

Opinion: Why going vegan is a ‘manly’ thing to do



Chickens at a farm in Nuevo, Calif. (Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times)

By Mark Hawthorne

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Twenty-three years ago, I did what seemed unthinkable: I went vegan. I had been vegetarian for 10 years, and throughout that decade I viewed veganism — eschewing not only animal flesh but also eggs, dairy-based foods and honey — as extreme. Surely consuming eggs and cheese isn’t hurting anyone, I told myself.

Visiting a sanctuary for farmed animals changed my opinion. I met cows rescued from dairy farms whose bodies had been so exploited that they had trouble walking. And there were hens saved from the egg industry who had spent most of their lives packed with four other birds into a barren cage the size of a filing cabinet drawer.

I went vegan that day and soon learned I was in a minority. Just how much of the U.S. population is vegan is hard to say, with estimates ranging from [1%](#) to [5%](#). But on average, just [one-quarter](#) of us identify as male. And among [global vegans](#), the number of men also remains small.

It appears that many men have not embraced a vegan lifestyle partly because they find it “[unmanly](#).” Meat has been inexorably linked to protein, and men have been taught that animal protein will make them strong. Likewise, the notion that plant foods are delicate and feminine is entrenched in many Western cultures, where too often men believe only meat will keep them healthy.

Yet [study](#) after [study](#) shows that vegan diets are not only healthy for humans but may be healthiest for the [planet](#) too. Eating meat and dairy has been linked to a variety of health issues, including [heart disease](#) and certain [cancers](#). Animal agriculture also produces a significant amount of greenhouse gasses, making it one of the [leading contributors](#) to the climate crisis.

So is it possible to overcome the narrative that veganism is not manly? I believe it is. The solution lies in reframing the idea of masculinity itself, which — let’s be honest — is just a social construct.

We can decouple masculinity from food or, better yet, show that veganism satisfies all the requirements of anyone who identifies as a man. Free from the burden of what society expects of men in general and masculinity in particular, we can gain a broader and more authentic understanding of ourselves.

Stereotypical expectations of men, such as being strong, courageous and protective, can be viewed through a vegan lens.

Male attitudes about eating tend to focus on consuming meat to gain strength, to reinforce their gender identity and even to dominate other species. But the most powerful land animals — think elephants, oxen, buffaloes and rhinos — build muscle by eating plants. Ancient Romans may have observed this as well, since gladiators, considered to be among the toughest athletes, adhered to [gladiatoriam saginam](#), a diet that was based on plant foods, including legumes, pulses and grains.

As another virtue men take to heart, courage fits neatly into a rethinking of masculinity and diet. It takes courage to stand up to not only the slaughtering of animals but also the peer pressure to eat meat. One young man [told researchers](#) studying men’s perceptions of meat alternatives that he was worried about photos on social media of him eating at a vegan restaurant. “I don’t want to end up with my friends laughing at me over a plant-based burger.”

Many men also pride themselves on being protectors — especially protectors of their family and home. Since [veganism means](#) abstaining from the exploitation and consumption of animals, vegans participate in the protection of countless vulnerable species and the environment, particularly if they extend the ethic beyond what they eat.

I suspect that men who mock veganism, such as those who deride the leaflets about being vegan I’ve handed out on college campuses, feel threatened and maybe even a little ashamed. What else could explain ridiculing a delicious and nutritious way of eating that is so much better for everyone? The benefits of a vegan diet are only becoming clearer, and so are the harms of consuming animals.

Yet some men still feel the need for posturing, as if their masculinity would be compromised were they to even express an interest in veganism. I found this at my old gym, a place where stereotypes of masculine strength are often on display. I’d wear a T-shirt with “VEGAN” across the front in bold letters. Other men would often acknowledge the message with some combination of curiosity and disdain.

“Where do you get your protein?” one asked me.

“From plants,” I said, to which he scoffed, “Man, you need meat to build muscle and be strong.”

“Tell that to a gorilla,” I said.

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