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More going green by eating greens

Those who avoid meat to save planet swelling the ranks of vegetarians

By Tania Tan

MS PAULINE MENEZES went vegan last year after learning about the impact livestock farming had on the environment. Now, she avoids milk and dairy foods, substituting them with soya-based products.

'I don't think I can reverse climate change,' said the 40-year-old, who first stopped eating meat in 1994 for ethical reasons. 'But by not eating meat I like to think I'm doing my small part to help.'

She is one of a growing number of Singaporeans who are choosing leafy greens over meat in a bid to save the planet.

The president of the Singapore Vegetarian Society, Mr George Jacobs, said there are 'definitely more' people turning towards a green diet.

He estimated that the vegetarian population has at least doubled in the past five years, although he could not say how many non-meat eaters there are here.

An increased awareness of ethical and environmental issues, coupled with an 'increasingly colourful range of vegetarian food', has made cutting meat out of everyday diets easier, he noted.

The real cost of livestock farming is alarming, he said.

An environmental report published in 2006 by the United Nations estimates that 50 billion land animals are eaten annually across the globe.

The same report also spells out the heavy toll livestock farming takes on the environment: About 7kg of grain goes into producing 1kg of meat.

Inefficient farming techniques also result in pollution. For instance, over 50 years of agriculture and livestock farming have rendered the water of the Indian Ganges undrinkable.

Facts like these have convinced some Singaporeans to take the plunge into a meatless diet.

Vegetarian food supplier Wu Qing of Zhen Hui Trading has seen a threefold increase in demand over the past five years.

He has been in the business for over a decade and supplies restaurants and vegetarian food stalls. He reckons that on top of the usual religious and health reasons, people are making diet switches to 'be good to the planet' and to 'save money'.

'A lot of Hollywood superstars are also vegetarian, so I think it's becoming more trendy,' Mr Wu added.

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In the United States, a movement called Vegetarian Wednesday is slowly gathering steam as more people warm to the idea of abstaining from meat at least once a week.

However, a meatless diet, Singapore's vegetarian society concedes, is not for everyone. Mr Jacobs said his group does not condemn meat eating. Rather, he hopes that through education, Singaporeans will first consider 'reducing their meat intake'.

'The idea of not eating meat might scare some, but if you just keep an open mind, it's not as difficult as one might think,' he said.

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