

Veggie vibes

Kate Farr finds out how to nurture a plant-based family



"Plant-based? No problem, mum!"
Three-year-old Henry Sim tucks in

“I think there is a misconception that being vegetarian or vegan is incredibly hard work,” says Amy Krywawych. The Discovery Bay-based English teacher and her husband Andy are both vegetarian, and they are also raising their children Isabel, aged three, and one-year-old Reuben, to follow a plant-based diet. “I haven’t experienced negative feedback, but I’ve had some raised eyebrows – more so because people are surprised that it’s sustainable,” she says.

Krywawych cites ethical concerns as a major factor in her decision to ditch meat. “Although I was raised as a meat eater, essentially, having children changed my way of thinking. I did a lot of research, and with the global issues of climate change, a rise in cancers and other health issues that are surfacing around the world, I thought it best to do away with meat.” She believes that this decision has been an overwhelmingly beneficial one for the whole family. “I feel that my children look very healthy and fit. I definitely think their physique would be different had they not followed this diet.”

In agreement is Shek Tong Tsui resident Emily Sim, who is mum to three-year-old Henry. A vegan for over six years, Sim also manages the Veg Parents Hong Kong Facebook group, and, alongside omnivorous husband Kevin, is choosing to raise Henry on an entirely meat- and dairy-free diet.

“Hong Kong is becoming increasingly vegan friendly, and is a wonderful place to be vegan,” she enthuses. “For specialised vegan products, there’s a huge range of options in a whole range of shops. Not to mention over 200 vegetarian restaurants.” Sim believes the move towards meat-free diets opens up new opportunities to connect with like-minded families. “The veg community is made up of so many amazing, cool and inspiring people. There are lots of events where you can meet others and enjoy good vegan food.”

So how do vegetarian or vegan children maintain their diet while at school? Sim’s experience is – perhaps surprisingly – pretty positive. “My son attends a local kindergarten and they have been very accommodating in adapting food for him, and letting me pack food for him. Many schools participate in Green Monday (where participants commit to one meat-free day per week) by offering vegetarian



Peggy Chan of Grassroots Pantry

meals, but it needs to go further, ideally offering vegan meals every day.” She believes that education – both at school and in the home – is the key to raising happy, healthy, plant-based children. “The most important thing when raising vegan kids is to learn about nutrition. All major dietician groups worldwide agree that vegan diets are suitable for all stages of life, including infancy, childhood, pregnancy, lactation and elderly.”

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Naturopathic Physician Dr Benita Perch often works with families who choose to transition to a meat-free diet, and echoes the need for solid nutritional education before taking the plunge. “There are three important factors that parents choosing a plant-based diet for their children should consider before changing their diet,” she says. “Are their kids adventurous

eaters, do they have any nutrient deficiencies or behavioural/anxiety issues (as these kids will need better levels of amino acids), and do they really understand what an effective plant-based diet is? Parents need to know what (their food) should contain to get all the essential nutrients.”

Dr Perch explains that nutrient deficiencies – predominantly protein, iron, vitamin B12 and vitamin D – can sometimes be an issue in poorly planned vegetarian or vegan diets. “These factors can lead to fatigue, poor concentration, immunity issues and mood or behavioural issues.” As such, she recommends tofu, tempeh, beans, lentils, nuts and seeds as good substitutes for meat and fish, plus they can be easily incorporated into children’s meals. She also suggests that parents consider adding a daily supplement into their children’s diet. “A good multivitamin is important, and children may additionally need extra iron, vitamin D, vitamin B12 and an algae-based Omega 3.”

Mum-of-three Lisa Terauchi has taken the desire for good quality, plant-based nutrition one step further, launching Sheung Wan restaurant Confusion Plant-Based Kitchen last year to cater to Hong Kong’s growing meat-free population. Far from the ‘beige food’ stereotype, Confusion’s menu bursts with colour and flavour, and includes plenty of child-friendly options such as tofu tacos, veggie

burgers and quesadillas.

“The decision to open the restaurant was more of a desire for people like me to have someplace they could eat without having to ask questions about how to sidestep ingredients like dairy or eggs,” says Terauchi. And it’s not just vegan customers walking through Confusion’s doors. “We find that 70% of our clients are omnivores just looking to eat more vegetables and be more conscious about their health and the impact of their food choices. And as we are almost always busy, I’m confident this is more than just a trend.”

An enduring voice on Hong Kong’s meat-free dining scene is chef Peggy Chan whose restaurant, Grassroots Pantry, has become a byword for delicious vegetarian food. Grassroots recently launched a dedicated children’s menu, reflecting the increase in diners of all ages looking for healthier options. Chan explains, “Nowadays people are looking at plant-based diets and other more conscious choices for their families. Children are sponges – they absorb what you tell them, show them, and what you open their eyes to.”

Chan suggests that an increased awareness of environmental issues will naturally increase the number of people adopting meat-free lifestyles. “This information needs to begin young, so it’s good that many schools in Hong Kong are generating sustainability as a priority. A plant-based diet is just a stem of suitability as a whole, but everything from reducing waste, to recycling goes hand-in-hand with plant-based eating, which means lessening the carbon footprint. Knowing that these children are going to be our future, we need to take the steps right now to inspire them to make the right choices for the remainder of their future years.”

Taking into account the environmental, health and ethical considerations of meat, it’s no surprise that an increasing number of us are looking for an alternative. As Emily Sim puts it, “There’s no need for animal products in our diets. So why contribute to so much animal cruelty and environmental destruction when there’s another way?”



Banana nut cake with salted caramel ice cream at Confusion