Thyme for a Change

If I were to describe my relationship to food at the beginning of the year it would have been "struggling vegetarian". For the past year, I had attempted several times to fully convert to vegetarianism (because, yet, I strongly believe that it requires a conversion of self to achieve), and had failed repeatedly. It was too easy to "break bad" and to enjoy the midnight Döner in Germany, or my all time favorite home-cooked pulled pork with Sweet Baby Rays. The key ingredient I was missing was the passionate motivation that drives all vegetarians to stop eating meat. My enrollment in Food, Media, and Literature has provided me the motivation to commit to vegetarianism. I have realized that eating meat is an unsustainable practice in the context of the industrial food system. As Albert Einstein said himself, “nothing will benefit human health and increase chances of survival for life on earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet.”

The United Nations defines sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future to meet their needs.” I have discussed this definition in a sustainability and ethics philosophy course, have seen it displayed on company websites (KSDG, Disti Kleen Inc.), and have read it in the University of Rochester’s sustainability newsletter *UR Green News*.


The prevalence of this definition is problematic, however, as it contains a very ambiguous term: need. What exactly is a need? Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, a theory in psychology proposed by Abraham Maslow, can be used to demonstrate the uncontestable fact that food is a

![Figure 1: I was once unable to resist the delectable döner. What’s most interesting is that when I once ordered a falafel döner, the man in front of me yelled at me and said “you are doing it wrong, that’s not how we do it in Germany— you must eat meat!” This is a perfect example of how meat is portrayed as a necessity rather than a privilege.](image1)

![Figure 2: Maslows hierarchy of needs](image2)
physiological need that forms the foundation for other aspects of life. Food is a need. However, in light of the industrial food system we, as consumers, must reexamine our food choices that fulfill this need in such a way that upholds the definition of sustainability. It is this sort of reassessment that has driven me to commit to be a vegetarian; the reassessment of the answer to the question of if we necessarily need meat to fulfill our dietary needs.

The Cultural Discourse of Meat

From my own personal experience, I have encountered that many people have the mindset that meat is a necessary ingredient to make a meal a meal. While many scientific studies have been done to prove or disprove the importance of meat in the diet, they do not propose an answer for WHY this is a mentality in our society that persists and drives a nation of meat-obsessed omnivores. I have found that the cultural discourse of a meal in our society is what establishes meat as a necessity.

**Figure 3.** This picture, from Eatright.org, - a website that promotes “scientifically-based health and nutrition information you can trust” and offers reliable resources from nutrition professionals- is what is offered as a family dinner. Clearly, meat takes up a large part of the plate when considering a meal.

Discourse: A stem of language, narratives, representations, codes, and values that construct our senses of reality, truth, knowledge, and power, defining what is said, how it can be said, who can talk, and who has power.
The representation of meat to consumers by the government and by iconic cultural leaders has constructed the fake reality that a meal is defined by the presence of meat, as seen in Figure 3.

ChooseMyPlate.gov, a USDA-funded website, is a great example of how the discourse surrounding meat has allowed its prevalence in our society. Created by the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP), a subdivision of the USDA, this organization strives to “improve the nutrition and well-being of Americans” and has outlined 2 primary objectives:

1. Advance and promote dietary guidance for all Americans, and

2. Conduct applied research and analyses in nutrition and consumer economics.

The organization has made it clear that they have taken on the responsibility to provide a reliable guideline to a healthy, nutritional lifestyle for consumers. After exploring the website, the portrayal of meat as the most important source of protein is quite evident, although subtle.

For example, in the “Protein Foods” section of the website, the CNPP lists the contents of the Protein Foods: “meat, poultry, seafood, beans and peas, eggs, processed soy products, nuts, and seeds.” Notice how meat is listed first in this list: a trend that is prevalent throughout the site. The same order can be found under the “Nutrients and Health implications” and “What Counts as an Ounce” tabs. Furthermore, the “Tips for Making Wise Choices” tab provides tips solely for meat products i.e. “choose extra lean ground beef. The label should say at least “90% lean,” and “ buy skinless chicken parts, or take off the skin before cooking.” Mention of non-meat protein groups comes, once again, after mention of meat products. This represents meat as a primary choice for fulfilling protein needs while portraying beans, peas, and soy products as a replacement for meat, rather than an alternative to meat. It is a manipulation of a consumer’s choice, as they are guided by these responsible organizations, such as the CNPP, to utilize meat as a primary source and to continue down the list they provide. In addition, they offer the consumption of beans and peas as a Vegetarian option, rather than as an option for all consumers, meat-eating and not meat-eating alike. The Poultry Industry movie that we watched made the huge claim that they are “feeding the mouth of the hungry world,” implying that chicken (meat) is the most efficient way to cure hunger, both personally and globally.
Celebrity Chefs helping to create a mindset

This representation of meat is further distributed to consumers via celebrity chefs, such as Jamie Oliver and Rachel Rae. In our society, we have, as Signe Rousseau argues, allowed celebrity chefs to become “authorities on food, [to] become authorities on life because we do not know how to feed ourselves...[we have allowed] chefs to become stars [and has turned] more than a century of media intervention into how we cook and eat has taught us to think that we need someone to tell us how to cook and eat.” This is problematic as it emphasizes the dependence of consumers on such an external entity as a celebrity chef to deliver HOW to fulfill our fundamental needs. This dependence allows celebrity chefs to manipulate the image of a meal; the presence of meat in Jamie Oliver and Rachael Rae’s presentation of food is quite evident, leading consumers to depict a meal as requiring meat.

