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## [Save the planet: Stop eating meat](#)

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Photograph by Mike Kemp/Getty Images

One drizzly Thursday last May, the townsfolk of Ghent, a Flemish burg of some 250,000 souls famous for its *stoverij*—a stew of beef braised in beer—gathered outside a centuries-old slaughterhouse in the town's historic core to sample soy fritters, pick up a map of local vegetarian eateries, and to watch as a boy in a banana costume did valiant battle against another dressed as a beefsteak. This was Ghent's inaugural *Donderdag Veggiedag*—Thursday Veggieday, literally—a weekly holiday from the evils of beef, fish, pork and poultry introduced last year by city council, which declared that the moratorium on animal protein would be “good for the climate, your health and your taste buds.” Said a representative of the Ethical Vegetarian Alternative, Belgium's largest vegetarian organization and a partner in the city initiative: “If everyone in Flanders does not eat meat one day a week, we will save as much CO<sub>2</sub> in a year as taking half a million cars off the road.”

Though meatlessness in Ghent each Thursday is encouraged rather than required, the policy has made vegetarianism pervasive: 95 per cent of the city's children at 35 local schools, as well as the city's elected councillors and civil servants, now submit to the *Veggiedag* menu each week. One poster promoting the policy depicts a polar bear adrift on a shrunken hunk of ice declaring with relief: “Oef! It's Thursday.”

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*Donderdag Veggiedag* was a global first, putting medieval Ghent on the cutting edge of efforts to combat climate change by changing the way people eat. But elsewhere, too, the moderate meat movement is gaining ground. A Meatless Mondays organization founded in the U.S. has now opened branches in Holland, Finland, Canada, Taiwan and Australia. Following Ghent's lead, cities like São Paulo and Tel Aviv have created city-wide schemes. Last year, Baltimore became the first city in North America to mandate Meatless Mondays in its school cafeterias, for environmental as well as health reasons. A similar proposal has just been made for New York City schools.

Meanwhile, meatless manifestos are topping bestseller lists, from food phenom Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food*, with its subtle suggestion, "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants," to American novelist Jonathan Safran Foer's painfully graphic anti-meat treatise, *Eating Animals*. Dwelling on all the nasty details of the livestock industry, Safran Foer reminds us that even meat from humanely raised cattle "came from an animal who, at best—and it's precious few who get away with this—was burned, mutilated and killed for the sake of a few minutes of human pleasure."

Star power, too, is focusing more attention on the cause. In December, former Beatle and long-time animal rights crusader Sir Paul McCartney appeared before the European Parliament in Brussels to back his Meat Free Monday campaign, which seeks to cut CO2 emissions by encouraging people to go meatless once a week. An impressive score of celebrity endorsements followed, from such luminaries as singer Chris Martin, actor Alec Baldwin, '60s-era model Twiggy, former U.S. vice-president Al Gore and, most recently, *American Idol* judge Simon Cowell. Gwyneth Paltrow issued a meatless edition of GOOP, her Internet newsletter, featuring a column by McCartney.

For centuries, people have debated the ethics of killing for food (one clearly carnivorous Stoic philosopher, Chrysippus, wrote in the third century BCE that the purpose of an animal's soul was simply to keep the meat fresh). New is the focus on the environmental consequences of meat—one rooted in science. Meatless proponents often refer to a 2009 study by researchers at the University of Chicago that suggests the vegan diet is a more effective way of curbing climate change than driving a hybrid car. Or, for that matter, a 2008 Carnegie Mellon report that suggests that eschewing meat beats eating local. And they're quick to draw comparisons with more conventional ways of cutting greenhouse gas emissions—things like public transit or switching off the lights. One oft repeated number is Carnegie Mellon researcher Christopher Weber's calculation that forgoing red meat for veggies just a day a week would save 1,860 km of driving a year (assuming the car did 10.6 km per litre of gas).

The numbers are compelling. According to one exhaustive report, "Livestock's long shadow," released in 2006 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, livestock accounts for 18 per cent of worldwide greenhouse gases, more than those emitted by all forms of transportation combined, and is a leading cause of deforestation and water pollution. Other estimates put the percentage of greenhouse gases leaked into the atmosphere during the raising of animals for food even higher. Last October, Robert Goodland, formerly the World Bank's lead environmental adviser, and Jeff Anhang, a World Bank researcher, attributed a staggering 51 per cent of world emissions to livestock production.

