



eating alternatives

FOUR WOMEN TELL YUEN YI YING HOW THEY MADE THE SWITCH TO VEGAN, VEGETARIAN, PESCE TARIAN AND MACROBIOTIC DIETS – AND WHY THEY'RE NOT LOOKING BACK.

In this food paradise where temptations abound, following dietary restrictions may seem like a major feat. But these local ladies have kept it up for years. (And they say it's not that difficult.) If you're wondering just how healthy these diets are, read on. We've also asked *Shape's* advisory board dietitian, Jaclyn Reutens, to weigh in.

THE PESCETARIAN DIET

Comprises grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, beans, fish and seafood. It omits meat, and may or may not include eggs or dairy products.

“I strike a happy compromise between a love for animals and a desire for good food.”



WHO: JACLYN LIM, 28, freelance writer
SHE EATS: Fish and seafood on top of an ovo-lacto vegetarian diet that includes eggs and dairy.

STARTING OUT

I first tried being a strict vegetarian as I didn't want to eat animals. That was until my health began to fail. I became weak and fainted easily because I led a hectic lifestyle and skipped meals when no stalls offered vegetarian food. As a result, my body lacked nutrition. I started eating meat again.

But I never felt comfortable about it, so I eased into the pescetarian diet by gradually cutting out pork, duck, then chicken. It's been two years since, and I feel cleaner and more energetic. I don't get pimples as often as I used to and my bowel movement has improved.

I do a lot of research on this diet, using Google alerts so that whenever there are mentions of pescetarianism on the web, the links are sent to my mailbox.

For many people, pescetarianism is a step towards a fully vegetarian diet. But I doubt I will go all the way because of two reasons – convenience and a love for food.

TRICKY TIMES

Besides daily enticements, I really miss my old favourites like fried chicken. But whenever I waver, I recall horrific photos of animal suffering. Reading books like *Eating Animals*, and seeing how celebs do it help too. I'm a big fan of Stella McCartney (an ovo-lacto vegetarian) and Morrissey, a vegetarian singer who cut the album *Meat is Murder*.

STAYING THE COURSE

My parents became strict vegetarians four years ago, which makes following the diet easier. We shop for groceries and cook together.

Even though I'm pescetarian, I limit eating seafood to special occasions like birthday dinners. When out with friends, I suggest places that offer food I can eat. My ex-colleagues were also very accommodating. They'll order dishes that they know I can have, like omelettes and tofu. No one has said they won't meet me anymore because I have so many restrictions.

I encourage others to adhere to author Michael Pollan's wise words, "Eat food, mostly plants, and not too much". But some people just can't be convinced! Fortunately, my boyfriend agrees so we go vegetarian whenever we're out on our own.

MY FAVOURITE EATS

• Everest Kitchen

I ate here often while I was at my old company, located nearby. A must-try: vegetarian momos!

• Muthu's Curry

They're famous for fish head curry but I don't order that. I'd order vegetarian stuff like Gobi Manchurian, a cauliflower stir-fry.



Everest Kitchen
578 Macpherson Road, tel 6844-4170

MY TYPICAL MEALS

BREAKFAST: Coffee + cornflakes with milk / egg or tuna sandwich

LUNCH: Cheese and tomato sandwich / salad / Indian vegetarian food

TEA: Latte + trail mix / butter croissant

DINNER:

[Home-cooked] Grilled salmon with vegetables / rice with vegetables, steamed egg and tofu

[Dine out] Sliced fish hor fun / aglio olio

SUPPER: Mushroom-flavoured instant mee (on occasion)

✓ THE EXPERT'S TAKE

A balanced pescetarian diet should have a variety of wholegrains and other carbohydrates as well as be high in omega-3 fatty acids.

With this diet, excess mercury consumption is a small risk factor. Mercury levels in most seafood are not high enough to harm adults. But they can be dangerous to a



developing foetus, so pregnant women should not try it. The potential nutritional pitfall is the lack of iron and calcium (if dairy foods are not consumed).

Jaclyn has three regular meals a day, which is ideal, and it is unlikely that she will have deficiencies. She appears to be conscious of eating proteins (tofu, salmon) and each meal is balanced with carbohydrates, proteins and fibre. However, she is missing out on fruits.

