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# COMING OUT AS *VEGAN*

The Cultural Overlap  
of Being Vegan and Queer



**W**hen I told my father I was gay, he was totally accepting and said things like, "I just want you to be happy," says Ari, his clear voice piercing the grainy screen of our video call. "When I told my father I was vegan, he screamed at me for an hour. Well, first I had to explain to him what vegan was, and then he screamed at me for an hour."

Ari, a white secular Jewish 42-year-old animal rights activist living in Los Angeles, was the first person to speak with me about what it's like being gay and vegan, a subject I've been exploring for nearly a decade. It all began when my family found out that I had stopped eating animals one Sunday afternoon. I was seated around a long oval table surrounded by uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents. The plate in front of me, a smattering of vegetable sides, salad, and a buttered yeast roll, lacked the large chunk of meat resting on every other plate. It was a matter of moments before my father outed me as a new vegetarian, to which one of my uncles loudly guffawed: "Well, *I'm* not gay. I don't eat tofu."

It had never occurred to me that someone could be queered based on the food they chose not to eat. At the time, I hadn't given my own sexuality much thought. I didn't consider myself queer, though in the ensuing years, a parallel interest in gay rights and Leftist politics would send me on my path to veganism. But in the fundamentalist, conservative, evangelical notch of the Bible Belt where I grew up, where

residents slice through their meat and potatoes with razor-sharp disdain for the "homosexual agenda" and "tree-hugging liberals," my uncle's conflation of soybean curd and gayness was designed to be doubly damning. The message was clear: being vegan was considered as unnatural and off-putting as being gay.

But his declaration seemed less about *my* sexuality (a cisgendered woman, I had been married to and divorced from a man by this point), and more of a knee-jerk affirmation of what it meant for *his*. It was as if each bite of pork tenderloin he skewered on his fork served to maintain his straightness—and a spongy cube of tofu would throw that identity into chaos.

His words played on a loop in my head, illuminating for me a vision of straight fragility that's bound-up in the Standard American Diet. The two overlap to create powerful and pervasive American iconography on full display at summer cookouts and Thanksgiving dinners: men flipping burgers and marbled steaks at the grill, or standing before a whole roasted turkey with a carving knife. You're not a *real* man, it says, unless you eat meat. It's so pervasive it dissolves seamlessly into everyday life—until someone rejects it.

Social norms like heterosexuality and omnivorousness are typically rejected first in private, where the backlash people face is contained to family and friends. But on the public stage, the repercussions intensify as the audience increases. In 1990, two years before she came out as a lesbian, country music singer k.d. lang announced that she was a vegetarian in a bold animal rights campaign by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) called "Meat Stinks." The ad drew outrage from country music stations who banned lang's music en masse and cattle ranchers across the US and Canada, some of whom threatened to blockade her concerts. Outside her hometown of Consort, Alberta, a sign that read "Home of k.d. lang" was burned to the ground.

When lang graced the 1992 summer issue of *The Advocate* and came out as a lesbian, however, her fans responded warmly and her career flourished. In queer activist circles, it was a time of increasing pressure to come out or be outed, an abusive tactic that lang likened to "the PETA of sexuality," perhaps a subtle acknowledgment of a similar push for vegetarians in the public eye to stand up and be counted for the sake of the cause, without much regard for the personal cost of doing so.

A lot has changed since the early nineties, but outside of the meaty Midwest, veganism is still confusing for many. Vegetarianism is fairly straightforward—no animal flesh—but vegans eschew all animal byproducts, meat and fish as well as dairy and eggs, leather and wool, even honey and beeswax. To be an "ethical vegan," one must routinely shirk norms about food and reject long-standing beliefs about humans' relationship with other animals. Food is the primary focal point, but being vegan means being critical of every industry that exploits animals and examining how the human-animal hierarchy is tangled up with other systems of power.

