

The Rise of Vegetarianism at Middlebury College in the 1970s:
How Fear and Guilt Changed Students' Diets

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The 1970s were a time of reevaluation and change following the social upheaval and unrest of the Vietnam War, global famines, and realization of chemical pollutants. Students at Middlebury College in Vermont, while isolated geographically from the rest of the world, responded with outrage and horror to these events, and became determined to make an impact on the world. Following this growing disenchantment with society, students and Americans across the country concluded, according to American Studies professor Warren Belasco, “that a sick society would produce carcinogenic food...[and so began to] avoid anything complex, anything [they could not] pronounce, anything chemical, synthetic, or plastic.”¹ Many students found that the simplest way to do their part to help fix a flawed world full of pesticides and food crises was to adopt a vegetarian diet. This prompted undergraduates to take action and change the food culture at Middlebury College to better promote personal and ecological health. Increased action in turn fueled a broader acceptance of these alternative eating habits, making it easier for more students to eat vegetarian, further enlarging the student network of conscientious diners. Due to a growing concern for personal health and remorse that the world contained famine, Middlebury students advocated for vegetarianism on campus, fueling changes in food consumption at the college.

With the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, Americans became increasingly aware of and alarmed about the potential toxicity of their food. Across the country, people began to consider what was natural for their bodies to ingest. Although DDT was banned in 1972, humans continued to use other pesticides and fertilizers to increase agricultural outputs, and these chemicals undoubtedly made their way into Americans’ meals. A vegetarian diet could reduce the risk of developing cancer or other diseases associated with contaminants because the concentration of these substances increased as they passed up through the food chain. Eating lower

¹ Warren J. Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*, 2nd updated ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 37.

on the food chain therefore decreased the likelihood of ingesting chemicals. Frances Moore Lappé, in her widely influential book *Diet for a Small Planet*, argued that “herbivores [were] less likely to accumulate potentially harmful environmental contaminants than [were] carnivores.”² As the decade continued, others pushed the argument even further, using Americans’ fear of sickness to encourage them to change their dietary habits. After reading Lappé’s work, journalist Vic Sussman urged not only an herbivore lifestyle, but also a natural diet consisting of as few animal products as possible because “reducing [one’s] reliance on flesh foods and turning away from the supermarket [would] help to limit [one’s] intake of adulterated or contaminated animal foods.”³ Supermarkets, once the epitome of the free world, became places of fear and potential hazards. The easiest way for consumers to quell their fear of contamination was to avoid tainted products, such as meat.

Guilt also motivated Americans, including Middlebury students, to abstain from meat. The media, both print and television, showed images of starving children from famines due to the Vietnam War, drought in the western Sahel, and political strife in Ethiopia in the 1970s.⁴ Americans, on the other hand, had access to abundant food and could easily go to the supermarket or, in the case of college students, the dining hall, and eat bountifully. Although the food they ate might have been contaminated, many Americans knew they were incredibly lucky to have access to it. Some Americans began to feel guilty that they were so privileged, and thus searched for ways to reduce their consumption so as to be able to send more food overseas to help the hungry. In her seminal work, Lappé argued that humans wasted eighteen million tons of protein by feeding grain to livestock and then eating the animals rather than ingesting the grain directly.⁵ Lappé estimated that in order to solve the world’s hunger crises, humans needed to create an extra twenty million

² Frances Moore Lappé, *Diet for a Small Planet* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), 19.

³ Vic S. Sussman, *The Vegetarian Alternative: A Guide to a Healthful and Humane Diet* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1978), 167.

⁴ "Famine," in *New World Encyclopedia* (New World Encyclopedia), last modified October 15, 2013, accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Famine>.

⁵ Lappé, 8.

tons of protein.⁶ Therefore, if humans stopped eating meat, they could make an enormous leap forward in solving famines. Grain prices would decrease due to the greater quantity of available grain, making it more feasible to ship overseas the foodstuffs that Americans once fed to livestock.⁷ The advent of live television news and faster reporting made Americans more aware than ever before of global problems. Feeling remorseful for being able to live luxuriously while others suffered motivated many Americans to make lifestyle changes, such as switching to a vegetarian diet.

