

–an **EVEN** exclusive interview –



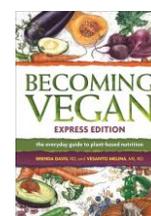
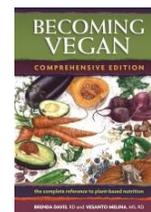
[photo by Kevin Trowbridge]

with

Brenda Davis **Registered Dietitian, Author, Speaker, Nutritional Consultant**

***Brenda Davis, Registered Dietitian,** is a leader in her field and an internationally-acclaimed speaker. She has worked as a public health nutritionist, clinical nutrition specialist, nutrition consultant and academic nutrition instructor. Brenda is the lead dietitian in a diabetes research project in Majuro, Marshall Islands. She is a featured speaker at nutrition, medical and health conferences throughout the world.*

*Brenda is co-author of nine award-winning, best-selling books – **Becoming Vegan: Comprehensive Edition (2014), Becoming Vegan: Express Edition (2013), Becoming Vegan (2000), The New Becoming Vegetarian (2003), Becoming Vegetarian (1994, 1995), Becoming Raw (2010), the Raw Food Revolution Diet (2008), Defeating Diabetes (2003) and Dairy-free and Delicious (2001).** She is also a contributing author to a tenth book, **The Complete Vegetarian (2009).** Her books are vegetarian/vegan nutrition classics, with over 700,000 copies in print in 8 languages. She has authored and co-authored several articles for peer-reviewed medical and nutrition journals and magazines.*



Brenda is a past chair of the Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group of the American Dietetic Association. In 2007, she was inducted into the Vegetarian Hall of Fame. Brenda lives in Kelowna British Columbia.



EVEN: How did veganism become part of your life?

Brenda: My earliest childhood memories are filled with animal encounters. I spent countless hours picking worms off sidewalks after a rainfall. I remember regularly asking my mother for 2 cookies – one for me and one for my friend. I also remember the look of astonishment on my mother's face when, after insisting she meet my friend, I brought home a big yellow lab. And, I will never forget the shock and devastation that engulfed me when my family, while vacationing in Spain, decided to attend a bullfight featuring Spain's most celebrated bull fighter, El Cordobes.

I was 3 years old. Ten thousand cheering fans erupted in thundering applause when El Cordobes entered the stadium. I suspected that this beautifully-dressed man was going to fight a bull, and I found the thought quite distressing. I could never have imagined that he was going to kill the bull. The picador, his accomplice, swiftly put pics into the bull, and each time he succeeded, the crowd roared with excitement. With each pic, the bull weakened and I winced. I was stunned by the spectacle of this innocent animal being tortured, and not a single soul coming to his rescue. I found it confusing and horrifying at the same time. I wanted desperately to help the poor creature, but I knew I was powerless.

Towards the end, the bull stumbled, then with one last mighty effort he gored El Cordobes and sent him flying. The crowd gasped, then fell silent... you could have heard a pin drop. My heart leaped. I naively thought that perhaps the bull had scored enough points to be spared. I jumped up and cheered with all my might. People glared with anger at my insolence. My parents quickly quieted me.

I had been awakened to a new reality.

In my mid-teens, although I had become desensitized to the plight of food animals, I became keenly interested in nutrition and health, and decided to pursue a career in dietetics. After completing education, I found myself gravitating to whole-food, plant-based fare. Gradually lentils and tofu took over the space on my plate formerly occupied by meat, poultry, and fish. Though my diet was mostly plant-based, I did not become a full-fledged vegetarian until a rather unexpected encounter with my friend, the deer hunter.

The year was 1989, and my friend (the best man at our wedding in 1978) stopped for a visit before a hunting trip. I wanted to say something that would make him feel guilty about shooting another deer. I asked him how he could feel good about pulling the trigger on such a beautiful animal. I pointed out that the deer had no defense against his bullet. I asked him if killing a deer made him feel like more of a man (I know - that was not very kind!). His response changed the course of my life. "You have no right to criticize me," he said. "Just because you don't have the guts to pull the trigger, doesn't mean you are not responsible for the trigger being pulled every time you buy a piece of meat camouflaged in cellophane at the grocery store. You are simply paying someone to do the dirty work for you. At least the deer I eat have had a life. I doubt very much you can say the same for the animals sitting on your plate."

