**[It Ain’t Easy Being Green: Memoirs of a Veggie Cowgirl](http://veganithaca.wordpress.com/2009/10/19/it-ain%e2%80%99t-easy-being-green-memoirs-of-a-veggie-cowgirl/" \o "Permanent link to It Ain’t Easy Being Green: Memoirs of a Veggie Cowgirl)**

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[Erin McNellis](http://uncomplicatedly.wordpress.com) went veggie while living in Ithaca – and now she’s our first guest author! “Being in such a progressive place definitely influenced my decision,” she told me, when she sent this piece in for the site.

**It Ain’t Easy Being Green: Memoirs of a Veggie Cowgirl**  
*(Note: names have been changed to protect the innocent!)*

I became a vegetarian reluctantly. My two best friends in high school were vegetarians, so for years I had no choice but to champion the life of the carnivore. While Kate and Jessica wrinkled their pretty noses, I was the girl going out with the boys for all-you-can-eat ribs at Big Ed’s Barbecue. I believed in the food chain, meat was delicious, but also – and not unimportantly – eating meat marked me as a different kind of girl, one who made dirty jokes and drank hard liquor and just might be talked into a ride on the mechanical bull in the back of Big Ed’s.  
  
It wasn’t that I never thought about the ethics of it. I must have heard Kate and Jessica’s speeches a hundred times; they lectured me, my friends, and anybody who gave them a hard time. I witnessed their anguish at going out to dinner and finding nothing to order but a side of French fries – and waiter, what kind of oil are those fried in? I admired their commitment, though I would never have admitted it, and I was impressed by the statistics they quoted about how many more people a field of soybeans could feed than a field of grazing cattle. One night my mother served Cornish game hens, and faced with an entire little body sitting on my plate I almost converted on the spot. I ran to the bathroom and retched at the idea of eating a corpse, but I managed to regain my composure with reassuring thoughts about natural selection gleaned from my AP Biology class. Other animals eat other animals; it’s only natural. Look, I have these pointy teeth in front and everything; I evolved them in order to cut and tear meat. I returned to the table and dismembered my little Cornish corpse with a smile.

That was the end of my dietary doubts for a long time. In my senior year of high school, I dated a vegetarian who relapsed into to omnivorousness after we’d been together for a few months, confessing that he’d really only been a vegetarian in order to impress chicks. Somehow for all of us, being a vegetarian came to signify a certain tenderness and care that was coded as feminine – for John, it was a way to seem “sensitive” and “deep,” and for me, it was one of the many “girly” things I was struggling to define myself against. It wasn’t just that Kate and Jessica didn’t eat meat; it was that Kate and Jessica read Seventeen magazine, knew how to apply rouge, and worried about whether their handbags matched their outfits. I never felt comfortable with any of that; when my mother suggested ballet lessons to me at age four, I absolutely refused on the grounds that tutus were for sissies. I never bought a Ken doll for my Barbies, and She Ra was a strong, single mother in my dollhouse. Kate and Jessica were good friends, but the kind of femininity they represented always seemed profoundly disempowering to me. For all their rouge and Seventeen wiles, they just didn’t understand boys the way I did and were often downright afraid to talk to them. I, on the other hand, had assembled a gender identity that allowed me not only to talk to boys, but to joke with them, fight with them, drink with them, and yes – occasionally sleep with them. Being able to belly up to the Big Ed’s Barbeque was an important part of my cowgirl brand of feminism.

In college I encountered a problem: the meat in the dining halls was inedible. Other freshmen managed to choke down the leathery minute steaks, and some even seemed to enjoy them, but my mother was an amateur gourmet cook and I’d been raised on Lobster Thermidor and Kobe Beef and Cornish game hens. Surrounded by minute-steak-chomping peers, I began to realize the truth: I was a food snob. I wasn’t thrilled with the uninspiring beige stir fry or the “mixed vegetables,” but at least I wasn’t going to get salmonella. It didn’t help that I had a vegetarian boyfriend from northern California who kept talking about things like heart disease and botulism and slaughter techniques. Soon I was avoiding meat in the dining hall as a policy decision, designed to avoid both unappetizing food and unappetizing conversation.

But when I headed home for Christmas that year, it was with visions of my mother’s ground-beef lasagna dancing in my head. At last, I would be able to eat delicious meat with fear of neither disease nor scolding. My first home-cooked meal in months was a Thai salad with grilled steak strips. I shoved forkfuls of lettuce in my mouth, reveling in the basil and ginger of my mother’s homemade Thai dressing. The steak looked tender and juicy, unlike its tough, brown dining hall cousin, but somehow my fork refused to make contact. I really thought I wanted it, but some insurmountable psychological barrier seemed to be in place. As I ate more and more of the greens around my steak strips, the truth became harder and harder to deny. I looked up from my plate with a bewildered expression and said, “Mom, Dad – I think I’m a vegetarian.”