It's not just CO2 that's at issue. Thanks to our appetite for bacon, vast lakes of manure dot the North American heartland, steaming nitrous oxide into the air, while the antibiotics fed to our sick, grain-fed cattle ooze into our waterways. Such vistas have led to plaintive requests like that of Rajendra Pachauri, the now-embattled head of the UN's panel on climate change: "Please eat less meat." Pachauri's Nobel

Prize-winning group has come under fire for a series of errors in its widely read 2007 report—including the faulty claim that the Himalayan glaciers would melt by 2035—but its meatless message continues to strike a chord.

Photographs by Bullit Marquez/AP (left) and Chris Pizzello/AP (right)

Indeed, the environmental concerns surrounding meat have helped make it the new nexus for a host of increasingly popular social concerns—food, culture, politics and the environment. The idea of channelling meat’s deepening carbon footprint into potent political rhetoric came to Tobias Leenaert, a long-time animal rights activist in Ghent, a few years ago. As a member of the Ethical Vegetarian Alternative, he had helped launch a pro-vegetarian campaign in 2000 that met with limited success. Then, in 2007, his group started looking for a campaign message with “a bigger scope, an idea that was more approachable”—in other words, a collective face more agreeable than that of the dogmatic vegan preaching against the suffering of animals or the perils of saturated fat.

The group hit upon the flourishing environmental movement and growing fears about climate change as a nifty marketing gambit. The new message made it “easier to get a lot of partners involved,” says Leenaert. “We wouldn’t have been able to get the city’s support if we just had a go-vegetarian message.” Now he hopes to convince even more of his neighbours by making the eating of animal flesh as embarrassing as owning a Hummer. “Just as driving an SUV to the bakery around the corner is sort of shameful,” he says. “We need the same thing with meat.”

When McCartney launched his Meat Free Monday campaign last June, it was “Livestock’s long shadow,” the UN report, that he referred to, saying: “We thought cars were the villain of the piece, but it appears livestock produces more.” Trust a pop-song virtuoso to boil an issue down to its snappy essence —“Less meat equals less heat” is as easy on the ears as *beep beep’m beep beep yeah*, yet it has broad backing from climate change scientists, who argue that meat, apart from presenting such risks as heart disease, obesity and *E. coli*, is a wasteful luxury. “It’s just a matter of feed conversion efficiencies—we’re going to feed 10 times as much grain to cattle to get a kilogram of meat compared to if we just ate that grain ourselves,” says Nathan Pelletier, an ecological economist at Dalhousie University and a leading expert in the environmental impacts of food. “It’s the basic math of animal physiology.”

Then there are the emissions stemming from the methane burps of cattle and other ruminants, and the

fertilizer laid out over fields of feed, not to mention the clear-cutting wrought by the demand for pasture. Estimates of the greenhouse gases associated with different meat products vary, but beef is undoubtedly king—between 13 and 30 kg of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent per kg of beef, says Pelletier. That's followed by pork, with estimates ranging from 2.3 to 6.5 kg of CO<sub>2</sub>, then chicken, which ranges from 1.5 to three kilograms, roughly the same as the emissions associated with some food crops. The environmental impacts of fish are more complex and vary enormously according to species; one University of Chicago study even suggests that fish and red meat are almost equally energy inefficient.

Though some argue that entirely grass-fed organic cattle—animals not fattened up with grain or corn on massive feedlots—generate less greenhouse gases because no energy is expended in producing synthetic fertilizer and growing feed, there's no clear consensus. On the one hand, cattle tend to be raised on grasslands ill-suited to food crops and, in their foraging, actually help pasture lands sequester carbon. On the other, they have a tough time extracting all the goodness available to them from hard-to-digest grass—hence their four stomachs—and on that diet generate even more methane, a greenhouse gas 20 times more potent than CO<sub>2</sub>.

Questions around the sustainability of meat are particularly pressing given the global rise in meat consumption in recent years. Consumption around the world has quintupled in the past 50 years and is set to double by 2050, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization. Sixty years ago, producers generated around 18 kg of meat per person; by 1994, production had jumped to a staggering 35.4 kg per person. In 2008, the most recent Statistics Canada numbers available, Canadians ate just over 100 kg of red meat, fish and chicken per person, more than a quarter of a kilo a day.

