

There's more to life than meat

More than two million Australians are now vegetarian or vegan.
by Max Brearley in The Australian on 27 Mar 2018

Are we on the cusp of a vegan revolution? Open a glossy magazine or scroll your online feed and a barrage of “five ways to make tempeh delicious” may make you think we are.

And while recent research suggests that more than two million Australians are vegetarian or vegan, it's premature to say we're calling time on meat while we are still vying for the spot as the world's largest consumer (per capita) of meat. It's less a case of we'll all be vegan (or for that matter vegetarian) in a year but, perhaps, have we reached peak meat?

Changing attitudes to diet, health, environmental concerns and animal welfare are drivers in the move of many to reduce meat in their diets. Beef and lamb are on a downward trajectory of consumption. Chicken has rocketed and pork has seen gains as a result of our move away from beef. The mantra of eat less, but of better quality, is also gaining ground.

I now eat less, buy direct from farmers — thanks to an excellent farmers market close by — and when I eat out, which as a critic is often, I do eat meat. But I'm looking for provenance and quality. At Firedoor in Sydney's Surry Hills, I recently ate the much-lauded 159-day dry-aged rib of beef. It cost \$167 (yes, \$167).

It was a standout of the past few years of dining, a dish that will be remembered. Each piece savoured, it didn't fuel carnivorous urges; quite the opposite. It brought to mind the thought, why would I eat beef of little ethical merit, and if I eat one decent piece of meat a month then I'm happy.

“Every butcher talks about having the best quality meats, and really it becomes a fairly arbitrary and subjective discussion about what one thinks of as quality,” says Grant Hilliard, of Marrickville's specialist butcher Feather and Bone. “What I'm interested in are embedded qualities.” Hilliard buys extensively, not intensively, raised animals. He's looking for meat that embodies the qualities of how the farmer has looked after the animals and the use of land.

It's the kind of thinking that would scare many butchers but Hilliard, who buys whole carcasses, has a view on consumption that's surprising. There's an issue with land-based proteins, Hilliard says, such that “a big slab of meat sitting in the middle of the plate is a portion size which is excessive”.

He offers a view I've never heard before from a butcher: that we don't need 280g or 320g portions of meat each, and that we don't need to be eating prime cuts that much.

Hilliard believes we should be eating more offal and sees many people swinging back this way. "Eye fillet, in the case of beef, is about 1.2 per cent of the carcass weight," he says. "Really that's how often you should eat it."

Doubtless it's not the view from the industry as a whole — the various meat marketing boards compete with each other — but Hilliard isn't your standard butcher. He's at the top end of the meat trade.

While there's the well-worn stereotype of the vegan and vegetarian movement (the dietary wowser) change is driven from unlikely corners and alliances.

Shannon Martinez, chef and co-owner of the wildly popular Smith and Daughters, and Smith and Deli in Melbourne's Fitzroy, is riding high. With a bestselling book and another on the way, and sought after for collaborations and events, she's the unlikely face of delicious vegan food: she's a meat eater. Martinez's motivation as a chef to explore the vegan world wasn't driven by ethics, it was more that she saw an unserved market. "I don't think there'll be a time where everyone is vegan," she says. "But I think people are more conscious of what they eat."

Key to Martinez's approach is to give people the things they love, re-creating dishes that would have meat or dairy products in them with substitutes. She's experimenting with a vegan blue cheese "made in the same style as regular Stilton, ageing it for nine weeks".

This ability to substitute and even mimic has been taken to surprising heights in collaboration with Belles Hot Chicken, also in Fitzroy.

Chef-owner Morgan McGlone says: "Shannon said: 'I can basically take your whole menu and make it vegan', and I said: 'No way.' I just didn't think it could be done."

But Martinez used a mix of vinegar and soy milk to dredge tofu pieces that became the fried chicken. Jackfruit, a vegetable that pulls and tears like meat, was bound with spring roll wrappers and dredged in flour, again using the vinegar and soy milk mix.

With 700 people served that day, and a queue that stretched blocks, McGlone was sold on the need for good vegan and vegetarian menu items.

“I’ve got dedicated vegan dishes which I would never have done, say, seven years ago,” he says.

He recently has opened Natural History, also in Melbourne, and an American style grill may seem an unlikely stronghold of a meatless menu, but McGlone says the offering has been designed to include five dishes that are meatless.

“It’s a bar and grill,” he says, “but you need to come to terms with the fact that the world is eating less meat. So we’ll be looking at things like a meatless Monday.”

While this may not seem like a huge thing to some, the shift in attitude, particularly from chefs, is significant. London chef and writer Anna Jones tells me that when she became vegetarian nearly a decade ago, amid a backdrop of nose-to-tail eating, chefs poured scorn on her; the implication being that she couldn’t be a serious chef and not cook meat.

She has seen attitudes change. Her take on vegetarian and increasingly vegan food is less about substitution and mimicking meat. “I like having that relationship with an ingredient and I can still see it on my plate,” she says.

She recognises, though, that it’s difficult for some to make a full jump away from meat and, while she’s not big on substitution, she talks about a recent backyard barbecue in Los Angeles.

A group of meat eaters, vegans and vegetarians all tucked into Impossible Burgers, a vegan burger that bleeds and sears, made from wheat, coconut oil, and potatoes.

The burger, invested in by the likes of Bill Gates, is engineered to have all the characteristics of the classic US patty but with less impact on the planet.

Environmental impacts aside, could this be the Holy Grail for those who can’t bear a barbecue without a burger? Jones says: “For those people on their first steps away from having meat three or four times a week, those burgers are actually a great thing because they still feel very familiar.

“Changing any habit is about taking a smaller step.”