I was silenced, because he was absolutely right.

I vowed at that moment that I would be accountable for my food choices. I went on a mission to learn more about how food animals are raised and slaughtered. What I learned filled me with guilt and outrage, and most importantly, it challenged me to live a life that was more consistent with my values.

I decided it was time to remove animal products from my menu. I wondered how my husband would react when I asked him if he would be willing to become a vegetarian. "I thought you'd never ask," he responded. He loved the idea of eating in a way that would further reduce our family's carbon footprint.

With the nutrition training I had, I was confident that a plant-based diet could provide not only safe and adequate nutrition for my young family (my children were ages 4 and 1 at the time), but that it would protect us in the long run.

EVEN: Who was an influential person in your life earlier on that led you to veganism?

Brenda: After the encounter with my friend, I started looking for information on vegetarian and vegan lifestyles.

The people who influenced me most at this stage were John Robbins and Michael Klaper. Their compassion and insight gave me the courage I needed to become a vegan.

The dietetic world was not very vegan-friendly in the 80s! It was a little scary - I was not sure how my colleagues would react to my vegan diet - I wondered if I would be ousted from the profession.

As it turns out, I was not ousted from my profession — to the contrary, I have been embraced and have received nothing but respect from my peers.

I have been an invited speaker at national nutrition conferences in 8 countries. I just spoke in Nashville at FNCE - the annual conference of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Our session was in a room that holds almost a thousand people and the Academy had to open an overflow room. It gives me hope to see this sort of interest among my colleagues.

The last time I spoke for Dietitians of Canada, one of the board members was in the room when I was being interviewed for a radio show. At the end of the show, she came up to me and said, "Thank you so much for the excellent work you have done on behalf of this profession. You make me proud to be a dietitian."

I remembered my fears 25 years prior, and was profoundly grateful and deeply touched.

EVEN: What advice would you give to a vegan advocate wanting to become more of an activist?

Brenda: Just do it. Pick your passion and explore your options. It matters less whether you devote your time to animal rights, the environment, or to food and nutrition than it does that you are doing what you can to effect positive change in the world.

You do not need to convince anyone that being vegan is an all or nothing option. Every step an individual takes in the right direction is worth celebrating.

Be kind, compassionate and respectful. Remember where you were at just a few years ago. Never underestimate the power of your personal example. Often, you are the only vegan your friends, classmates or acquaintances have ever met. If you are kind, healthy and joyful, you make one compelling argument for a vegan lifestyle. You don't have to do everything; but please, do something.

EVEN: What do you think makes veganism hard for people?

Brenda: People want to feel as though they belong within their social circles. They want acceptance and approval from their family, friends and colleagues. Standing for something that is outside of our social norms has the potential to separate us from the people we really care about. It takes immense inner strength and courage to oppose the status quo. That, in my opinion, is what makes being vegan so hard for many people.

EVEN: What, in your opinion, is the most misunderstood idea about veganism?

Brenda: I think the most misunderstood idea about veganism is that it is a huge culinary sacrifice, and that vegans are self-righteous, stick-in-the-mud types.

While being vegan does mean removing animal products, the vegan culinary world is fabulous. When you are eating delicious food, it never feels like much of a sacrifice.

I remember several years ago my husband asking if he could bring two out-of-town colleagues home for dinner. I spent the day cooking. I made soup, salad, lasagna, calzones (from scratch) and pie. The next day when the men went to the office, people at the office started teasing them about the vegetarian dinner they had. In unison, they said, "We did not have a vegetarian dinner." They went on to rave about the feast they had and how delicious it was. When they did, they realized for the first time that the meal was vegetarian (vegan actually). They were stunned --- so were those who were teasing them.

While some vegans *are* smug, holier-than-thou types, they are few and far between. Most vegans understand that this attitude serves only to push others away. They get that people generally respond better to encouragement and support than to criticism and blame.

EVEN: What one thing from your thinking in childhood do you wish you could change?

