

**‘If you eat right,
you won’t just feel well
– you’ll flourish’**

Veganism is the biggest food trend of the moment, and Tel Aviv is its self-styled capital

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If there's one thing I love in this world, it's a nice, juicy piece of fillet. Served medium, with a side order of creamy peppercorn sauce. So, when a waiter at one of Tel Aviv's best vegan restaurants sets down a sizzling steak before me, I'm a little confused.

Tel Aviv is the self-styled vegan capital of the world, responding with alacrity to what is arguably one of the biggest food trends of this century. Around five per cent of Israel's population of nearly nine million is fully vegan, with the majority living in the city. Here in the UK, meanwhile, the Vegan Society suggests the number of vegans has grown fourfold in the past 10 years. A visit to any supermarket, here or there, testifies to this switch in tastes: meat-free alternatives and plant-based milk products are now widely available.

For many vegans, the diet is an ethical choice. Intensive agricultural production methods mean that many animals aren't necessarily treated with the respect they deserve, and there are myriad hormones pumped into them to increase their productivity.



I may be a committed carnivore, but the horror stories have left their mark, which is why I find myself in Israel slicing off a corner of steak-like wheat protein called seitan and placing it gingerly in my mouth.

'I've been vegan for 12 years and feel great,' says EL Rachmani, owner and manager of 416, the New York-style restaurant where I'm sampling the fake steak. He doesn't market 416 as a vegan eatery – rather a high-end destination where the food just happens to be >>



THIS IS NOT A STEAK

The 416 restaurant (opposite) is famous for its 'steak' (above) – a facsimile made from a wheat protein called seitan. It doesn't sell itself as a vegan venue, but rather as a high-end food destination that just happens to serve dishes that are entirely meat- and dairy-free

meat- and dairy-free. 'This is one of the most ambitious vegan projects in the world,' he says. 'We make all our own sodas, infuse our own spirits... We make the seitan, too. It really looks, feels and tastes like steak.'

Although I'm not sure it does. The texture is rubbery – a little like overcooked steak, but without the toughness. As it grows colder, it deflates like an inner tube with a slow puncture. But the roasted pumpkin and lima-bean dish is delicious, as are the alfajores – cookies served with coconut whipped cream and dulce de leche, and topped with white chocolate that tastes even richer than if it had been made from real milk.

Vegan cuisine aside, Israel has long been a food destination. The warm climate means the region produces a raft of high-quality fruits and vegetables, and its mix of cultures also lends itself to cross-pollinated dishes. And because meat is expensive here, it encourages people to get creative with plant-based alternatives.

Take a stroll round Carmel Market in Tel Aviv and you'll see a profusion of grapes, mangoes, pomegranates and spices piled high alongside Israeli Defense Force T-shirts and plastic menorahs. There are plenty of chances to sample hummus, too – it's arguably the Middle East's most revered dish, with hole-in-the-wall joints such as Hummus HaCarmel serving up big bowls of the stuff.



FUTURE-PROOF FOOD

Food journalist, blogger and activist Ori Shavit dedicated her life to promoting a plant-based way of life after she decided veganism could save the world



ALT. MEAT

Seitan

Seitan is made from a combination of high-protein wheat gluten and liquid. It forms a doughy texture that can be fashioned and flavoured to resemble a number of meat products, including steak.

Soy

Soy, derived from soya beans, is used to make miso, tempeh and tofu, as well as the soya milk now popular in lattes. It's packed with protein, vitamins and minerals, but should be eaten in moderation and in its least processed form.

Mushrooms

The mushroom's unique flavour, known as umami, along with its dense texture, make it a popular meat alternative. In vegan recipes, mushrooms are used whole or combined with another meat substitute, to which they will lend their rich, savoury flavour.

Uncomfortably full, I head north up Ibn Gabirol Street, the city's central artery, to meet food journalist and blogger Ori Shavit. She's waiting at Falafel Mevorach, a vegan fast-food place owned by Gali Lenga and her father Michael. Michael has been in the restaurant industry for years, but Gali convinced him to eschew meat this time round, and business is booming. She serves us a hamburger made from mushrooms and soy, and a schnitzel made from seitan – the same protein used in the 416 steak. 'Good, right?' Ori encourages. The schnitzel feels particularly meaty and works well with Gali's home-made soy mayonnaise. >>

‘Sultana is Tel Aviv’s first-ever vegan shawarma restaurant and already, at 5pm, there’s a queue forming in advance of its opening in an hour’



MEAT AND GREET

Harel Zakaim (above) opened Tel Aviv’s first vegan shawarma restaurant, Sultana, this summer. Queues for his meat-free meat stretch right around the block

FAKE IT TO MAKE IT

Harel’s shawarma ‘meat’ (left) is made from a combination of mushrooms and soy. It took him three months to develop the right flavour and texture



Ori became a vegan after a video she watched online exposed her to the iniquities of the meat industry. This heralded a new chapter for her, both personally and professionally. ‘In 2012, I started hosting vegan pop-ups, which were really successful. That led the way for other restaurants to experiment with vegan menus, and helped the movement become more mainstream here,’ she explains. Ori has since been consulted by Tel Aviv’s Sheraton hotel and a number of restaurant chains that are looking to devise vegan menus.