Long before I came out as queer, I'd learned to a certain degree what it meant to be queered by coming out as vegan. I felt the discomfort of my presence at the table, how my not eating meat, eggs, and dairy disrupted traditions and expectations. I could, and eventually would, hide other elements of my life, like my politics and sexuality, but I couldn't hide my food, nor could I sidestep the rebuttal it elicited: tiresome mockery, the stream of Biblical quotes about man's God-given dominion over animals and women, praise for animal husbandry and the domestication of creatures who were once wild, endless questions about why I insisted on being vegan and what that entailed. I decided to backtrack in order to unpack and understand my uncle's comment. While most LGBTQ people are not vegan, I wanted to know what the experiences were of fellow queers who are, and how their coming out experiences—as gay and as vegan—may have overlapped or differed. Over the past few years,

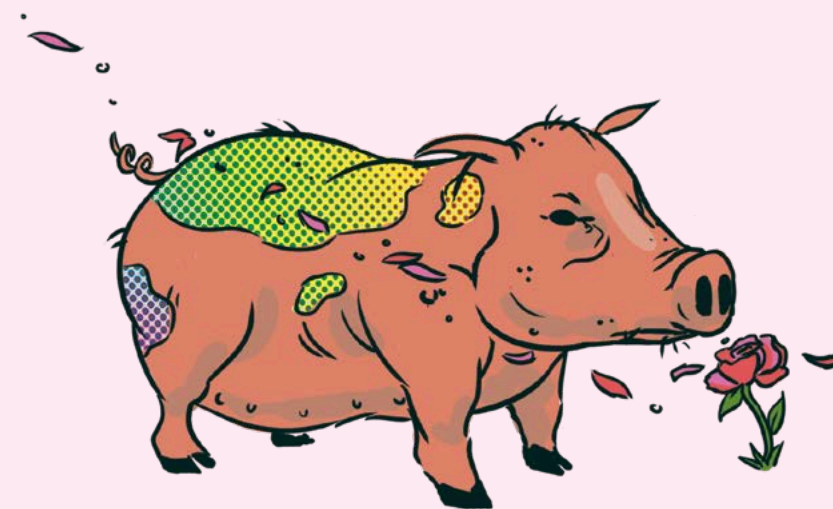
I spoke with twenty-four people who shared their stories. No universal experience emerged, of course, but each person's story shed light on how political and sexual identities—compounded with race, class, gender, religion, and ability—are reinforced or rejected through the food they put on their plates.

### The day after Ari's high school graduation, he

announced to his friends and family that he was gay, a declaration that was met with enthusiastic support, still novel for the early nineties. But in the early 2000s, when he announced that he was becoming vegan—not chiefly for health or environmental reasons, but out of concern for animals and the horrors he witnessed watching online videos of the cruelty inflicted at slaughterhouses—it sparked a fiery family uproar.

"It was this really visceral reaction," he says, recalling each angry charge his father accused him of: that he had joined a cult, California had gone to his head, his health would be compromised, and he would effectively ruin all future holiday meals for family. "He freaked the fuck out," Ari laughs, reassuring me that his father, along with the rest of his family, has lightened-up since then (as have my own family members), even though they'd be thrilled if he stopped being vegan.

The knee-jerk reaction of Ari's father to veganism runs eerily parallel to historical homophobic and transphobic propaganda—the still-rampant claims, by parents and "concerned" others, of mental illness and deviant lifestyles that pose risks to health and livelihood. Much like the paranoia of anti-LGBTQ aggressors, the



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fears that Ari's father blamed on veganism never came true.

His empathy for animals is tinged with bittersweetness, Ari continues, because if he had not experienced homophobia firsthand, he wouldn't have felt an immediate conviction about animal cruelty and become vegan overnight. "When you watch a lot of that undercover footage, it's like, *yeah, these guys are just a bunch of bullies*," he said. It left a scar, but through the experience he learned the importance of speaking up for others. "Being gay isn't something that I chose, it's just something that I am," Ari said after a pause. "Being vegan, on the other hand, is something that I choose every day."

