising animals for food consumes more than half of all water used in the U.S. A totally vegetarian diet requires 300 gallons of water per day, while a meat-eating diet requires more than 4,200 gallons of water per day.

In addition,

- o By 2050, the world’s livestock will consume as much food as 4 billion people.

- o Scientists concur that new viruses such as common bird and swine flus, which move between farmed animals and humans, will increasingly be a major global health threat.
- o According to the UN, animal agriculture is the number one cause of climate change.
- o Animal protein seems inexpensive—unless we take into account the government farm subsidies, environmental impact, human disease, and so on—which make the price we pay historically high.

Discussions of food typically bring up strong emotions and beliefs. Like many of us, I have a convoluted eating history. I wasn't always a vegetarian, and I didn't grow up in a vegetarian home. For much of my life, a meal without animal protein was a foreign concept, something my family joked about, or treated with suspicion—at the very least, vegetarian eating *couldn't* be healthy. And that belief was perpetuated by the burgeoning animal food industries through prolific advertising and what was made available to eat in restaurants, fast-food places and grocery stores. In addition, eating animal food was (and often still is) promoted as healthy and essential by many scientists, medical doctors, holistic practitioners, teachers, government agencies and other respected sources.

I once believed that eating animals and animal products was “natural.” My food choices were based less on compassion, health or environmental issues than on my conditioned appetite, deeply held sentimental associations of food with my family and friends, and even on subtle issues of race and social class (eating meat was a sign of status, much as it is becoming today in developing countries for those who have the money).

Eventually, however, my consciousness began to change—not overnight, but as part of a gradual, cumulative process, based both on factual information (statistics about factory farming, pesticides and causes of global warming, for example) and emotional experiences (like looking into the eyes of a cow in the field across from my college dorm and feeling an unexpected ache in my heart). Once, while browsing in a bookstore, I came upon a book about Macrobiotics, a popular vegetarian eating regimen at the time. The more I read, the more I questioned: What part does food play in my life beyond what I have always believed? Is there a spiritual aspect to eating? How do my eating choices affect animals, other people, the environment, my own health? This was the conscious beginning of a path that for me began over 30 years ago, and that I continue to explore today.

Because we are conditioned from birth to see food a certain way, the only way to look at food differently is to challenge some of those ideas. The American Dietetic Association says that well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for all individuals during all stages of the life cycle. Vegetarian diets are often associated with a number of health advantages, including lower blood cholesterol levels, lower risk of heart disease, lower blood pressure levels, and lower risk of hypertension and type 2 diabetes. Vegetarians tend to have a lower body mass index (less body fat) and lower overall cancer rates.

I believe we all want to be healthy, to keep from harming animals, to protect the environment as much as possible. Luckily, today there is no shortage of information on how to do this—including the benefits of plant-based eating and how to transition to it. There are books, videos (Netflix has several), web sites, organizations and delicious recipes galore, ranging from simple to gourmet. (See suggestions in Bibliography.)

Where to begin? Initially, individuals can reduce animal food consumption. Begin with one item at a time, one meal at a time. Replace one, then two, then three and more animal-based meals a week with plant-based meals (grains, beans, nuts, peas, seeds,

vegetables, fruits). Ask your grocery store and favorite restaurants to offer more organic, non-animal foods and dishes. If you already eat a vegetarian or vegan diet, or if you buy organic, local, or fair trade, share the benefits of sustainable eating with other cohousing members.

As cohousing communities, we can make our *communal meals* completely plant-based or, at the very least vegetarian, using dairy and eggs sparingly. Such an effort would not only increase our communal consciousness about plant-based eating, but would help reduce the demand for animal food and the detrimental effects associated with *unsustainable* eating.

To be clear, the focus of a plant-based diet is not to judge those of us who eat animal food. It is about compassion and sustainability; savoring and appreciating the cornucopia of plant foods the earth provides. It does not mean that all cohousing members would—or must—share lockstep dietary habits; but at the very least, it would demonstrate our support of sustainable eating as a community value. Cohousing communities have a unique opportunity to provide leadership in this area.

