

VEG OUT

Third annual Northeast Florida Veg Fest comes to Jacksonville

Bill Clinton does it. So does Ironman triathlete Brendan Brazier and Jacksonville Jaguars running back Montell Owens. And, ladies, Venus and Serena Williams do it, not to mention Natalie Portman. No, it's not some silly trend like planking. All these folks, and a whole lot more, are eating a plant-based diet. In fact, the number of Americans who identify themselves as vegan has doubled in just the last year to over

7.5 million! **BY ANNA RABHAN**

The move toward the general term "plant-based" to describe diets of mostly fresh, unprocessed plant foods, as opposed to diets based on animal products like meat, dairy and eggs, is likely due to the wide variety of forms this kind of diet might take: vegan, vegetarian, raw and so on. People's motivations for eliminating some or all animal products from their diets are just as varied. About 53 percent of Americans have done so for health reasons. But motivations also include environmental concerns, food safety worries and animal welfare issues.

However, it is precisely that potentially confusing variety (and the misconceptions surrounding the various options) that is one of the practice's biggest stumbling blocks, even for those who may be intensely interested in the benefits. That's where opportunities like the Northeast Florida Veg Fest come in. The event, organized by local nonprofit the Girls Gone Green (www.thegirlsgonegreen.com/index.html) and the Northeast Florida Vegetarian Society (www.meetup.com/NFVegSociety/events/71336782), exists, in part, as a way for those interested in exploring a plant-based diet to get information and interact with the experienced and the experts. The Girls Gone Green's president and founder, Julie Watkins, says, "I'm very passionate about a healthy and humane lifestyle, and after moving back to Jacksonville in 2009, we didn't have any event or festival promoting these options. Since I had experience with Orlando's Veg Fest, it was a no-brainer. I was plotting to bring Veg Fest to life in this area the first day I moved back."

An informative and engaging slate of speakers is planned. For example, Dr. Jon Repole, of event sponsor Jacksonville Health and Wellness, will be "Debunking the 10 most common vegan health myths." There will also be booths dedicated to various organizations and nonprofits, including EndX-Meat and Vegan Outreach, that offer information and dialogue about plant-based diets.

And, of course, it would be hard to explore an alternative diet without sampling some of the food! Just a few of the fantastic food vendors are Fresh, offering organic hot sauces and seasonings;



photo by anna rabhan

One of the residents of CJ Acres Animal Rescue Farm at last year's Veg Fest

Shakti Life Kitchen, offering an array of organic vegan delights; and Culture in a Cup Tea, offering their fresh, local, organic beverages as well as veggie burgers, soups and more. Last year's "food alley" was one of the most populated this frequent festival-goer has ever seen, so consider those examples just a drop in the bucket. And what would an event like this be without demos, freebies and samples? Organizers scored big in getting the Vegan Black Metal Chef, a YouTube sensation who has been featured on national media and news outlets, to do a cooking demo. And a bevy of vegan, vegetarian and natural food companies will offer free take-home samples of their products.

Watkins says, "If any city needs an event like this, it's Jacksonville. We were ranked the fattest city in Florida in a 2010 *Men's Health* ranking. In order for healthier choices to exist in our area, we need to demand them. In order to demand them, we need to know what the heck is healthy! That's where the Northeast Florida Veg Fest comes in—for people to get to know who is out there providing these better choices and, ultimately, how to incorporate a healthier lifestyle into your daily routine."

But the day will be about more than just food. Part of the Girls Gone Green's mission statement expresses their desire to "make this a better world for all inhabitants, humans and animals alike."

As such, there will be presentations by a host of animal welfare experts such as Elizabeth Decoux, an animal law professor. The GGG feel so passionately about animal rights, welfare and protection that they don't even charge animal rescue groups to be a part of the event. Such groups include Pit Sisters, a pit bull rescue organization; Save the Manatee Club, which advocates for the protection of the First Coast's beloved sea cow; and First Coast No More Homeless Pets, whose stated mission is "to eliminate the killing of dogs and cats in our community through free and low-cost spay and neuter programs."

Those interested in sponsoring one of the many animal rescue groups that will be at Veg Fest, or simply supporting the event with a donation, can find links on the Veg Fest site at www.nfvegfest.org/index.html. "If, at the end of the festival," Watkins says, "we have built a more conscious community when it comes to the environment, animal treatment and health, then we have succeeded. We know that if people are equipped with great insight, knowledge and first-hand experience, they will invest in themselves and their surroundings because they begin to see value in both!"

And, of course, one of the reasons Veg Fest attracted approximately 5,000 visitors last year is all the fun there is to be had. Aside from the speakers, food and adorable animals, the Veg Fest organizers are planning a full schedule of music, including local acoustic musician Jenni Reid; a kids corner with games, eco-friendly crafts and face painting; and raffle prizes that include, in small part, an Ecos products gift basket, an assortment of ready-made mixes from Mom's Vegan Kitchen, a cutting board and T-shirt from Earth Balance, and a goodie bag and free subscription from VegNews. The GGG mascot, Pea Pod, is sure to be cutting a rug with its super-cool veggie dance moves as well!

No matter if you're veggie curious and want to explore the possibilities of a plant-based diet, if you currently follow a plant-based diet and want to see what's new and exciting and hang out with other veg-minded folks, if you love animals, or if you just crave a sweet festival experience, come check out the third annual Northeast Florida Veg Fest on Saturday, November 3, from 10 am to 5 pm in Riverside Park at 753 Park St. You *will* have a veggie good time!

Please email your questions, comments or suggestions to anna@eujacksonville.com.

PLANT-BASED DIET RESOURCES

- This section of the Girls Gone Green's website has a list of helpful links for all things veggie: www.thegirlsgonegreen.com/links.html.

- Download a free vegetarian starter kit: www.pcrn.org/health/diets/vsk/vegetarian-starter-kit.

- There are some fantastic vegetarian and vegan recipes at this local blogger's site: www.floridacoastalcooking.com.

- Various environmental issues, including plant-based diets and veg event-related items, are covered on this site: www.theorganicadventurer.com.

- Bill Clinton read Dr. Dean Ornish's books, such as Program for Reversing Heart Disease, before becoming a vegetarian. He also refers to the work of Dr. T. Colin Campbell (The China Study) and Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn (Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease).

- The documentary Forks Over Knives is a good visual primer on the benefits of a plant-based diet.