The anxiety that omnivores express about veganism has a similar tone to heterosexuals' defensiveness about queerness, in that both identities unseat assumptions about "normal" human behavior. Omnivores are rarely expected to explain why they eat animals—their diet is the norm—but vegans are asked to cite their protein intake and vitamin B12 levels while solving complex philosophical quandaries on command. Likewise, straight people have

little reason to ever think critically about their sexuality, while gays have to disclose theirs again and again. To extend the comparison, the practice of compulsory heterosexuality—mandating straightness as means of controlling human reproduction—has been used for centuries to police women and queer people; in industrialized farming and animal husbandry, bodily autonomy is systematically denied.

A few decades ago, vegetarianism came with serious consequences for teens like Jess, a 43-year-old native New Yorker who lives in the Gowanus neighborhood of Brooklyn. Jess's refusal to eat meat at 15 was deeply symbolic of her rejection of heterosexuality. Struggling for autonomy over her own body, she learned about the routine mutilation of animals' bodies for food. When Jess stopped participating in her family's mixed white and Hispanic traditions that involved meat, her home deteriorated into a battleground and her parents threatened to kick her out of the house—an all-too-relatable scenario for the countless LGBTQ youth still disproportionately affected by homelessness.

No longer a vegetarian, the "reluctant omnivore" holds firm that the same ethical beliefs that made her stop eating animals helped her "understand that all love is equal." Her parents' overreaction to vegetarianism was tied to "something so much bigger," she wrote to me, to the larger question of what it means to be normal. "When you're queer, the process of self exploration and coming out makes you question the narrative about your future that you've been given."

**Not all vegans are activists, whether in animal rights or otherwise, but for non-white and trans vegans it's more of a necessity in their lives to speak out against racism, police brutality, and state violence. When they do speak up they risk additional profiling, and the broader vegan community doesn't always offer support to them.** Pax, a 48-year-old queer black trans vegan who lives in San Francisco, has built a career educating the public about animal rights and educating vegans about gender, race, and sexuality. Their work in and outside of animal rights circles stems from the desire to "liberate all animals from property status." As Pax explained, "I was motivated to start doing gender education because of my experiences as a trans person, and specifically as a non-binary person of color. I wanted cisgender people to see that not every trans person is Caitlyn Jenner."

After fluctuating between vegetarianism and veganism on and off for nearly two decades, Pax chose to stop eating animal products permanently at age 41, two years before they began their gender transition in 2013. "Being vegan is definitely essential to my identity," they wrote. "My name, Pax Ahimsa, literally translates to 'peace' and 'do no harm.' I extend that ethic to our fellow animals as well as humans. I adopted the name Ahimsa as a literal, constant reminder to never resort to violence."

Pax talks a lot about the cruelty of animal-based industries but is equally swift to criticize the glaring cultural blind spots perpetuated by mainstream veganism. Too often, animal rights activists tout plant-based health and celebrate vegan foodism—the images broadcast in books, television, and over Instagram often portray a narrow view that's white, elitist, celebrity-obsessed, and routinely appropriates traditional, non-European vegan culinary culture—but many of these public proponents remain silent about whiteness and white supremacy. This is a reality that vegans of color don't have the privilege of ignoring.

**"We are like a minority within a minority within a minority,"** says says Mrinalini, a 44-year-old Indian-American who lives in Columbus, Ohio, with her wife, Poonam. When I ask her about queer representation in the United States and where she fits into it, Mrinalini laughs in exasperation. It isn't that simple. "First of all, we're immigrant, right? And women. I identify as a lesbian and Poonam identifies as bisexual, and we've struggled with coming out to family and friends. Then on top of it, we're vegan," she sighs. "It's hard to find people like us." She lives with one foot planted in the Midwest, where she and Poonam have built a life, and the other foot in India, where they were born, Mrinalini in Maharashtra and Poonam in Rajasthan. Neither women had even considered the option of being out until long after they moved to the U.S. in the late 1990s for college, after which they swiftly divorced the husbands with whom they had been pressured to enter into arranged marriages.