The cooking methods of her choice are generally healthy, but she should review her snacks, which tend to be high in saturated fat (like croissant or instant noodles). This can lead to unnecessary weight gain. She should go for a yogurt or fruit smoothie instead. This way, she can meet her fruit requirements and get some high-quality protein.

THE VEGAN DIET

Typically comprises only grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, beans and legumes.

“The meat of a dead animal should not be worth more than its life.”



WHO: LOW LAI CHOW, 29, editor
SHE EATS: No meat, seafood and animal by-products.

STARTING OUT

I've been vegetarian for 20 years, with the last 17 spent as a vegan. I made the decision when I was nine. I vividly recall that fateful supermarket trip with my mum. It just didn't make sense that the meat of a dead duck was worth more than its life.

I didn't do much research before becoming a vegan. But as I grew older, I read more and loaded up on multivitamins, especially vitamin B12 which is tough to get in this diet.

TRICKY TIMES

It gets trying when I travel overseas, don't know the native language, and yet want to try local delicacies. I usually get around that by pointing at vegetables. Silly, but true!

STAYING THE COURSE

It's a myth that it's difficult to find vegetarian food in Singapore. You just have to be flexible. I've even ordered a vegetarian burger at Carl's Jr. Just ask for the Portobello Mushroom Burger without the patty, cheese and sauce.

Sometimes I check the menu of a restaurant that I'm not familiar with before heading there for a gathering. As long as you ask politely for vegetarian options, it's really not hard at all.

I don't cook much, but my specialties are bruschetta and aglio olio. I get away with these only because Italian herbs make everything taste heavenly!

MY FAVOURITE EATS

• **Food #03-BenBino's**
I like it for the ambience, and their tempeh burger is excellent.

• **Salad Stop!**
I never used to like salads until trying theirs. I order the Iron "Wo"-Man without feta cheese.

MY TYPICAL MEALS

BREAKFAST: Thosai / beehoon / cinnamon oatmeal with almond milk

PRE-LUNCH SNACK: Copious amounts of tea + my sister's newest baking experiment (on weekends)

LUNCH: Tea + rice with vegetables / wrap / pumpkin salad



Food #03-BenBino's
(107-109 Raffles Road,
tel 6396-7980)



Salad Stop!
(#01-03 Convent Tower,
tel 6463-2003)

DINNER: Tea / red wine (on weekends) + sushi / soup, rice and veggies

✓ THE EXPERT'S TAKE

Vegans risk running low on protein with this strict diet. There's also a higher chance of developing vitamin B12 deficiency, which increases one's risk of macrocytic anaemia (where there's not enough oxygen-carrying haemoglobin in blood).

Vegan dishes tend to overload on seasoning to improve palatability. Add salt sparingly, and use more herbs and spices to impart natural flavour instead. Also, limit the intake of deep-fried and oily foods. Indian vegetarian foods can be greasy too.

Lai Chow drinks a good amount of fluids which helps her body process the large amounts of fibre she eats. The nutritional adequacy of her diet is fair but her overall calorie intake may total less than 1000kcal on some days, which is low. She may also be short on zinc, iron and calcium, protein and fruits.

As tea in large amounts can be an inhibitor of iron and calcium absorption, I advise Lai Chow to take plain water or fresh fruit juices as substitutes.

THE VEGETARIAN DIET

Typically includes grains, fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts and seeds, and excludes meat and seafood. Some variations of vegetarianism include eggs (ovo) and/or dairy (lacto), so one can be an ovo-vegetarian, a lacto-vegetarian or a lacto-ovo vegetarian.

“I will not let animals suffer or kill them for food.”



WHO: SHAREN SHALOM WONG, 30, post-production manager
SHE EATS: A meatless diet, with some eggs and dairy products.

STARTING OUT

I've been on the diet since I was 15 and have never looked back. I was – and still am – adamant about not letting animals suffer or killing them for food. I believe our teeth, intestinal tract and body chemistry are that of an herbivore. To me, animal parts can never be as

pleasing as food made from fresh, wholesome vegetable sources.

Other than health reasons, going vegetarian lets me play my part in conserving our planet's non-renewable sources of energy.

I believe that if I get a good mix of vegetables, legumes and nuts, I won't really lack the nutrients – except B-complex vitamins which I take supplements for.

TRICKY TIMES

Sticking to my diet was very tough when I went on a mission trip. I periodically had fish because the cook didn't know what to provide other than an extra portion of carbohydrates at each meal. Another instance was when I went diving and the boatman had difficulty preparing food for me. But my divemaster specially ordered vegetarian pizza and barbecued vegetables during mealtimes.

