



Vegging Out

BY JAYME OTTO

THERE IS AN EPIPHANAL MOMENT IN OUR adult lives that I'll call the "Nutritional Awakening." For some, it's a dire situation brought on by health concerns or first-time pregnancy. For others, it's inspired by a book like *Skinny Bitch*, read at precisely the right time.

For me, it was Joe, a personal trainer in über-fit Boulder, Colorado, where I moved at age 23. The wall behind the gym's front desk held photos of Olympic snowboarders, skiers and runners, all autographed for Joe. "Couldn't have done it without you, man," read one. Needless to say, the first time I felt Joe's eyes on me during a workout, I was terrified that I wouldn't live up to his holiest of standards.

"Where you from?" he asked when I'd completed my set.

"Ohio," I replied.

"Tell me about your diet," he said, smiling.

"Ummm," I stammered, not sure what he wanted to know.

"You're a meat-eater, right? Milk and cheese too?"

"Yeah," I nodded proudly. "I make sure I drink at least one glass of milk every day."

Joe crossed his tanned arms over his regal pecs. "I can smell it on you," he said, wrinkling his chiseled nose. "The cow is a disgusting human experiment."

I spent several days in mortified confusion. What ever happened to "Milk, it does a body good?" Soon afterward, I developed a voracious appetite for any and all literature regarding healthy food. I scoured the Internet for information on superfoods, raw foods, whole foods, organic foods, seasonal foods, locally grown foods.

Apparently, my eating habits were all wrong. Even my choice of grocery store was wrong. I wanted to learn more, I wanted to fit in in this new town, where everyone looked like an athlete. So I went to the Mecca of nutrition: Whole Foods.

Over the course of the next few months, I enrolled in a six-week whole foods cooking course. I learned to decipher labels—high fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated oils and words I could not pronounce indicated items

to be avoided. My new friend Joe was pleased with my progress. He shared his "if you can't kill it or grow it, don't eat it" philosophy. I cut out foods with labels all together.

Soon the Nutritional Awakening spilled into other areas of my life. I regarded my home cleaning products with suspicion. Were they non-toxic, biodegradable, all-natural? What about my beauty products—my make-up, my lotion, my deodorant? The ingredients were even creepier than those in processed foods—petrochemicals and carcinogens—all waiting to be slurped up by my unsuspecting skin. Was nothing sacred?

Only when my entire life had been overhauled did I find a sense of peace. My vegan world of whole grains, legumes, nuts, organic seasonal fruits and vegetables, filtered water, natural deodorant, and Bare Minerals makeup kept me safe. I was converted, walking undetected through Boulder's nutritionally elite. Smell me now, Joe.

Then I went back to Ohio to visit my family.

"There are leftovers in the fridge if you haven't had lunch," my mother said upon my arrival.

Great! I ripped open the fridge door and investigated. Whole milk, Kraft cheese, deli meat, iceberg lettuce, last night's spaghetti and meatballs, Diet Coke. Strike one. I flung open the pantry door. Macaroni and cheese, canned soup, Captain Crunch, white bread, Doritos. Strike two. I turned to the kitchen counter fruit basket. Red and green apples. I selected a Red Delicious, took one bite, and spit it out in the sink. Strike three. I could literally taste the pesticides. And what was that waxy stuff?

"There's nothing to eat in this house," I yelled to my mom upstairs.

She came running down. "What are you talking about?" she said. "This house is full of food. You must just not be hungry."

With my dad, I thought I'd have a little more leverage, due to his recent triple bypass heart surgery.

"Do you really think you should be eating

bacon with your eggs, Dad?" I asked as gently as I could the next morning.

"Well I don't want to eat any carbs, you know," he replied. "Have you heard of the Atkins diet?"

As it turns out, my parents were less than enthusiastic over my newfound healthy food fanaticism. But worse was the contention that arose from it. Sharing a family meal is such a simple pleasure, and apparently I had ruined it. Then an interesting shift occurred. Perhaps it was due to Dr. Atkins' untimely death. One day, my mom called me up and requested a recipe for beets. Real beets. Not beets from a can. "Dad's doctor said they're good for his heart," she confided.

The next time I was in for a visit, she made those beets. She also had brown eggs in the fridge—organic from free-range hens. "If the hens can roam free and the eggs are unfertilized, maybe you could eat them?" she suggested. Perhaps it was due to Joe's move to California, but I obliged. That morning, we all sat down to breakfast together—scrambled eggs, oven-roasted beets and fresh squeezed orange juice from an old juicer I found in the basement. They weren't organic oranges, but I realized that some things were more important.

As I shared the first real meal with my parents in seven years, I chewed on this: the Nutritional Awakening is an unfolding that leads to more vibrant health and well-being. It doesn't have to be a revolution to be an evolution. •

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