College campuses were the epitome of privilege, and many Middlebury College students became concerned about the health of the world due to famine, and their own personal health due to environmental contaminants in food. Undergraduates questioned the morality of the world, wondering why people were dying of hunger when they were able to eat gluttonously. Concerned students addressed the issue of food inequality in public spaces at the school. For instance, on January 12, 1975, student Terry Bouricius presented a resolution at the Student Forum to offer vegetarian meals in addition to meat courses to symbolically represent Middlebury's commitment to addressing the broader issue of global hunger.⁸ Despite the forum's support of the issue, it was the college's food service that ultimately had to decide the meal plan. To further the conversation, the college hosted a special preview of the film of Lappé's book in 1975. The movie, like the book, addressed the world hunger problem and discussed how to make a vegetarian diet nutritious. After the screening, the fifty attendants planned a "Food Conference" for April 18-26 at the college.⁹ The conference allowed more students to learn about ongoing problems concerning food and hunger.

⁶ Lappé, 9.

⁷ Maya Pines, "Meatless, Guiltless," *The New York Times*, November 24, 1974, accessed April 24, 2015, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9F02E6DA1E39E73ABC4C51DFB767838F669EDE>.

⁸ Rick Votta, "Forum Recommends Vegetarian Alternative," *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), January 16, 1975, 3.

⁹ Karen Gross, "Are You Eating Responsibly?," *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), April 3, 1975, 13.

In response to growing student interest regarding food-related issues, Middlebury undergraduates decided to create a club called the “Vegetarian Alternatives Group” to organize for change and increase the discourse concerning hunger and food contamination. These students, influenced by nationwide, global, and campus events, wanted to try to make a positive impact on the larger world, starting by changing their college’s culture. The group circulated a petition in the fall of 1975 and amassed one thousand signatures in support of having both a meat and vegetarian course at each meal, or, at a minimum, a vegetarian meal in one dining hall. The group wanted this change in order to convey to fellow students “the dangers and excesses of the ‘American meat mentality.’”¹⁰ Mirroring nationwide trends, the students worried about the health risks, including carcinogenic red dye and high levels of fat and cholesterol, associated with meat. To appeal to a different subset of students, including those focused on global activism and fundamental human rights, the group declared that the “unconscientious consumption [of meat was] immoral.”¹¹ The use of the word immoral indicated the students’ vehement opposition to meat, and their dedication to convince both other undergraduates and the school’s dining services of their position.

By addressing both health and morality issues, the Vegetarian Alternatives Group appealed to a broad array of students at Middlebury College, giving the group the energy and salience necessary to effect change on campus. After receiving the group’s petition, Director of Dining Halls Gordon Bridges investigated the economic feasibility of implementing a vegetarian option in the dining halls. Bridges then worked with the group’s advisor, chemistry professor David Bennett, to formulate meals that would provide students with sufficient nutrients and calories. After deciding that the additional preparation time required for vegetarian cooking would be offset by the lower prices of ingredients needed for vegetarian meals, Bridges decided to have a non-meat

¹⁰ Sybil Smith, “1,000 Students Sign Vegetarian Petition,” *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), November 6, 1975, 15.

¹¹ Ibid.

option available for dinner in one dining area, SDU-B, every evening, beginning in the spring semester of 1976.¹² Students, by voicing their concerns for their health and the global community, made this modification to dining possible, demonstrating the power of group action to create lasting impacts on communities.

The change certainly would not have happened as rapidly as it did had it not been for students' activism in support of the issue. Less than a year prior to the change, in March of 1975, following Bouricius' resolution at the Student Forum, Bridges had said that he did not believe students actually preferred non-meat meals, and, furthermore that it was "College policy not to serve special diets...[and] the vegetarian [was] just such a special diet."¹³ Bridges' change in attitude in 1976 was likely due to the engagement and passion he saw in students, which convinced him that students truly did want vegetarian food. Furthermore, by amassing a large number of supporters, the Vegetarian Alternatives Group demonstrated that vegetarianism was becoming a mainstream, rather than a "special," diet.

By the mid-1970s the vegetarian diet was becoming common not just on Middlebury's campus, but also across the country. The more people that adopted vegetarian diets, the more people there were to advocate for its benefits and convince others to do the same. As an increased number of Americans became vegetarians, the demand for high quality, appetizing vegetarian food increased. Before the 1970s, vegetarian cookbooks consisted of bland recipes that often both lacked a balanced array of nutrients and did not contain sufficient protein. Due to an increasing interest in vegetarian food, Belasco observes how the "design and tone of vegetarian guides changed in the early seventies...and the recipes [became] ecologically and nutritionally correct,

¹² Peter Young, "How Did the Vegetarian Alternative Get Instituted?," *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), February 26, 1976, 16.