STAYING THE COURSE

Being a vegetarian can mean taking a step out of one's social circle. On occasion, I am excluded from gatherings due to my diet restrictions.

But in recent years, more vegetarian-friendly dining places have surfaced. Now many eateries also offer vegetarian options when requested.

Vegetarianism isn't for everyone. If one is a fanatic of meat (and I was at one time), she may not even consider turning vegetarian. My conviction in the diet helps. I got tempted when I was younger, but the cravings faded with time.

MY FAVOURITE EATS

• LingZhi Vegetarian

I like this place for its mushroom hotpot.



LingZhi Vegetarian
(#03-0910 Velocity@Novena
Square, tel: 6538-2992)



*Freshness Burger
(#01-30 The Central)*

- **Freshness Burger**
Their tofu burger rocks.

MY TYPICAL MEALS

BREAKFAST: Honey with barley green / low-sugar Yakult / soya bean milk / soya beancurd with no syrup

PRE-LUNCH SNACK:
An apple / crackers / muesli bar

LUNCH:
[Dine out] Brown

rice with a side of vegetables, tofu and mushroom / sandwich / salad

[Home-cooked] A one-dish meal

SNACK: Nuts / dried fruits / yogurt / ice cream

DINNER: Brown rice again with side dishes / soba (Japanese noodles) with soup and salad.

POST-DINNER SNACK: Fruits / nuts / chips

✓ THE EXPERT'S TAKE

Most vegetarians lack protein, calcium, zinc, omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin B12. They may also lack iron, as the mineral traces from plants are less readily absorbed than those from animal sources. What's more, the usually high levels of phytic acid in a vegetarian's diet inhibit its absorption. This compound is generally found in the fibrous portion of nuts, seeds and grains.

It's great that Sharen is conscious of her sugar intake. She has a very high fibre diet and meets her recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables.

Although Sharen is a lacto-ovo vegetarian, she does not seem to be eating much dairy or eggs. Vegetarians who don't eat these protein foods should make sure they get it from alternative sources every day. Try baked beans on toast, or peanut butter on bread.

If eggs or dairy foods are allowed, be careful when having them in cheesy, creamy or buttery dishes (like cakes and pies) as they are laden with calories. Dairy tends to be high in fat, especially the saturated variety. Cholesterol levels would be of concern, so while dairy is rich in calcium and protein, low-fat options are better.

Sharen's morning meal is too small. It should total 200-300kcal at least. She can improve her breakfast by increasing her protein intake with options like wholemeal cheese sandwich, poached eggs on toast or yogurt with muesli. To up her zinc and iron intake, she can include beans and lentils in her diet.

Overall, I think Sharen has a healthy diet and small tweaks would make her nutritional intake complete.

THE MACROBIOTIC DIET

Consists of wholegrains, vegetables and beans. It aims to be as pure and natural as possible, similar to Japanese cuisine. Traditional theorists focus on achieving balance ("yin" and "yang") in meals while the modern approach emphasises on reducing intake of processed foods and animal products.

“I eat a much more varied diet now than when I used to be a meat-eater.”



WHO: SIMONE VAZ, in her 40s, CEO
SHE EATS: An extremely wide variety of non-animal-based whole foods

STARTING OUT

Five years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer. I researched anti-cancer diets and narrowed down to two – the Gerson Therapy and the macrobiotic diet. The latter was easier to implement and closer to Asian cooking, so I chose that. I eat a much more varied diet now than when I used to be a meat-eater – then I had only beef, lamb and pork every day with salads as an accompaniment.

There are different types of macrobiotic diets, which differ based on culture, climate and needs. But all advocate seasonal produce and skipping refined foods like ham.

I read everything about macrobiotics online, and I bought all the books on the topic available in Singapore. Now I'm a certified counsellor from Macrobiotics America, an online macrobiotics school.

I credit the diet for sparing me of the side effects of chemotherapy, except hair loss. In fact, my energy level went through the roof and I looked like I was in the pink of health, apart from the bald head!

My immunity has been amazing. I used to fall ill once a month, but I haven't had the flu since adopting this diet. I run 9km each day (a practice I started after my third cycle of chemotherapy).

