



# The future of dairy

With the number of British vegans increasing year on year, Alice Barnes-Brown asks campaigners on both sides of the fence whether pastoral farming could cease to exist altogether



Emily Norton



Gellatley, founder of vegan organisation *Viva!*, says “Don’t underestimate the power of social media. It puts us on a level playing field to people who have much bigger budgets”.

### Ethical choices

Juliet says that the reasons people turn to veganism are threefold – for the environment, for their own health, and to make a statement against cruelty to animals in the farming industries. Certain practices of the dairy industry have come under particular fire; the separation of calves from their mothers at an early age, artificial insemination of cows and the poor conditions of some farms have caused large-scale public outcry. Last year, images of calves kept in tiny hutches at a dairy farm in Dorset went viral – evidence of the power that social media has in influencing what we eat.

Many vegans say that these ethical concerns are one of the main reasons they changed their lifestyle, as they no longer wished to give their tacit consent to animal maltreatment. A spokeswoman from the Vegan Society, Dominika Piasecka, claims: “There’s absolutely no justification for the suffering we impose on dairy cows.” Dawn Carr, from PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), agrees. “There’s nothing normal about artificially inseminating a cow and forcing her to give birth, only to tear her beloved baby away from her so that the milk that nature intended for her calf can be consumed by humans instead”.

But many farmers in the UK vehemently

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**A**s many of us become more conscious of what we are eating and consuming, the popularity of veganism has grown exponentially. Endorsed by celebrities such as talk show host Ellen DeGeneres and now even Jeremy Corbyn (who in September said he was “going through the process” of converting to veganism), people across the western world are making the decision to ditch all animal products, including eggs and dairy. In the past decade alone, the number of vegans in Britain has increased by a staggering 360%.

But what exactly is veganism? The Vegan Society – a British charity founded in 1944 – defines it as “a way of living that seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose.” So no meat, fish, dairy products, eggs, rennet, gelatine, leather or fur – a purely plant-based way of life, rejecting any and all animal products.

The recent so-called ‘vegan revolution’ has been spurred on a great deal by social media, which makes communications faster and news spread a lot quicker. Young people, in particular, are embracing this alternative lifestyle. Juliet

disagree. Nick Green, the director of Lye Cross Farm just outside of Bristol, is keen to dispel any fears that British cattle are mistreated. “We base all our animal management on the RSPCA’s Five Freedoms: freedom from hunger and thirst, from discomfort, pain, injury and disease, fear and distress, plus the freedom to express normal behaviour”.

And some farms, like Church Farm in Norfolk, are willing to go the extra mile to assure their customers that their cows are exceptionally well treated. They pride themselves on their “seriously pampered cows”. Emily Norton, the owner, is running a social media campaign called #Febudairy. It aims to counter popular vegan movements such as #veganuary, and improve customer confidence in their high welfare

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standards. “We rear all of our animals, so we know them from birth, and do not compromise on their welfare afterwards. They’re bedded on fresh straw in the winter, and fresh grass outdoors in the summer. They choose when they want to be milked with our voluntary milking system, and get two months’ holiday a year”. Additionally, both farmers invite their critics to take a tour of their farms and see for themselves, but whether the two sides will ever come together remains to be seen.

### Saving the planet?

Environmental concerns about industrial farming have also played a big part in turning consumers off dairy products. Animal agriculture requires a lot of land, power and water to sustain, and it presents problems of its own, such as methane emissions from flatulent cows causing damage to the ozone layer. It has been argued

*Juliet Gellatley, founder of Vegan organisation Vival, believes that social media has had a huge impact on the rise of non-dairy alternatives*

that non-dairy milks (like soya, almond and rice) reduce the environmental damage significantly, by requiring less water and energy to produce.

The 2014 documentary *Cowspiracy*, produced by actor Leonardo DiCaprio, claimed that up to 75 trillion gallons of water every year are directly used for animal farming. With water being a finite resource, these statistics certainly are cause for concern. An often-cited 2006 UN report on the impacts of animal farming states it is “one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global,” something that the three vegan campaigners we spoke to are keen to highlight.

However, others have countered that producing specialist ingredients like soya and almond is more detrimental to the planet than dairy farming. Nick from Lye Cross says many dairy farms are working hard to reduce their emissions, and queries the “desecration of Brazilian rainforests to create soya-growing areas” needed for non-dairy products. If dairy farming is done correctly, he argues it can be a positive for the environment, as efficient farming is integrated and involves a lot of reuse - particularly in terms of fertiliser. “On a farm basis, animal manures provide natural





**“Even supermarkets are promoting the health benefits of consuming non-dairy alternatives”**

fertiliser for growing crops, whether that is crops grown to feed the dairy herd or crops for human consumption. Without animal manures we would have to rely on manufactured fertiliser”. Norton’s Dairy apparently follows this same pattern – the straw from Emily’s farm is recycled in order to make fertiliser for the crops, which then restarts the cycle.

**Healthy living**

In the UK, most people are well aware of what you need to maintain a healthy diet. The NHS recommends eating plenty of fruit and vegetables on a daily basis, as well as some meat and dairy products. Dairy does contain a lot of protein and calcium, and has been proven to be good for bone growth. But on the other hand, dairy that contains higher levels of hormones – oestrogen in particular – has been linked to certain types of

*Above: Battery hens are kept in squalid conditions, and even some that claim to be free range have very little room to move*

cancer, like breast cancer in women.

