



A Man With Opinions on Food With a Face



ANYTHING FOR A SALAD Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, the author, making new friends at the Catskill Animal Sanctuary in Saugerties, N.Y. He calls himself "an aspiring vegan."

By ERIC KONIGSBERG
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DID you hear the one about the vegan who mistook his anorak for a sandwich? He realized the error only because it tasted so good.

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THAT FACE Jeffrey Masson writes books about animals; his latest book espouses veganism.

O.K., O.K. Laugh all you like. And Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson — author, former psychoanalyst and Freudian scholar, animal lover and vegan — will probably laugh with you. "You know, we don't have restaurants like Chez Panisse in the vegan world, not yet," Mr. Masson said. "A vegan diet takes getting used to, and I'm somebody who was raised vegetarian."

A matter of particular dissatisfaction for Mr. Masson at the moment is his overconsumption of muesli. "I'm looking for a new breakfast food," he said. The problem intensified when his 12-year-old son was found to be sensitive to gluten. "They make him aggressive," Mr. Masson said. "And the thing is, I can't bring home delicious, wonderful French bread and just eat it in front of him while he has to eat that gluten-free bread that tastes like paper or something."

Mr. Masson, who came through New York last week to promote his new book advocating veganism, "The Face on Your Plate: The Truth About Food," is not exactly known for having a great comfort level in regard to poking fun at himself. Before devoting much of his prolific writing career to the subject of animals and their emotional lives — his books include "When Elephants Weep" and "Dogs Never Lie About Love," both best sellers — he waged a 10-year libel lawsuit against the writer Janet Malcolm, disputing quotations that she attributed to him. These included one in which she wrote that he boasted that he would someday be regarded as the greatest analyst since Freud himself. (A jury ultimately found two quotations to be false, and one of those to be defamatory, but ruled that Ms. Malcolm had not shown the recklessness required for a libel verdict.)

Mr. Masson began eating meat as an adult and became vegan just five years ago.

"I call myself an aspiring vegan — sometimes I say veganish," Mr. Masson said. "I make mistakes sometimes." If he's at a restaurant and finds out he ate cake made with a bit of butter, he said: "I can live with that. It's just too weird and too hostile to go 'blech' and throw up and say, 'I can't believe I just ate that.'"

But that, Mr. Masson said, is a fairly typical response to accidental dairy consumption by vegans, who will eat nothing produced by or from an animal.

Time — and, undoubtedly, tempah — have been kind to Mr. Masson. At 68, he is silver-haired and hollow-cheeked, and bench-presses 200 pounds. With his second wife, Leila, a German pediatrician who is 25 years his junior, he has a 7-year-old son in addition to the 12-year-old.

This week, his family is relocating to Berkeley, Calif., from Auckland, where they have lived for the last eight years. "I didn't make one friend the whole time we were there," Mr. Masson said. "They ask me what I eat, and when I tell them, that's pretty much the end of the conversation at a barbecue."

Over dinner at Angelica Kitchen, the vegan stalwart in the East Village, Mr. Masson was energized by the young crowd. "This place is hopping," he said. "They don't have vegan places like this in New Zealand." The meal included a raw kimchi salad, walnut-lentil pâté and a casserole of cauliflower and string beans.

He chatted with every member of the staff who came near, including a busboy he addressed in Spanish until the young man told him he was actually from Nepal. Mr. Masson began serenading him with the Bhagavad-Gita.

He was curious what percentage of the restaurant's patrons were vegans, but a waiter he asked said it was difficult to know for sure. "It may come up in casual conversation, but we don't ask," the waiter said.

"That's a lot of tact," Mr. Masson said a minute later. "I could learn to use some of that."

For an author of polemics — and "The Face on Your Plate," though it's more measured and engaging than most, is definitely that — Mr. Masson has a deep inclination to forgive. He said that the best excuse for eating meat (or butter or eggs) is "because you like the taste."

What he gets more worked up about are "rationalizations," such as the argument that animals like cattle and chickens exist only because we eat them and their milk and eggs. "That's denial," he said. "We're the only animal who gets to choose what we eat, so we can choose to do what's humane and also much healthier."

Cats, by contrast, can't make a rational choice — they were made to eat meat. "Cats don't appreciate it when you give them vegetables," Mr. Masson said.

Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society of the United States, said: "He's had great success in breaking down this notion that animals are commodities or automatons. By showing the richness of their emotional experiences, it makes us ponder our responsibilities to them in a more serious way."

In the book, Mr. Masson draws on the argument that humans evolved primarily as herbivores, as evidenced by our small mouths, flattened teeth and long small intestines. "So I don't believe it's natural for us to eat meat," he said.

One of the epiphanies that led Mr. Masson to veganism came in 2004 when his family took in a puppy, a kitten, two chickens and two rats. "The chickens were very sociable," he said. "They would come inside the house and watch me writing at the computer. And I would be picking up after them with a box of Kleenex. My wife made me put them outside. And do you know what they did? They banged on the window: 'Let us in. Let us in.' They have such strong personalities."

Suddenly, the idea of raising livestock in cruelty-free environments didn't hold up for him. "When people say their chickens lead such a good life, I say, 'According to whose definition of a good life, are parents separated from their young?'" he said. "Chickens like to fly. They like to take dust baths. They're programmed to hide their eggs, so it would be very time-consuming to give them 10 acres and then go searching all over the place for the eggs."

His mother and father, who were disciples of the British mystic Paul Brunton, raised Mr. Masson and his younger sister as vegetarians in Los Angeles and Uruguay, though Mr. Masson said his parents abandoned the regimen when he was 12.

"They went on a trip to Europe and sent a telegram telling us to get a turkey ready because Thanksgiving was coming up," Mr. Masson said. "My sister and I sobbed."

As a Harvard undergraduate, Mr. Masson saw his own demons in a can of tuna. "They put me in Adams House, which had parietal rules, and that wasn't going to work for me because I was very active with women," he said. He ended up by accident in a large faculty apartment with a kitchen where he made meals with his best friend, a practicing vegetarian from India.

"One day we were shopping and we saw this tuna fish," he said. "We looked at each other and we said, 'We'll just try this once.' And before you knew it, I was just like everyone else."

Avoiding animal products has given Mr. Masson "a purer sense of taste," he said. He does not cook much. "I make beautiful salads, with lots of avocado and lots of garlic," he said, adding that if his sons, who are vegetarians, ever started eating meat, he wouldn't feel right stopping them. He still misses mozzarella.

This summer, Mr. Masson and his wife and sons are going on a bicycling tour of Italy. "I can see a situation where we've been riding all day, and we're going to be hungry and the Italian people are going to give us pasta with cheese and we don't want to hurt their feelings," he said. "So I may just not be vegan for two weeks."

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