TRICKY TIMES

When I signed up for a cruise to

Alaska a few years back, I was promised vegan food. But when I boarded the liner, it turned out that they meant that I could eat any vegetable I wanted from the salad bar.

Dinner was eggplant cooked in tomato puree. I ate my way through the fruit basket, which they replenished every day. It was a miserable experience and I think that chefs should challenge themselves to make delicious vegan food rather than simply removing the meat from everything and calling that vegan.

STAYING THE COURSE

The macrobiotic diet is all about striking a balance: If I am out, I make sure I eat mostly fish or lots of vegetables, then I'll eat my brown rice or other grains when I get home.

I eat at good Japanese restaurants where the quality of the produce is better. I'll have raw fish and other foods such as sea vegetables, which are a mainstay of the diet.

If I am going somewhere where it might be difficult for me to stay on the diet, I have a full meal before leaving my home.

I cook every day, and I give macrobiotic culinary classes to help other people eat better. The ingredients are not hard to come by, but the supply is inconsistent. So when I see something interesting, I tend to buy a lot of it. These, however, are small issues. It's possible to have an excellent macrobiotic practice with what is available in Singapore. Like most things, if there's a will, there will most certainly be a way.

MY TYPICAL MEALS

BREAKFAST: Bancha twig tea or grain coffee with steamed soya milk + fruit cooked with wholegrain / pressure-cooked wholegrain with steam vegetables or oats with dried fruit.

LUNCH: Green tea / bancha twig tea + brown rice with stir-fried veggies / wholegrain sourdough sandwich with homemade seitan and salad / sashimi with salad

TEA-TIME SNACK: An apple / a handful of nuts or dried fruit

DINNER: Brown rice with veggies, fish and tofu

MY FAVOURITE EATS

• **Kuriya Dining at Great World City**

I like the sashimi served here. And they have good

seaweed salads too.

• **Wan Hao Chinese Restaurant at Marriott Hotel**

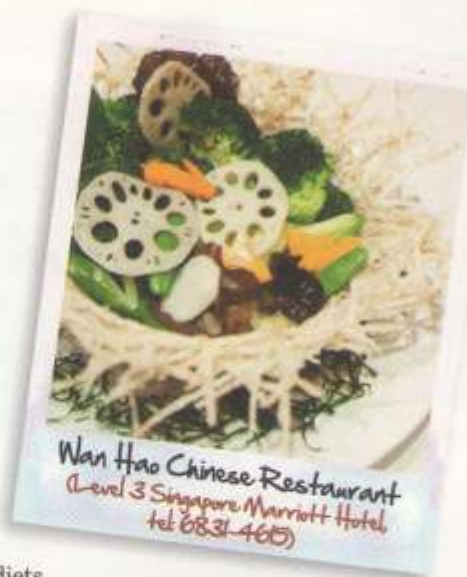
They're good with creating veggie dishes without salt or seasoning, and frying the brown rice that I bring from home.

✓ THE EXPERT'S TAKE

Those following macrobiotic diets generally have a low intake of calories, iron, calcium, protein as well as vitamins B12 and C. As the fibre content of this diet tends to be high, drink at least two litres of water a day to prevent constipation. And use walnut or flaxseed oils in salad dressings to get omega-3 fatty acids.

Simone meets her nutritional requirements of rice and vegetables. She should have the latter as fresh as possible so that their vitamin C levels are still high. Her daily protein intake is low, although she makes a good effort to eat fish and tofu at dinner. She can try eating quinoa with some meals.

Her methods of cooking are healthy and varied. To increase the variety of foods in her diet, add beans and lentils for zinc and iron. Prunes would also make a healthy snack, as it would help pump up her iron intake. Her fresh fruit intake needs to be improved, and she should increase the frequency and options (within the restrictions of the diet).



COMMON DEFICIENCIES ACROSS THE DIETS

LACK:	EAT:
Iron	Oysters, mussels, cockles, spinach, beans, chickpeas or dried fruits like raisins and apricots.
Vitamin B12	Fortified cereals and soya milk
Omega-3 fatty acids	Flaxseed oil, canola oil, walnuts, tofu, soya beans and cold water fish.
Vitamin C	Citrus fruits. These also help with iron absorption.
Protein	Tofu, calcium-fortified soya milk, beans, lentils and nuts
Calcium	Fortified soya milk, dark green leafy vegetables, beans, dairy products and fish with edible bones such as anchovies and sardines.
Zinc	Beans and lentils