Mrinalini's father didn't speak to her for six months after she told him that she was a lesbian via email, and Poonam's brother, who was supportive of their relationship initially, severed contact with her for three years after she and Mrinalini wed. Outside their families, they've each encountered homophobia in the medical community where they work. But neither was



prepared for the reaction of their coworkers and family when they became vegan in 2014. Mrinalini's brother began to scrutinize her health and insisted that without meat in her diet, she was destined for a life of sickness. He went so far as to suggest that a shoulder injury of hers was caused by her diet. Routine business dinners became professionally alienating when a male coworker openly declared at the table that he disliked Mrinalini because she stopped eating meat.

Poonam's vegetarian mother was a strong ally when she came out as bisexual, but she didn't initially approve of her daughter's turn toward veganism. "She was very emotionally and religiously attached to the idea that human beings had to have cow's milk," says Poonam. This belief that dairy is wholesome if not essential to human health is pervasive in many parts of the world, from India's Mother Dairy brand to California's slogan "Happy Cows Make Better Milk"—the influential feminist-vegan scholar Carol J. Adams calls eggs and dairy "feminized protein" in her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*—and the topic has incited exhausting, heated discussions between Poonam and her mother. Just as LGBTQ children upend their parents' expectations of replicating the hetero-nuclear family, vegans force their parents to examine cultural norms and inherited beliefs about food, including meat, dairy, and eggs.

**Katherine opts to stay quiet about both being a lesbian and being vegan.** The white 34-year-old lives openly in Denver with her wife Kelly and their baby Beau, but she doesn't want to risk being an object of scorn when she visits her hometown in Wyoming, where both identities are risky taboos.

"I think my whole life, I always paired the meat that I was eating with the animal," Katherine told me over the phone during a long commute for her job as a social worker. "Even as a kid, it didn't feel right." The animals Katherine grew up eating weren't just chickens, pigs, and cows from factory farms but also wildlife that lived in nearby forests and fields. "A lot of the food I was eating my dad would go out and kill because hunting is a big deal, and it always grossed me out."

Throughout high school, Katherine struggled with conflicted feelings about eating animals, but she knew that there would be social consequences if she became vegetarian. To not eat meat is taken as a personal affront, and "it's basically unheard of to be vegan," she said. The local economy depends on cattle ranching and growing corn and soy for feedlots, and meat forms the basis of a conservative political climate. When she began dabbling in vegetarianism and told her long-term high school boyfriend about it, he dumped her immediately. "That was it for him," she chuckles. While Katherine had been aware since middle school that her sexuality was different from her peers, it wasn't until the end of senior year in high school that she first came out to a cousin who lived in New York, the only person she trusted. By age twenty, once she'd left home for college, Katherine had stopped eating meat permanently and had joined an LGBTQ student group on campus. That these trajectories towards veganism and queerness happened in parallel was a realization of Katherine's that crystallized the first time we spoke.

Return visits to Wyoming still require Katherine to omit a lot about herself. In the same way that next to no one is vegan, she says few LGBTQ people are out because "it's just not safe there." In the face of casual homophobic slurs spoken in her presence, she juggles the fear of speaking up and anger at herself for being in those situations in the first place. Being the only vegan at the table brings its own anxiety, so she treats it "almost like a closeted identity" electing to "just not eat meat" when she eats out, so as to avoid unwanted attention.

**"Thinking back on it now, I'm sure that my animal politics were parallel to my sexuality,"** says Slater, a white 25-year-old genderqueer make-up artist and vegan home cook living in Brooklyn who went vegetarian at age thirteen. A more recent switch to veganism exposed a glaring

setback that many young vegans encounter: Slater didn't know how to cook. A lot of time was spent experimenting with recipes and mastering basic cooking techniques before Slater sought out other queer members of the vegan community willing to open up their kitchens.

Timothy Pakron, who goes by Mississippi Vegan online and on Instagram, first connected me with Slater after he had hired Slater to work one of his pop-up dinners. The two quickly became friends. "It was three fags in the kitchen cooking vegan food," Slater reminisces about working with Timothy. "You really couldn't ask for something better."

