

Guilt Free Diet

By: Alpa M.Patel

Two months ago, I drastically changed my diet...for good. I add the "for good" because I have made the healthy diet pledge before and then gone back to my hamburger-pizza-cupcake eating ways. This time, I have vowed to stop eating all meat except fish and to attempt to stop all dairy consumption. I say "attempt" for the latter because I have stopped using dairy in the home, but have found it nearly impossible to do so outside the home. Yes, I am not trying hard enough. Eventually, I will be strong enough to go all the way and stop consuming fish and dairy as well, but for now my main goal remains to relieve years of guilty eating.

I have never wanted to be a vegetarian. I loved meat. I ate meat at least once a day. I dismissed the whole idea of vegetarianism. Perhaps it is because my mom has cooked such sumptuous chicken curry and juicy Thanksgiving turkey and mouth-watering spaghetti bolognese my entire life. This is ironic because my mom was a strict vegetarian while growing up in India. She didn't eat eggs but did drink buffalo milk. That changed after she married my father at the age of 23. In the beginning, she was cooking chicken and fish without tasting it, but eventually she succumbed to the omnivore's ways. It is hard to resist the pull of slow smoked pulled pork. When my brother and I were in grade school, beef was introduced into the household. We were full-fledged Americans at that point. mmm, McDonald's.

I gave up beef when I went away to college. I had no religious or political or health reasons for doing so. I just thought it sounded right. This was not difficult because there were a lot of food choices at our dining hall. Every week there was an international themed menu, as well as, an odd-looking, crusted vegan bar, which I stayed away from due to its foreign nature. My anti-beef pledge lasted five years. A year out of college, I was at a barbeque in San Francisco and a friend offered me a bite of his hamburger by waving it in my face. I replied, "I don't eat beef," so he promptly and respectfully moved the burger away. However, the smell or look must have been too much because I said, "I'll take a bite." Thus, began a two-week beef binge during which I ate burgers, meatloaf, roast beef, and filet mignon nonstop. I could not believe how much I had missed the taste of beef. Although I didn't eat it often, it was back on the menu.

If I couldn't eat healthy while living in San Francisco where people linger for hours over meals consisting of alfalfa sprouts and avocados, I certainly was not going to change when I moved to New York City where steakhouses are the favored restaurants. But, soon after moving to New York City, I read *Fast Food Nation* and promptly stopped eating beef ... for four months.

We all know that the cattle industry is doing disgusting things and it certainly smacks you right in the face when you read about it, but then we return to our normal lives and avert our eyes.

Fast forward through many years of meat consumption to my., now, husband's and my gluttonous engagement trip to Australia. We did not and could not control ourselves from indulging in Barramundi, John Dory, fresh grass-fed beef, even kangaroo meat (as despicable as that made me feel). We returned home and vowed to get fit for the wedding. That led to us drawing up a "DON'T" list of foods, including beef, poultry, pork, pasta, bread, rice, potatoes, and desserts. Needless to say, we were fit and trim for our wedding thanks to this low-carb and fish and veggie friendly diet. That lasted about two days into our honeymoon. I came back ten pounds heavier and back on the meat bandwagon.

About three months ago, both my husband and I read *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer. It was eye-opening and emotional in a way previous books on the topic had not been. The author mentions that he faced the reality of his diet when he was expecting his first child and that is what hit home with me. I spend an inordinate amount of effort and hours every week in providing my 17 month old son a remarkable healthy diet. His weekly diet consists of quinoa, barley, brown rice, lentils, mung beans, every bean you can imagine, and steamed vegetables. I do not even use seasonings apart from low sodium vegetable broth once in a while. One mother came up to us as I was feeding him quinoa, zucchini, and avocado and stared in disbelief. The kid made a yucky face when I tried to give him chocolate milk once. He spit out a french fry the one time I tried that. If it's possible for me to *raise* a healthy eater, it is certainly possible for me to *be* a healthy eater.

Even with my recent diet changes, my goal was not to become a vegetarian or vegan although the slow changes I've been making do seem to be leading me to that enlightened path. The practices of factory farming are horrific for the animals and unhealthy for us consumers. I cannot live with such unconscionable guilt. When I look at my son, I see that I do care about what we are putting in our mouths. Not only do I care about my food consumption, I know how to eat well and it makes me feel better to eat well.

I can do with a little less guilt in my life.