Leather Jacket Vegetarian

Stop grazing on those goofy preconceptions, because blood runs even in the veins of a Berkeley vegetarian

By Dan Hubig / The Chronicle

By Cullen Curtiss

FIRST PERSON

I am at a restaurant with a friend. She orders the skewered lamb. My decision is easy. I order the only dish I'll eat, the Veggie Delight, a marvelous medley of vegetables I've never heard of thrown together in an unwieldy pile over brown rice. I ask the waiter to hold the melted cheese.

My friend drops her head into her hands. She has this tendency to be histrionic, so I am not too alarmed. I am prepared for anything.

"Shelley, what is it?"

"You must hate me," she says, pouting.

Now, I've no clue what she's talking about. I've disliked her in the past, thought about how some situations would have been less complicated if I'd never met her, but no, I've never hated her.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You're so good. So healthy. So pure. I make you sick, don't I? You think I'm a pig."

She's definitely a slob. No manners and the whole bit, but I've had dinner with her family, and so I forgive her.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I just ordered skewered BAAAAA."

At this juncture I should mention that in addition to her other charming habits, she does a very believable imitation of a baby lamb. Only now that we've got the crowded restaurant's immediate attention do I wish I could have caught on a little earlier. Then we might be talking privately about how she thinks my choice to be a herbivore means I am walking in the grace of God.

■■■

I've heard it before. Apparently, it is a widely held belief that vegetarians are the nicest, fairest, purest, happiest, most well-adjusted, politically correct people you'll ever meet. Now, I may be one of the more well-adjusted people out there, but it has nothing to do with eating like a rabbit. It is in direct proportion to how much sex I am having. At the time of this dinner with Shelley, my boyfriend and I had just discovered Good Vibrations, so my adjustment to living under water would have been good.

All of the aforementioned superlatives aside, as a card-carrying vegetarian I love all animals, eat organic produce, wear hemp clothing, vote for Ralph Nader, recycle and prefer bare feet over shoes. I eat vegetables for political reasons. I will live longer. I am a freedom fighter. I am not aggressive. I love reading and burning incense. Bikes, independent bookstores, and art films get a thumbs up from me. Public radio is cool, Howard Stern is not. I hate excessive packaging, television, and canned soda.

I am a good listener. I don't drink hard liquor or smoke cigarettes. I know how much water it takes to grow grain for raising cattle; I know who to boycott; I know what eating steroids will do to my children; I know who is being exploited in the name of America's beef habit. Wildlife preserves are good, ski areas and golf courses are not. I never stray from marked trails — I fear erosion more than a Republican in office. You will never find me in the middle of a river fishing for trout. And never, ever would I have sex with a carnivore.

I could address each one of these gross generalizations individually. Nothing would give me more pleasure — like finally getting rid of the playground bully, the kid who's never had an original thought. But instead, I'll just admit to an almost visceral backlash that can be summed up with the following declaration: I am in search of a bumper sticker I once saw on the back of a pickup truck that read, "I love animals, that's why I eat them."

Giddy is how I get imagining the people driving behind me on the freeway feeling rather uncomfortable, thinking, God, that girl's sarcastic. And to think they don't even know the half of it.

■■■

I stand up beside the table and show Shelley Exhibit A. When I bought it two years ago, she fell at my feet.

"You're not all rabbit — you're a human!" she said.

I thanked her for the vote of confidence.

I hope for the same level of understanding tonight.

"Indulge me, Shelley. What am I wearing?"

"Your leather jacket," she says.

Now, I credit Shelley with being smart, i.e., she comes to her own conclusions without external directions. Her logic is sound, her intuition is attuned. She can understand a subtle gesture. Evidently, not tonight.

I could have helped her out, I suppose. We all have dumb days. I could have asked her, What sound did this animal make before his backside was shipped off to the garment district in New York City? But I like to think my friends have the ability to process seemingly contrary bits of information. Doesn't it make it easier to live in the world?

The fact is, my short-waisted, black leather jacket with the wide silver zipper and the pointed collar is perhaps my most coveted piece of property. It makes me feel like the lead singer of a hard-rocking chick band. It makes me feel like I live in a rough neighborhood where you get by on your wits. It makes me feel cunning and raw.