Since then, cooking has become a central point of connection for Slater to educate vegans about queer culture and to rally the queer community. It's evolved into a web series called *Slater G. String's Kitchen*, with short instructional videos that blend culinary activism with performance art. In episode two, "How to Make Vegan Quiche and Support Trans Women," a thong-clad Slater in full makeup whips a long braided hair extension around the kitchen, lip syncing to music and chopping vegetables. The show's guest, Maya Monès, a trans Afro-Dominican model and DJ, joins Slater to talk about Afro-Latinx representation in the fashion industry, hormones, and practical tips for supporting trans femme and non-binary friends.

"Cooking has really elevated my own consciousness," Slater tells me over coffee. Being a self-taught makeup artist and a self-taught cook, it's empowering for Slater to offer skills that LGBTQ people don't always have easy access to. A lot of people in the queer community are working class with limited resources, Slater explains, so bartering—trading vegan dinner or



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makeup for weed and hand-poked tattoos—is common, allowing queers to support each other outside of the framework of capitalism.

When it comes to the connection between animal rights and food, it's as if Slater and Ari exchanged notes beforehand, because the same underlying sentiment unfolds. "I'm trying to show how animal-rights politics connect to human-rights politics," Slater says adamantly. "Understanding my own marginalization has made me more empathetic to animals."

**When I spoke with Joshua, an Ashkenazi-Sephardic** 38-year old Brooklynite, I finally heard the clear echo of my own experience at the dinner table with my uncle. For Joshua, it was his concern for the environment that led him to animal-rights literature and animal advocacy. He struggled as a teen in the mid-'90s to find acceptance for being vegan while also experiencing bullying for being gay, which began before he was out. He sought communities that were both vegan-friendly and gay-friendly, gravitating for a time to the hardcore punk music scene, which despite having plenty of vegan role models, he found to be "hyper-masculine and not very queer-friendly."

He's now a fashion instructor at the New School in New York City, as well as founder of the high-end ethical vegan clothing line Brave GentleMan and author of a forthcoming book about the history of animals in the fashion industry. His work in the animal-rights movement has defined his life's trajectory, even including the vows he exchanged with his husband at an animal sanctuary where they were married. As an outspoken activist who pickets on the street and blogs about animal-rights issues, Joshua's been on the receiving end of angry messages from people who oppose animal rights. Many of their comments are homophobic not because he's gay, but because he's vegan. The recurring

association of femininity with veganism he experiences, particularly on social media, frequently uses "homophobic or misogynist language to offend me because of my veganism."

There it was: the mechanism behind my uncle's theory about tofu. The conflation of meatlessness and queerness stems entirely from the notion that being gay is inferior, the myth that dominance over animals is inherent to masculinity, and that eating plants is feminine and weak. Like so many constructs, it topples over with just the slightest interrogation, but I've been seeing it seep into vegan circles, too. Imagery seeking to attract new consumers equates masculinity with physical strength, selling vegan protein powders with the promise of ballooning muscles and increased sexual stamina, as if all they've done is swap a steak for a smoothie. You can be a "real man" *and* a vegan—at the same time!—the logic goes. I question that this is progress.

Being queer and being vegan are different experiences that overlap in distinct ways depending on how each person identifies within the LGBTQ community, and within a broader culture still largely defined by cisgender, heteronormative assumptions. Because of this, we all stand to benefit from a more meaningful inquiry of marginalization, one that not only examines how outdated patriarchal notions of gender and sexuality get reinforced, but that also examines the overlapping forces that can multiply marginalize people. Inhabiting the margins, whether by choice (as it is for vegans) or not (as it is for most queer people), offers first-hand knowledge of what oppression can look and feel like. If animal rights is about ending the oppression of all animals then it must include humans, too, LGBTQ and otherwise. Teasing out the inverse allows for a more comprehensive way to understand exactly what our relationship with animals is, and what it could be. **///**