¹³ Gene O'Neill, "On Beating Some Dead Horse Meat," *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), March 6, 1975, 7.

and usually ethnic, or at least ethnic inspired.”¹⁴ New cookbooks, including Lappé’s *Diet for a Small Planet* and *The Moosewood Cookbook*, written in 1977 by Mollie Katzen, helped make vegetarian cooking both easy and nutritious. Katzen and Lappé recognized that most of their readers were used to a meat-based diet, and so they carefully explained how to best prepare vegetables and balance different vegetarian dishes to create complete, flavorsome meals to help their readers adjust to the dietary changes.¹⁵

Most supermarkets, however, did not carry all the ingredients necessary for the ethnic recipes in the new cookbooks. Furthermore, many vegetarians worried about health hazards due to chemicals found in supermarket foods and were thus wary of shopping at them. As a result, health food stores and co-ops, which often operated simply as not-for-profit health food stores, multiplied rapidly. In 1965 there were five hundred for-profit health food stores in the United States, but seven years later there were three thousand.¹⁶ The increased availability of healthy, non-meat products made it much easier to be a vegetarian, convincing many Americans to change their dietary habits. Although most Americans still refused to give up meat, many became willing to eat vegetarian meals on occasion, further increasing the number of people that desired vegetarian food. A growing demand only increased the number of vegetarian cookbooks, stores, and restaurants, which in turn converted more Americans to a vegetarian diet, amplifying the cycle.

Undergraduates at Middlebury College became a part of this cycle, and more students became interested in vegetarian food. Increased student awareness forced additional changes in dining at the school. For instance, in 1977, due to a greater demand for vegetarian food than initially expected, dining services purchased two new vegetarian cookbooks full of innovative

¹⁴ Belasco, 61.

¹⁵ Perry Garfinkel, "Beyond 'Moosewood': Vegetarian Food for the Committed 80s," *The New York Times*, January 4, 1989, accessed April 24, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/01/04/garden/beyond-moosewood-vegetarian-food-for-the-committed-80-s.html>.

¹⁶ Belasco, 161.

recipes to serve in the dining hall and hired an additional vegetarian cook.¹⁷ While many students enjoyed the increased vegetarian options in the dining hall, others wanted to take advantage of the copious number of recently published cookbooks and cook for themselves. The establishment of the Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op, through which student groups could pre-order bulk goods, and which became a storefront business in 1976, made it much easier for students to access the ingredients needed for their vegetarian recipes.¹⁸ As a result, by the end of the decade, undergraduates increasingly cooked vegetarian meals for themselves since they could prepare exactly what they wanted using the natural ingredients for sale at the Co-op in combination with a vast array of recipes from vegetarian cookbooks. By 1980 in Homestead House, students cooked together every Sunday through Thursday night with food they bought from the Co-op,¹⁹ and students in Jewett and Weybridge cooked vegetarian food in such a manner every night.²⁰

The development of vegetarian meals at Middlebury College mirrored the increased popularity of vegetarianism that spread throughout the United States in the 1970s. Fueled by concerns about food contamination and world hunger, Middlebury students and Americans at large tried to change their eating habits to support both personal and global health. This in turn fueled an increase in cookbooks and stores catering to vegetarians, making it easier to eat such a diet, and allowing even more people to consume meatless meals. Middlebury undergraduates in the 1970s petitioned successfully to make it simpler for students to be vegetarians at the college, and the results of their work are still evident today as many students eat meatless meals, shop at the Co-op, and purchase vegetarian cookbooks, just as undergraduates began to do almost half a century ago.

¹⁷ Rick Legro, "Starr Reviews Food Service," *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), October 5, 1977, 2.

¹⁸ "Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op's History," Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op, accessed May 1, 2015, <http://middleburycoop.com/coop/History>.

¹⁹ Steve Siegel, "Vegetarianism Gains," *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), November 13, 1980, 7.

²⁰ Sandra Murray, "Off-Campus Food Co-op Offers Delicious Dining," *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), November 13, 1980, 7.

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Honor Code:

I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this assignment.

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