Who I think I am is worn into the soft hide, and I would wear it 24/7 if I could. My vegetarian proclivities are not compromised by my leather jacket; hell, they aren't even complicated by it. Not if you consider the larger picture: my personal vegetarian agenda.

Not that I didn't think twice about buying it. I thought about it more than twice. The other transgressions: the chicken stock in the French onion soup in Nevada City, the occasional cruelty-full shampoo, the obsession with cream in my coffee — those could be overlooked somehow. But a leather jacket is a monster of a statement.

No different, really, from a mink coat or stole, except you look more dangerous, as if you might be packing something with a sharp edge, and so the animal rights activists with their bottles of ketchup tend to let you walk on by unbloodied.

■■■

Looking back, I realized I'd wanted a leather jacket forever — ever since I'd seen "Rebel Without a Cause" and "West Side Story," but I had always thought I would have to have been born a different person to wear one. People who wore leather jackets were bad; they ran away from broken homes and led broken lives. They squashed things with their heavy boots, and their friendships were ephemeral.

My family was aghast when I returned home a few Christmases ago proudly clad in my new black leather jacket. Though I'd flirted with darkness many times before, it had been in the midst of adolescent confusion, and that was expected. But here I was, almost 30 years old, walking around like a girl looking for the back of a bike.

> *I eat vegetables for political reasons. I will live longer. I am a freedom fighter. I am not aggressive. I love reading and burning incense. I hate excessive packaging, TV and canned soda.*

Funny, my family didn't address the obvious, screaming discrepancy. I had to point it out to them: "While you are all enjoying your holiday roast beast, I've got a side of hide hanging in my closet this year." Either they forgave me or didn't think about it. I'd rather have an argument about my particular brand of vegetarianism than be exalted for forgoing the MacDonald's drive-through. I'd welcome the challenge, but somehow my 16 years of vegetarianism have made me transcen-

Our food arrives, and Shelley plays with hers.

"So, this doesn't gross you out?" She twists a skewer in the air.

"It would if I had to eat it."

"So you're not judging me for stuffing my face with the meat of a once woolly little lamb?"

"Why would I?" I ask, inspecting a star-shaped green vegetable.

"Because you're a vegetarian!" She demands, slamming her hands on the table. "It's like a religion. You're the Jehovah's Witness of Diets. You should be telling me I've sinned."

Perhaps I should have proceeded with my litany of didactic questions regarding Exhibit A when I had the chance. What was this jacket in its former life? How would you make a complete meal out of what I am wearing? Mashed potatoes and corn?

"You don't get it, do you?" I ask.

Wide-eyed, she says, "What's to get?"

A big question to answer. Bottom line, there's a lot to get. More each day. You've got to be willing to synthesize a whole lot of diverse information just to reach an educated guess. Imagine if there were agent software that could direct you, not only to the books you want to read, but to who you really are. I'd type in vegetarian first, and then beer-drinking, fame-obsessed, feline-hating, carnivore-screwing leather-jacket owner. The computer would explode.

■■■

To be fair, the genesis of my vegetarianism has been the subject of some debate. At the age of 13, I was fat and vain — that is a real fact. Vegetables seemed to go in and out with a certain admirable alacrity and regularity, and so I converted. My mother has a different view, of course. She tells some sensitive story about how when I was a child, just learning to talk, the family would sit down to a meat dinner and I would implore her to tell me what noise the animal we were eating made, where it slept, and what its habits were. Too precious, I know, but there's a certain genuineness to it I find attractive.

My leather jacket doesn't fit so well into this particular legend, but those little stories are important to my mother, and so I let her tell them. In her mind, I was a saint just waiting to happen. Call the Pope. Start cranking out a likeness of me in plaster for St. Peter's Square.

I guess I can live with it, but just barely. While human beings by nature have been raised to conquer, my mother thinks I am a thoughtful pacifist, considerate of the world and kind to animals. Truly, though, it's more responsibility than I can handle. It's all I can do to remind people that a vegetarian might be driven only by a preference for vegetables.

I look up at Shelley again. She's shaking her head, gnawing on her skewered lamb. Her whole world is thrown because I am not acting like a vegetarian should. She can't point to me, click and have me tell her she's wrong to be eating meat. It makes me want to throw the towel in and be the saint she seems to need. I'd do it, if only I could keep my leather jacket.

Cullen Curtiss works for a Berkeley publishing company, Stone Bridge Press.