In line with the rising trend in veganism, nutritionists, health organisations and even supermarkets are promoting the health benefits of consuming non-dairy alternatives. As long as they are unsweetened, the NHS claims that soya and almond-based items are “good alternatives to dairy products,” making it far easier for those who shun animal products to receive adequate nutrition.

The aforementioned Juliet Gellatley, a nutritionist, further emphasises the positive effect of a vegan diet on our health. “We’ve had swathes of support from the 50+ age group, who are looking to improve their own health. They find people who’ve gone vegan tend to thrive, they’re slimmer, they get less chronic diseases [such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes].” Moreover, there is a tendency for vegans to consume more fruit and vegetables, thereby taking in more nutrients and vitamins. Even on the most basic level, Dawn from PETA cites anecdotal evidence, claiming that many people who switch to a vegan diet generally feel “lighter and more energetic”.

**The future of dairy**

Could it be that one day, animal agriculture will cease to exist? The vegans we spoke to certainly hope so. They say that demand for dairy, eggs and meat will decline, meaning farmers are forced to produce crops for human consumption, as opposed to livestock. Dominika sets out the Vegan Society’s ideals thus: “Realistically, the world will move towards the vegan lifestyle gradually and as it does, the demand for animal products will decrease, which will in turn lower the supply. Farmers will gradually move from farming animals to growing crops for human consumption, to provide food for the growing vegan population. Once the population of animals we currently farm gets down to

**INFO**

**20%** of 16-to-24-year-olds in the UK now follow a vegan or vegetarian diet.

A vegan diet requires about **1/3** of the land and 1/3 of the water required to maintain an animal-based diet, as farmed animals eat more protein than they produce.

At least **542,000** people in Britain are now following an entirely vegan diet.

Meat-eaters consume the equivalent of about **5,000** litres [1,100 gallons] of water a day, compared to the 1,000-2,000 litres on vegetarian diets in developing countries.

a manageable level, they will be placed in sanctuaries and cared for until they pass away naturally.”

Indeed, some farmers are recognising the decline in demand. Elmhurst, a family-owned dairy farm in New York (and former supplier to Starbucks), switched its production towards primarily vegan milks once its dairy plant no longer became financially viable. The CEO himself even said that pasteurised milk has “sort of gone out of style”. According to Elmhurst’s website, it now wishes to “lead the plant-based revolution”.

“But veganism is not about being anti-farmer,” Juliet stresses. “It’s about being anti-intensive farming. We just want farmers to do things in a different way.” She says the benefits of making the switch to plant agriculture range from increased profits by giving consumers what they want, to being able to claim they are actively helping to combat climate change. Her parting words? “Dairy is a dying trade – open your eyes, mind, and heart,” she pleads.

Many dairy farmers are nonplussed. Nick believes that “the vegan movement would have to grow exponentially to affect what we produce and how we are operate.” And Emily agrees. “The British consumer has driven an animal rights agenda here in the UK since the earliest welfare legislation in the world (back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), and to think that we will ever think differently is nonsense.”

Though there does not seem to be an immediate threat to the dairy industry, the vegan trend is certainly something worth watching out for. Supermarkets have expanded their non-dairy ranges to suit demand, and in Sainsbury’s, sales of their vegan cheese range exceeded their expectations by 300%. Though as Nick argues, veganism is perhaps not in the “mainstream” yet, there’s a still considerable and growing market for vegan alternatives.

It might be the case that the ‘vegan revolution’ is actually a misnomer. Animal rights concerns and ethical dietary choices are not modern phenomena. More importantly, both sides of the argument seem to agree that veganism is not just a craze. “Veganism is absolutely here to stay,” says Emily, and Nick backs her up. The movement continues to grow – a PETA study revealed that over 75% of young British people polled are interested in trying more vegan foods, and the Vegan Society has seen orders of its Vegan Starter Kit double between 2015 and 2016.

Meanwhile, celebrities and public figures continue to advocate the benefits of a vegan lifestyle. As more publicity and attention is drawn to the subject, it attracts more followers – but also detractors, in equal measure. Ultimately, it seems what the future holds is incredibly hard to predict, but one thing is for sure – the two sides are deeply divided. 🐣

## MEAT PRODUCTION

The debate on meat-eating has been raging almost since time began. Many religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, encourage their followers to eat a vegetarian (and sometimes vegan) diet. The reasons for this are primarily ethical, but recent research suggests meat production is one of the key contributors to global warming. Red meats such as beef are the least efficient product of the farm industry, using up 28 times more land and 11 times more water than other forms of animal agriculture. Additionally, cows require much more protein to survive than they can produce, especially when compared to other forms of livestock. On top of all this, the

issue of methane-producing cattle herds has not improved. A UN report actually suggested that these emissions were 11% worse than they had expected.

Interestingly, according to the National Diet and Nutrition Survey, approximately 1.2 million people in the UK identify as vegetarians. The market for meat alternatives is a hugely lucrative one, despite the criticism it often attracts. Estimated sales of meat-free/free-from products reach almost £1 billion annually. Quorn – the most famous meat-alternative manufacturer on the UK market – has seen its sales increase by an average of 20%, year on year. It seems that the vegetarian and vegan movements continue to grow.



*Innovation in plant-based foods are taking meat and cheese substitutes to a whole new level*

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Beyond Meat