Trends in developing nations like India and China, where ballooning middle classes are boosting appetites for animal protein, suggest things will only get worse. Demand in China doubled between 1990 and 2005 and continues to rise with galloping intensity. As that demand grows, so do the ominous forecasts. "If you look at the impact on the planet of today's levels of meat consumption, it becomes absolutely clear—there's no way that we can continue to eat meat at the rate we do or that developing nations are going to be able to satisfy their growing demand," says David Boyd, author, along with David Suzuki, of *David Suzuki's Green Guide*.

These realities are creeping into policy discussions around the world. A tax on meat that would reflect its carbon output has been discussed in the Swedish parliament, and by the influential British economist Lord Stern. Princeton bioethicist Peter Singer, writing in New York's *Daily News* in October, proposed a 50 per cent tax on meat and compared it to tobacco, going so far as to argue that "the reasons for a tax on beef and other meats are stronger than those for discouraging consumption of cigarettes, trans fats or sugary drinks" because of meat's triple whammy impacts on health, the environment and animal welfare. Last year in the U.K., farmers feared Environment Secretary Hilary Benn—a vegetarian known derisively in the British press as Veggie Benn—would produce a policy document encouraging British families to drop red meat from their diets. (Instead, Benn said only that British consumers should choose less environmentally impactful foods, and encouraged food brands to participate in a voluntary "green" labelling program.)

Photograph by Michael Dalder/Reuters

Not surprisingly, the war on meat has roused the attentions of a red-blooded conservative establishment, particularly in the U.S. Fox News pundit Glenn Beck has dismissed Meatless Mondays as “indoctrination.” Lou Dobbs, formerly of CNN, warns it is “a real political storm in the making.” Just as many, both in the U.S. and at home, are skeptical of the new anti-meat rationale. “There’s no question that with individuals like Paul McCartney, that is a primary driver for them—an animal rights agenda, not necessarily an environmental agenda,” says Ron Glaser of the Beef Information Centre, a Calgary-based industry group.

The North American meat lobby, too, has been fighting back. Things came to a head last April in the United States, when the Environmental Protection Agency moved to declare that the climate change properties of greenhouse gases endanger public health. The effort prompted the U.S. National Cattlemen’s Beef Association to file a court challenge arguing that future climate regulations would hurt beef farmers. For environmentalists, the cattlemen’s gambit was a clear pre-emptive strike against what the EPA finding would mean for them. “They know full well that that’s just setting the stage for carbon taxes,” says Pelletier. “Everyone sees it coming—the smart companies are those that are acting early to get a handle on emissions in their supply chains.” Even Wal-Mart has committed to slapping sustainability index labels on everything it sells, meat included.

The livestock industry is certainly large and powerful enough to counter that message. On its recently launched website, *MeatFuelsAmerica.com*, the American Meat Institute claims the industry contributes US\$832 billion to the U.S. economy, almost six per cent of that country’s GDP. It also estimates that the meat and poultry products industry employs some 1.8 million workers, plus another 2.6 million on the supplier side.

As it is, the industry has been battling its share of problems. The Canadian beef industry, worth \$20.3 billion, according to the Canadian Meat Council, has been battered by bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and last year’s listeriosis outbreak. Producers so far haven’t taken steps to counter anti-meat crusaders’ claims, largely because the movement is not as well developed here as it is in Europe. But as the campaigns grow, the industry is left to wonder—how far can all this go? “We have nowhere near the resources of a Paul McCartney,” says Canadian Cattlemen’s Association environment chair Lynn Grant. “We don’t have the following that his entertainment business has generated, we aren’t

able to fight on the same kind of battlefield.”

Meanwhile, the anti-meat crusade continues to grow. Meatless Monday, which started out as a rather ho-hum public-health initiative rolled out in association with the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in 2003, went viral after shifting focus to “the health of the planet.” Soon it spawned a weekly column in the *Huffington Post*, a weekly segment on *Air America* radio and reams of press. When Baltimore last year mandated the program in its schools and brought in items like homemade eggplant dip and whole-grain pizza, the move made Antony Geraci, head of the Food and Nutrition Services Department for Baltimore City Public Schools, an international culinary icon, with profiles in foodie bibles like the now-defunct *Gourmet* magazine.