From these examples, it is quite clear that a meat diet has been established in our culture as the main method of meeting protein requirements. It is not the consumption of meat that is the problematic issue I am stressing, but rather that because consumers are misguided to believe that they NEED meat to survive, there is an overconsumption of meat. It is this cultural mindset that drives the demand for meat in our society and contributes to the continuous rise in overall meat consumption in the U.S. (NCBI), which in turn creates the unsustainable methods and practices that exist in order to attain this demand for meat.
Figure 4/5. The covers of magazines featuring Rachael Ray are very meat-involved. The Five Dishes, One Day shows a picture of different meals, 5 out of 5 being made with meat. In the Every Day magazine highlights Rotisserie Chicken as comfort food, and classifies a vegetarian dinner as a makeover, rather than a normal option. As a celebrity chef, consumers have given Rachael Ray the power to delegate what we should eat and how we should cook it. Clearly, this reiterates the mindset that meat should be incorporated into every meal, unless you want to make a great change and go vegetarian. This discourse makes a vegetarian diet seem difficult to attain and that if you want to cook a simple, comforting meal, you must cook with meat.
Redefining the needs of people as possible to love and enjoy good food.” (Ministry of Food) In fact, this very cookbook has become a major movement that has resulted in people transforming their lives through learning the basics of cooking at home.” (Rousse 58). When I looked at some recipes from this cookbook, I immediately noticed the overwhelming presence of meat. For the MAIN dishes, 8 out of 12 were meat-including recipes. This demonstrates how Oliver’s influence utilizes the discourse of meat in a meal; as a consumer, you can transform your life by learning to the basics of cooking meat 8 out of 12 times. Non-meat recipes are labeled as “vegetarian,” marking these meals as different from the rest that include meat. Notice how the meal pictured on the cover contains meat, juxtaposed with the subtitle “Anyone can learn to cook in 24 hours.” This sends the message that meat is clearly a more enjoyable food option: it’s easy and fast, and Jamie Oliver says so!

Figures 7 & 8: These cover photos demonstrate, once again, that meat is what makes a true meal and allows a consumer to “cook your way to the good life” and to cook comfort and classical food.
the present

Our needs must be reassessed if we are to sustain the ability of survival for future generations. The green house gas emissions caused during the production of meat is not sustainable for the climate as these emissions accelerate climate change. This climate change will alter the ability of certain plants to grow, for animals to be fed, and will put at risk the food and water resources available to future generations (IPCC).

The economy of the meat industry is not sustainable for future generations; how can an industry that treats its workers in such a way as Kenny Dobbins was treated by Monfort slaughterhouse, as seen in Fast Food Nation. The high demand for meat calls for a high demand for feed, which causes the need for federal subsidies to American famers, described by Michael Pollen in “The Omnivore’s Dilemma”:

“Taken together these federal payments account for nearly half the income of the average Iowa corn farmer and represent roughly a quarter of the 19$ billion US taxpayers spend each year on payments to farmers.” (Pollan, 61)

Subsidies create an unsustainable economy; the proportion of money being spent to cultivate corn for livestock feed in order to meet the consumer demand for meat could be eliminated if the “need for meat” was reevaluated and recognized by consumers to be a false need.

Growing a solution

Reflecting on these issues has caused me to undergo a personal revolution and to finally find the motivation I needed to become a true vegetarian convert. I consider myself an environmentalist, and for me, after learning all these issues and seeing how unsustainable the meat industry is, it seemed hypocritical to press environmental issues without being a vegetarian. I am in full agreement with Albert Einstein that a vegetarian diet is the key to creating a more sustainable world. However, there is more to the picture than becoming vegetarian, as I am arguing that the globalized network that meets the consumer demand for meat in unsustainable. I would gladly try some freshly caught venison from my neighbor that he/she hunted earlier that morning, week, month, year; this is a more sustainable process of attaining protein needs as there is a need for population control of deer in rural environments, thus hunting is a sustainable process.
Therefore, along with changing the cultural mindset that meat is necessary in our diets on a daily basis despite its origin, I have shifted to become a more local consumer and to shift my focus to local foods, as it is more sustainable for the environment:

- Mitigates emissions from transportation
- Improves the local economy and supports farmers so that they do not need federal subsidies that come from tax payers
- Creates more social interactions between producers and consumers

Thus there is a triple bottom line advantage to consuming in a local sense.

I have heard arguments that this is not an attainable lifestyle for all consumers, and that it is difficult to achieve this goal across all economic income populations. However, as we saw in the Guerilla Gardeners TED Talk, this is achievable in lower income areas if the right resources are utilized and carried out correctly.

[http://www.ted.com/talks/ron_finley_a_guerilla_gardener_in_south_central_la](http://www.ted.com/talks/ron_finley_a_guerilla_gardener_in_south_central_la)

The correct approach to the problem of food insecurity has allowed a neighborhood to be able to sustain itself more efficiently and grow the solution: the community turned to gardening and self-provided food so that they were no longer dependent on the globalized food system.

A shift in our relationship to food is required to maintain a sustainable relationship with the Earth. For me, a tomato was once a fleshy, red, seedy fruit (I did think it was a vegetable once) and that the tomato that grew in my mothers garden was the same as the tomato I could find in a grocery store. I have grown out of this ideology and have realized that a tomato has a history and a back story just as any entity of life does; it involves an assortment of issues that can mitigated based on one single choice. In my case, it is the choice to consume locally and to avoid as many components of the global industrial food system as possible. Getting to this realization, however, required overcoming several cultural barriers that I did not see in the first place, such as the discourse of what a meal is and how to fulfill dietary needs. This awareness is key, and my next goal is to spread this awareness and recreate the cultural view and relationship we have with food so that we can become the Fresh Food Generation.
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