

Vegans Tell Corny Jokes, Not Cheesy Ones

By Mark Hawthorne



Stand up for animals: Veganism is a rich source of vitamins, protein and humor.
Courtesy of Mark Hawthorne

Raise your hand if you heard there are different levels of veganism. The notion of levels started a few years ago when *The Simpsons* depicted Lisa, a vegetarian, in an episode where she falls for an environmentalist named Jesse:

Lisa: Oh, the Earth is the best! That's why I'm a vegetarian.

Jesse: Heh. Well, that's a start.

Lisa: Uh, well, I was thinking of going vegan.

Jesse: I'm a level-five vegan—I won't eat anything that casts a shadow.

In this episode, the creators of *The Simpsons* exhibit an affinity for a plant-based diet, even if only to elicit laughter. It was five years earlier, after attending a Howard Lyman lecture that the show's executive producer, David Mirkin, decided Lisa should go veg. Mirkin was so impressed by Lyman's talk he asked the former cattle rancher to speak to the show's writers. Among the highlights of the resulting episode is a filmstrip called "Meat and You," a bit of meat-council propaganda co-starring a child who questions the ethics of eating beef. "Don't kid yourself,

Jimmy," the host warns him. "If a cow ever got the chance, he'd eat you and everyone you care about!"

Although there are a number of veg comedians and comic performers, such as Jerry Seinfeld and Weird Al Yankovic, the lifestyle is rarely included in their work. In an episode of *Seinfeld*, Jerry even worries his date will think it unmanly that he's not eating meat—"Women don't respect salad-eaters," he observes. And Weird Al? He seldom mentions his veganism in public, though when he does, it's for laughs. He recently explained to musicstore.connect.com why he gave up meat: "I read a book called *Diet for a New America* that a friend had given to me, and it made a lot of sense to me. I found out for one thing, I didn't know this, that hamburgers are made of dead animals, so that kind of grossed me out."

Dan Piraro is the exception: a mainstream vegan using irony and satire to raise awareness about animal exploitation. His daily *Bizarro* cartoons, syndicated in newspapers around the world and regularly reprinted in *Satya*, frequently skewer animal enterprises ranging from factory farming and hunting to biomedical practices and the fur industry.

"I think that different messages get across to different people in different ways, and there is no way of predicting what will work with whom," says Piraro. "I don't use humor because I think it works better. I use it because it is a tool I have at my disposal."

While not as well known as Piraro, activist and author Greg Lawson explores the funny side of veganism in essays like "The Seven Levels of Veganism," a lighthearted piece in the same spirit as *The Simpsons* ("Vegan Level Seven... Uses a mild vegan soap that doesn't kill microbes; it just floats them away"). It's readily available online.

Indeed, the web is a great source for vegan-inspired wit, as anyone who reads posts on VeganPorn.com ("For vegans who get it") will attest. Just typing "vegan" into YouTube.com will give you a variety of videos, one of the most popular of which is a mock cooking show called "Steven the Vegan." This sketch features Ben Popik of the comedy troupe *Olde English* as a vegan chef addressing the common, and not-so-common, questions about what vegans eat.

"No, I'm not actually a vegan," says Popik, who created the character after countless restaurant experiences with a vegan friend. He mimics a server's typical response to his friend's order: "So...wait. You want the pasta, but without the sauce and without the cheese?" It got to the point where I'd just interrupt him and tell the waiter that my friend was not only a vegetarian, but lactose intolerant and allergic to honey." View "Steven the Vegan" at OldeEnglish.org.

Also, clearly inspired by the success of *The Onion* and *The Daily Show*, VeganStreet.com offers fake news stories like "Teen Vegan Makes Entire Family Uncomfortable" and retorts to some of the sillier questions from meat-eaters. Vegans hear such questions so frequently that one works well as a punchline: Q: How many vegans does it take to screw in a light bulb? A: I don't know, but where do they get their protein?

As Homer Simpson would say, it's funny because it's true. ■

Mark Hawthorne is a California-based activist and a contributing writer for Satya.