Political activists have succeeded in giving the issue a sheen of cool, and young people, a demographic prone to such fashions, are therefore in the vanguard of meatlessness. A study by Aramark Limited, a massive food supplier that services schools, businesses and hospitals, found that a quarter of university students now demand vegetarian and vegan options. “There’s definitely a revolution happening in food services,” says Tina Horsley, Aramark Canada’s director of wellness and sustainability, a position the company created just a few years ago. McMaster University (the most vegetarian-friendly university in Canada, according to PETA), has a separate dining facility where meat is strictly prohibited and where students down 200 litres of vegetarian chili each week.

Likewise, when students at Branksome Hall, a Toronto private school for girls, championed the Meatless Monday campaign, the new menu put it on PETA’s “Top five most vegetarian-friendly high schools in Canada.” The veggie fare served there is a far cry from soggy french fries: baked mushroom caps with bruschetta and cheese, edamame and homemade hummus are a few favourites.

If those dishes sound a tad highfalutin, that’s in keeping with the anti-meat movement’s affinity with the chattering classes—it’s the well-to-do who are most likely to turn against the most expensive food out there: animal flesh. Indeed, moderate meat-eating has escaped the fringes of granola activism to become a place where even gourmands can feel at home. “Food politics used to be sharply differentiated from an interest in ‘fine food,’ ” notes University of Toronto sociologist Josée Johnston, who studies food and “foodie” culture. “A lot of social movements are now realizing that by tying themselves to consumer politics they can get more traction.”

Photograph by Jessica Darmanin

In Paris, the food elite was shocked when Alain Passard, whose restaurant l'Arpège boasts three Michelin stars, scrapped meat from the menu to create a vegetarian oasis. In between waxing poetic about “the freedom of inventing a new universe” of vegetable delights, Passard has argued for the need to “replant the earth.” “The people who are into foodie culture now use the environmental credentials of their food as a source of status,” says Johnston. “That puts low-income shoppers, or even middle-income shoppers, in a difficult position, because they don't have the economic or cultural capital necessary to participate in high-status eating.”

Such a display of conspicuous conservation apparently needs its own nomenclature. Hence the adoption of labels like “flexitarian,” voted the year's most useful word in 2003 by the American Dialect Society, which defined it as “a vegetarian who occasionally eats meat.” Dawn Jackson Blatner, a Chicago dietician, first heard the term then. “I was like, ‘Oh my God, I'm finally something. I'm not just a lazy vegetarian. And I don't have to feel like I'm secretly eating pork chops in a closet.’ ” Since then, Blatner's 2009 book, *The Flexitarian Diet*, has earned her celebrity status. She has toured the offices of the “*People* magazines of the world” as an ambassador of “this minimizing meat movement.”

Cookbook authors Tara Mataraza Desmond and Joy Manning, a reformed vegan—she realized she missed eggs and bacon too much—grabbed attention with *Almost Meatless*, which offers such not-quite-vegetarian recipes as cod cakes cut with corn. Mark Bittman, a *New York Times* food writer, is another foodie who has scaled back on meat but hasn't given it up. Bittman found fame with his cookbook, *How to Cook Everything*. He has since changed his mind, publishing *How to Cook Everything Vegetarian*; Bittman himself is vegan until every night at 6 p.m., when he permits his appetite anything it wants.

As with any sort of privation, cutting down on consumption has elevated meat's status. A more discerning attitude may be transforming the way we consume meat, with the emphasis on quality and connoisseurship rather than quantity and endless choice. Such a reappraisal of animal protein as a complement to the meal rather than its focus has for some turned its role into something more akin to that of wine at dinner. Important, sure, but better savoured than swilled.

That brand of “mindful” meat-eating has made butchers into culinary stars and charcuterie into the new sushi. “What's emerged alongside flexitarianism is an interest in butchery and nose-to-tail eating,” says Johnston. At his London restaurant, the St. John Bar & Restaurant, Fergus Henderson serves dishes that include generous heapings of offal. Gordon Ramsay, the celebrity chef famous from TV's *Hell's Kitchen*, has raised his own livestock on his most recent show, *The F-Word*, slaughtering pigs and turkey for service on the series finales. In Toronto, the model has been taken up by the Black Hoof. “If you're going to kill the animal, you might as well have enough respect for it to use every part,” says co-owner Jen Agg. Specializing in homemade charcuterie, a rarity in the city, the Hoof keeps its own hogs. “I'm looking forward to the challenge of raising our own pigs and looking them in the eye and understanding that the walk from farm to table is an ugly walk for the pig,” Agg says. That kind of visceral awareness, too, will tend to promote meat moderation—if not exactly the kind Sir Paul is after, then something not far off.

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