The assured me it was a phase, but when the Christmas lasagna came and went and I stuck to green beans, they started to worry. I was too embarrassed to admit it to my friends at first – Kate and Jessica would be smug, and the Big Ed’s boys would be disappointed. I would say things like, “I’m just not in the mood for ribs today,” and for the entire first year of my career as a vegetarian, I was pretty sure that it was just an aesthetic choice. The idea of eating meat had become kind of unpleasant to me, so I was choosing to eat other things. When I finally did confess to the boys, they took heart in the fact that I wasn’t one of those “ideological” vegetarians – I wouldn’t lecture or shame them, I’d just quietly eat my side of hush puppies and grilled corn instead.

Eventually I was forced to interrogate those feelings. At the beginning of my sophomore year, I asked myself: what does it mean that I don’t like to eat meat? I tried to remember what it felt like to like it: I would tear off one of those ribs, already getting barbeque sauce all over my fingers, and sink my teeth through the crispy, carbonized outer layer into the soft, gristly flesh. I used to relish the sensation of pulling the meat from the bone with my teeth, feeling the connective tissue resist ever so slightly and then give way. But now the thought of it turned my stomach, and I began to realize that it was because the whole thing was fundamentally barbaric. I’d broken up with California Boy, but his words and those of Kate and Jessica finally began to sink in. I had begun to think of meat, quite seriously, as the flesh of dead animals and I could not just “turn off” this awareness and blithely enjoy the foods I used to love. Before my very eyes, my aesthetics had turned into an ethics, my visceral discomfort into a philosophical position.

I don’t eat meat because I don’t want to participate in that kind of barbarism. Rejecting traditional notions of femininity does not have to mean embracing the violence of the slaughterhouse, and it wasn’t doing justice to any gender to think that it did. My commitment to causing as little suffering as possible among my fellow creatures was an answer that I didn’t have to mumble or be ashamed of; I began to think of my vegetarianism as a strength rather than a wussy, “girly” weakness. I educated myself about the slaughter industry, I began to care what oil my French fries were cooked in, and vegetarianism became something I was resolved about, not simply resigned to. I don’t lecture people who don’t ask for it, but the boys at Big Ed’s always do, and I’m not afraid to fight with them about it either. I’m still the girl you’ll find astride the mechanical bull – but if you suggest that chowing down on the real thing would be more fun, you’d better watch yourself.

Written by [Erin McNellis](http://uncomplicatedly.wordpress.com). Thank you Erin! Vegan Ithaca is accepting articles, art, and links for publication – and you can even [be an author.](http://veganithaca.wordpress.com/be-an-author/)

<http://veganithaca.wordpress.com/2009/10/19/it-ain%E2%80%99t-easy-being-green-memoirs-of-a-veggie-cowgirl/>

## About the Site:

[Vegan Ithaca](http://veganithaca.wordpress.com/) is a volunteer-run community-building project. The goals of this site are:

* To serve the needs of the thriving vegan community in and around Ithaca, New York, and to make us more visible and accessible to newcomers (to the area and to veganism)
* To build community and coalitions among vegans and non-vegans by upholding values of mutual respect and nonviolence, and avoiding judgment and oppression of others. We recognize that veganism is a process and not an on/off switch, and that there is no hierarchy of suffering; all struggles matter
* To provide a perspective which is founded on sound reasoning, careful research, and thoughtful analysis and critique
* To [maintain a directory of Ithaca-area vegans](http://veganithaca.wordpress.com/meet-the-ithaca-vegans/) and to [accept link suggestions from local folks so that the directory can keep growing](http://veganithaca.wordpress.com/add-a-link/)
* [To blog about local potlucks, social gatherings, and events; provide profiles of local vegans and vegan organizations; and post vegan recipes](http://veganithaca.wordpress.com/) and to [provide a public forum so that folks in the community can make their voices heard](http://veganithaca.wordpress.com/be-an-author/)

Thanks and peace to all of you active, visible vegans out there who make this community such an animal-friendly and vegan-friendly place to live.

Vegan Ithaca was started by [Ari Moore](http://shirari.com/about/more-about-ari/) in August 2009.

*This site is for people and not for profit, and will not be accepting advertising or participating in commercial link exchanges.*