‘Even the army provides vegan meals, leather-free boots and helmets, because a lot of youngsters are going meat-free,’ she says, sawing off a corner of seitan schnitzel and loading it up with mayonnaise. ‘It represents people from all over the country and cultural backgrounds, which suggests to me that veganism is everywhere.’

Ori also reckons there’s a strong connection between Judaism, which is the dominant religion in Israel, and veganism. ‘In the Torah, it’s a *mitzvah* [commandment] not to hurt animals. You don’t have to eat meat either. Rather, you need to take good care of your body and your environment.’

We walk south to Alegria, another vegan spot, to try its interpretation of the *fricassée* – Tunisian street food that’s traditionally made from tuna and potatoes in a doughnut-like roll. Here, it’s served in a dairy-free croissant, and the tuna is emulated by a combination of ground chickpeas and seaweed. It’s fresh, and healthier than anything I’ve eaten thus far. I’d have another, but Ori has organised a tasting at the hottest new vegan fast-food place in Tel Aviv, and we’re running late.

Sultana is the city’s first-ever vegan shawarma restaurant and already, at 5pm, there’s a long queue forming in advance of its opening in an hour. We dodge a few begrudging looks as we skip the line and head straight for the door, and owner Harel Zakaim beckons us inside with a smile. The place looks like a standard kebab >>



shop – a rack of meat turning slowly on a vertical rotisserie, and a cabinet filled with a variety of salad options with which to fill your pitta bread. But, of course, it's not meat. This vegan facsimile of a doner is made from mushrooms and soy.

Harel demonstrates for us how he slices the fake meat from the slowly turning rotisserie, and again for the local film crew that's jockeying for position in front of the counter. 'It took me three months to develop the flavours and textures,' he says, assembling a plump shawarma for me.

Outside, a girl in the queue eyes up my food. I take a bite. The texture is certainly meaty, but without the heft of actual meat. The salad is delicious.

I've eaten more fast food in a day than I would in a month, so I'm up early the next morning to take a brisk walk along the beach. This is the city's beating heart – a string of sandy coves that hugs the glittering Mediterranean, backed by Bauhaus and Art Deco-style buildings that jut into a cloudless sky.

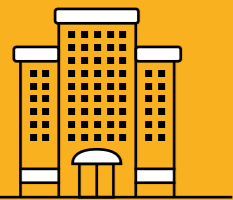
Already, by 6.30am, I'm joined by implausibly sculpted locals dressed in just a suggestion of beachwear. They're jogging, bench-pressing, lobbing balls over volleyball nets and playing five-a-side football. There's even a shirtless man who tips himself into a handstand under the shade of a palm tree, then looks around to see who's watching before doing it again.

Inspired by this assiduous company, my next engagement is with naturopath and nutritionist Udi Sahar, who runs >>



SANDS OF TIME

Tel Aviv's beachfront is the city's beating heart – a strip along the Mediterranean where locals and tourists jog, swim, practise yoga, sunbathe, play volleyball or catch up



INNER SPACE

Tel Aviv's boutique-hotel scene is growing, thanks in particular to an array of office spaces reinvented as stylish places to stay. Hotel Saul (above) is one such development – a 34-room bolt-hole that dates back to the 1940s. White-washed brick walls and exposed concrete honour the building's utilitarian history, but the space is softened by pot plants and hand-woven rugs. The café downstairs serves gourmet sandwiches – and there's a vegan option, too, of course.

a wellness centre called Urban Shaman. He's the picture of health, his skin glowing in the mid-morning light as he settles into a shady corner of the Urban Shaman café and watches me drink my Wake Up smoothie, which is made from banana, date, cashew, cacao, maca and cayenne pepper.

'If you eat right, you won't just feel well – you'll flourish,' Udi opines, biting delicately into his gluten-free buckwheat toast topped with avocado and sprouts. 'Our bodies are just like cars – if we give them the right fuel and look after them, then they'll run for miles. If you use the wrong kind of fuel, then they'll break down.'

However, surprisingly, he's not a fan of vegans. 'I help people heal themselves with foods and, yes, it'll always be a plant-based vegan diet – but a very healthy one. Here, a lot of vegans turn to carbs or junk food that's

vegan – but it's not healthy. I meet people who went vegan and became ill because they're missing nutrients. It's about having a balanced diet and everything in moderation.'

For Udi, it's also essential to consider the big picture and make sure that all the food you consume is grown in a natural habitat and without using herbicides and pesticides. He's not a fan of soy, that vegan staple, because the majority of soya beans are genetically modified, and their production has taken up acres of former Amazon rainforest. 'Being vegan's like being in kindergarten,' he says. 'Now it's time to go to university.'

I head back to the beach for sunset and watch a man practising yoga on the sand, the water lapping at his feet as the sky turns a deep shade of pink. At dinner that night, I choose the vegetarian option. ☺☺



'A lot of vegans turn to carbs or junk food, but it's not healthy. Being vegan's like being in kindergarten. Now it's time to go to university'



RECIPE FOR HEALTH

Udi Sahar (above) is a naturopath and nutritionist who promotes a plant-based way of life. He runs the Urban Shaman wellness centre. He's no fan of veganism – he says its followers don't always look at the bigger picture

SEEDS OF CHANGE

The Urban Shaman café (right) serves only plant-based dishes, such as falafel balls made from sprouted buckwheat, zucchini, carrot, onion, garlic and basil

