Vegan Heaven

By Adrienne Perron
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I was not paying attention to the twinkling lights of Tower Bridge as I powered down its walking path, GPS in hand. As tourists meandered slowly to take in a bird's eye view sight of the Thames and admire the City of London lit up at night, I rushed past them with fervor in my step and a grumble in my stomach. I was hungry, and had only one thing on my mind.

Vegan. Baked. Goods.

As much as my trip to London has been about city landmarks and new experiences, it has also been largely about food. Vegan food, specifically, meaning food that is not made with meat, fish, dairy, or egg. As a vegan, I sometimes feel as though I fall into cycles of eating certain foods over and over again at home because it is easier and more mindless than trying to cook new things. My trip to London has given me an excuse to treat myself and spend money on new and semi-foreign vegan food.

London has over 155 vegan restaurants and is also seen as one of the most vegetarian-friendly cities in the world with its first vegetarian society having been established in 1849. Great fact! Consequently, London has been like my Mecca.

I chose to go vegan in March of 2017 when I met someone who had been vegan for years. My mind was opened to the idea of using veganism to improve my relationship with food, help me to lead a more compassionate and kill-free lifestyle, and also reduce my environmental impacts. I had been a vegetarian since age 16, and was intrigued. I tried it for a few days and found it an easy lifestyle to follow. Veganism has forced me to consider my impacts on other living things

and the environment when it comes to my food choices. I haven't regretted my decision to become a vegan once in the past two years. I love everything about it.

My close friends at home have nicknamed me "Vegan" or "Vedge" for short. This pet name does not help my frequent attempts at keeping a low profile as a vegan to avoid unwanted confrontation from passionate omnivores, even though it is kind of funny. I can't help but think of this nickname, a kind of brand, as I have been exploring the food scene of London over the past week, navigating my way around fast food places, cafés and markets like a plant-based connoisseur. I am Vegan, and I am hungry, I have been thinking to myself as I have scoured the innumerable culinary options in this grand city, intent on finding the perfect dishes.

So, as much as I appreciated the sights of Tower Bridge while crossing it, the knowledge that a vegan café was less than 500 feet away according to my iPhone's maps application was the only thing that I could focus on. In London, I have become like a predator stalking its prey, even though the prey I am trying to catch is plant based. I have been an avid researcher of vegan-friendly restaurants and have had my internal radar for the labels that read "vegan" set on high in every restaurant, café and food market that I have been to.

I flew past the other people on the street and left my friends in the dust as I entered the café feeling out of breath and overwhelmed with a sudden feeling of belonging. Looking around and seeing people with vegan macaroni and cheese, vegan chocolate cake, and delectable looking slices of banana bread, I knew this place was made for me. I wanted to try it all.

"Is everything *really* vegan?" I've said countless times to vendors at fully vegan food stations like the one near Tower Bridge in places like Camden and Borough Markets, unable to believe that my vegan dreams were coming true in so many different places in the city.

"Yes, everything is vegan," the vendors usually respond with a smile.

It's Veganuary in London, which is convenient due to the fact that many restaurants, even those not necessarily designated vegan, have been offering specialty vegan meals. The BBC reported that Veganuary *"helps boost vegan numbers in the UK"*. The initiative started in 2014 according to the Vegan Society, and encourages people to pledge to try veganism for the month of January. Recent research done by Compare the Market shows that 7% of the UK's population is now vegan, an increase of 700% in the past 2 years, making finding vegan meals and treats almost effortless for me in any part of the city.

A lot of takeaway restaurants, even the ones that are not necessarily designated vegetarian or vegan, are very good about labeling allergens, dairy and egg content in their food throughout the year, not just during Veganuary. However, as much as London is good about warning consumers about ingredients, I can't help but reflect back on the times when my food choices have gone very wrong in my numerable, frivolous attempts at acquiring vegan food in the city.

"You can get two flavors for the same price, you know," said a man who had been working behind the counter of Gelato, an appropriately named gelato shop, as he scooped my dark chocolate, dairy-free gelato into a sugar cone.

"Oh no, that's really okay," I assured him, certain that my choice of the dairy free chocolate was the right one.

"How about a little bit of lemon on top?" he asked me persistently. I thought about it, and conceded. It sounded refreshing.

"That one is non-dairy, too, right?" I asked, just to be certain.

"Yes," he assured me as he reached for his gelato scooping paddle. As he reached toward the case of lemon sorbet, he stopped abruptly and looked at me. "You know there is egg in you first flavor, right?"

I didn't. I do not eat eggs. At this point, it was too late for me though. I didn't want the gelato he had already scooped and handed to me to be trashed.

"That's okay," I said. I turned to my friends, who looked at with surprised expressions. "Just don't tell the vegan police," I told them.

I brushed this one off. I probably won't die if I consume traces of egg this one time, I thought.

A few days later, I took a walk in Regent's Park, stopping briefly in a café that was conveniently placed in the center of the walking path. The word "vegan" caught my eye, the way it always seems to. A prepackaged sandwich called "The Vegan Delight" was sitting right in my line of vision. I was sold. I paid the woman at the counter, and brought the sandwich home to eat on the bus ride to Bath that I was taking the next day. I couldn't wait to find out what was so delightful about this vegan meal I had snagged for myself.

The next day, stomach growling and hanger setting in, I opened the sandwich and took a large bite. I was overwhelmed with the taste of mayonnaise. And was that… cheese? I looked down. This was not a vegan delight sandwich. It was not vegan food at all. It had been mislabeled. I picked some of the bread off, trying to salvage what I could before I wasted the rest of the sandwich, and threw it away, feeling hungry and guilty for wasting food that someone else could have enjoyed.

Something that London has taught me in these moments, as stressful as they are, is about how to forgive myself for making mistakes. I am not perfect. Sometimes, I might consume a little bit of milk or egg, and what I have learned is that I will not spontaneously combust if I do. The world will not stop turning if my tongue touches mayonnaise. My slip ups in London have allowed me to learn how to laugh at myself and move on. As fun as it is to find delicious vegan food from a new city, I know that I am not defined by my "vegan" label like the food on the

shelves of London's restaurants. If I make mistakes, no one is going to rip away my Vegan title like a label on a sandwich.

The best experience I have had in London in terms of vegan food was had at the Free From Bakehouse, a bakery that was stationed in Borough Market and sold baked goods that were free from many of the most common allergens and were mostly vegan. I fell in love with the sight of a thick piece of dark chocolate cake, and within second of seeing it had my face pressed against the glass and was telling the baker exactly which slice I desired.

"This must be a popular food place for people with dietary restrictions," I said to the vendor as I thanked her for the cake.

"Actually, it's popular for all people who like dessert," she said in response.

I pondered this as I indulged in my small slice of heaven. Whenever people ask me what I eat as a vegan, I usually respond semi-sarcastically, but also semi-seriously, with one simple word: "food". Everything is still just food, no matter the ingredients that make it up.

I smiled at this thought, and ate my cake like a normal person, undefined by that loaded "v" word that doesn't really represent who I am. Veganism is an important part of my life, but it is just food, after all. There's more to life than labels.