For those of you who secretly harbor images of vegetarians or vegans as quiet, thin or introverted, as weird hippies, or as wild-eyed animal activists (all of whom I think are great, by the way), please visit The Engine 2 Diet web site (<http://engine2diet.com>) and enjoy some myth-busting. This is one of a multitude of sites where you'll find recipes, grocery lists, even exercises to get you started on sustainable eating.

If you live in a cohousing community that already has plant-based or vegetarian communal meals, please tell the rest of us about your experiences. Share some recipes. Start a Sustainable Eating cookbook. The possibilities for delicious, healthy, cruelty-free sustainability abound.

Linda Spiegler has been a member of the Washington Village cohousing community in Boulder, Colorado, since 2008. She is currently reading *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer, and included some of his research in this article.

Bibliography/Resources

This is only a beginning list, and different resources will work for different people. Many of these references, including videos, are available through your **local library**. Also check out **Amazon.com**, which often shows sample pages of books, and **Netflix**.

Anderson, Mike, *The Rave Diet and Lifestyle* (2009). Web site: <http://www.ravediet.com>
Book, video and web site about plant-based eating: vegan, no refined foods, no oils, low sodium, raw foods, exercise. Includes recipes and tips.

Esselstyn, Rip, *The Engine 2 Diet* (2009). Web site: <http://engine2diet.com>
Firefighters show that vegetarian eating builds health and strength. Book and web site provide grocery lists, meal planning, exercises and more for a month of plant-based eating.

Farm Sanctuary. Web site: <http://www.farmsancry.org>
A non-profit organization that works to protect farm animals from cruelty, inspire change in the way society views and treats farm animals, and promote compassionate vegan living.

Foer, Jonathan Safran, *Eating Animals* (2009).
This book uses personal stories, statistics and thought-provoking questions about the factory farming industry, animal food, and our values around food.

Food, Inc. (2009) Web site: <http://www.foodincmovie.com>
A film and companion book that examine America's food industries and what consumers aren't told.

The Future of Food (2004). Web site: <http://www.thefutureoffood.com>
A film focusing on genetically modified food (GMO) and grassroots activism. The film seeks to educate voters and help ban the planting of GMO crops.

Humane Society of the United States. Web site: <http://www.humanesociety.org>
The nation's largest animal protection organization. Investigates animal cruelty; advocates for better laws; encourages corporations to adopt animal-friendly policies; conducts disaster relief and animal rescue; and provides direct care for thousands of animals annually.

Lisa the Vegetarian, *The Simpsons* (animated television show), Season 7, Episode 5, (1995).
An enlightened episode of this popular tv show where Lisa, the oldest Simpson daughter, visits a petting zoo and decides to become a vegetarian.

Meet Your Meat (2003). Web site: <http://www.meat.org>
A graphic, uncensored video and web site about how food animals are raised and slaughtered.

Nonviolence United. Web site: <http://www.nonviolenceunited.org>
The organization started by Matt & Barbara Bear (Boulder, Colorado) for consumer education regarding plant-based eating and nonviolence.

Tribe of Heart: The Art of Peaceful Transformation. Web site: <http://www.tribeofheart.org>

An educational organization that produces videos with first-person stories about animals, factory farms, compassion for farmed animals, and the work of Farm Sanctuary. Two current videos are *Peaceable Kingdom: a Tribe of Heart documentary* (2004) and *Peaceable Kingdom: The Journey Home* (2009) (<http://www.peaceablekingdomfilm.org>)

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Web site: <http://www.peta.org>

The largest animal rights organization in the world. PETA works through public education, cruelty investigations, research, animal rescue, legislation, special events, celebrity involvement, and protest campaigns. Their main focus is factory farms, the clothing trade, laboratories, and the entertainment industry.

Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM). Web site: <http://www.pcrm.org>

A non-profit group of medical doctors and scientists that promotes preventive medicine (including plant-based diet), conducts clinical research, and encourages higher standards for ethics and effectiveness in research.

Recipes.

There are a *huge* number of vegan/vegetarian recipe web sites. Search for “vegan recipes,” “vegetarian recipes,” “cruelty-free eating,” “plant-based diet,” “gluten-free vegan” or for specific dishes like “vegan mac and cheese,” “chickpea cutlets,” etc.