Brenda: I am not sure I would change a thing. I had an exceptional childhood, with a loving family. I seemed to understand the sensibilities of animals, especially as a young child.

It makes me think of an interaction I had with my son when he was 3 years old. We were in the car together and drove by a McDonalds. He asked me if we could go to McDonalds and buy a McDonald's hamburger. I knew he had watched the advertisements on television that showed the Hamburglar stealing hamburgers off trees. I suspected that he pictured a lovely grove of hamburger trees behind every McDonald's restaurant. I decided that the time had come to tell him about meat, and why we did not eat it.

I explained that the hamburgers at McDonald's were not the same as the "burgers" at home. While our burgers were made of plants like beans, the McDonalds hamburgers were made of cows. He looked at me as though I had completely lost my marbles and replied quite emphatically,

“Mommy, people do not eat cows.” He seemed shocked I would say such a crazy thing. When I went on to explain that people *do* eat cows, he began to cry. And through his tears, he said, “But mommy, them have eyes. Don’t they know that cows are people too?”

I understood. He could see that cows think, feel, smell, hear, eat, sleep and love – just like people. He could not see why that was not enough.

EVEN: If you were to mentor a younger person today, what guidance might you offer? What encouraging words might you share with a newbie?

Brenda: Many people believe that being vegan is about eschewing hamburgers and ice cream. It is not. Being vegan is about widening our circles of compassion to include those who are commonly excluded, be they human animals or non-human animals. It is about understanding that our choices have consequences for ourselves, and beyond ourselves.

Being vegan is about recognizing that eating animals is absolutely unnecessary. It is about making choices that are a true reflection of our ethical and moral principles, and about recognizing that custom and tradition do not justify atrocities.

It is not about personal purity or about moral superiority. It is about becoming more *other*-centered and less *self*-centered. We must recognize that our vegan lifestyle is a means to an end, not the end itself.

EVEN: Do you have a favorite vegan meal or food you can tell us about that really makes veganism work for you?

Brenda: It is tough to pick a favorite when you love food. My everyday meal of choice is a full meal monster salad. I start with organic greens such as kale, wild greens and romaine lettuce. I add my home-grown pea and sunflower sprouts, and a variety of colorful vegetables such as broccolini,

watermelon radishes, beets, carrots, celery, colored peppers and steamed, cubed butternut squash or yam. I often pop in some blueberries or pomegranate seeds. Then I add avocado, pumpkin or other seeds. I top it off with tofu, tempeh or beans and a yummy dressing like lemon tahini.

I often include a hot soup with our meal, and sometimes dehydrated crackers and a fermented nut cheese.

My favorite dessert is home-made frozen fruit ice cream in the summer and baked bananas or apples with cashew pear cream in the winter. I enjoy cooked meals such as dragon bowls, curries, vegetable lasagna, cabbage rolls, stir fries and stews. I also love raw food main dishes such as raw pizza, zucchini pasta and collard wraps.

As for specific foods that make vegan work for me, I would have to say beans, peas, lentils and tofu. These protein, iron and zinc rich foods make being vegan easier and more enjoyable.

EVEN: What one thing makes veganism worthwhile for you?

Brenda: Just knowing that I am living a life that is consistent with my deepest ethics and values gives me peace.

Above all, I am grateful to be living a life that allows me to minimize my personal contribution to the pain, suffering and death of other sentient beings.

EVEN: Any opinion or insight on the future of veganism in today's world?

Brenda: I believe that the shift to a mostly or completely plant-based diet is an ecological imperative. *It is the only solution to sustaining a growing population on an ever-shrinking planet.* As people begin to understand this, they will be more open to the ethical arguments against the use of animals as resources.

The health piece is falling into place beautifully. There is no longer a question about safety and adequacy of vegan diets. There is a growing body of evidence that vegan diets provide greater risk reduction for chronic disease than any other dietary pattern.

Today, vegan is mainstream; tomorrow it will be the norm.

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[photo by Kevin Trowbridge]

[Brenda Davis, RD](#)

One of my favorite quotes:

*Risk more than others think is safe. Care more than others think is wise. Dream more than others think is practical. Expect more than others think is possible. - **Claude Bissell***