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The vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions caused by agriculture are directly or indirectly related to livestock. The UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) estimates that livestock are responsible for 18 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, a larger share than that of all transport.¹



Picnik

A call for friendly food

If meat production plays such an important role in global warming, each day that meat is consumed less makes a substantial difference. This is a very simple and low threshold action any individual can take. Unfortunately, as agro industries lobby harder, people are consuming more meat and more dairy products than ever before. Globally, FAO even predicts that meat production will more than double by 2050, predominantly in the developing world as emerging new economies emulate Western lifestyles and consumption patterns.

However, eating less meat can be seized as an excellent opportunity to take individual responsibility in the global challenge ahead. The amount of emissions saved by a party eating vegetarian food is significant: a dinner party for 50 people saves no less than 350 kg of CO₂. This equals the emissions of a 2250 km drive. Its energy saving is equivalent to that of 25 energy saving light bulbs, a result that couldn't even be reached if everyone attended the party by bicycle!²

Whereas more and more individual households are becoming 'flexitarian', replacing meat and fish by vegetarian alternatives, restaurant and catering businesses are failing to assume a leading role in the reduction of meat consumption. Almost one third of the food we consume daily is provided by restaurants, snack bars and catering. Considering the scale of this and the subsequent impact on global warming, the food providing industries are missing a great opportunity to raise awareness and take responsibility.

Although most restaurants today include – usually very mediocre – veggie dishes on their menus out of a sense of good practice, from a gastronomic point of view, vegetarian food is absolutely not taken seriously. This is a missed opportunity for gastronomy as well as for climate change. In this perspective, I decided to make my own contribution to the popularization of vegetarian food. Five years ago, I started a vegetarian restaurant and catering business. The latter has now become our main activity and is situated in a very small but well-defined market niche.

Our catering is quite unique because we cook purely vegetarian without sacrificing quality, variety and taste. For instance, we make veggie sushi hence respecting fish populations and cook spicy Mexican enchiladas with GMO-free soy proteins. It is evident that this concept combines perfectly with organic and fairtrade ingredients. All our food is fresh and homemade. We put a lot of emphasis on the look and taste of the food, but try to avoid gastronomic protocol. Essential elements for typical Picnik catering are an informal atmosphere, outstanding food and friendly and correct service.

Our clients consist mainly of non-profit organizations working on environmental issues, dance and theater companies and academic institutions, as well as many enthusiastic individuals. Of course, these clients are already



convinced of the health and environmental benefits of vegetarian food. However, the impact of our cooking adventure reaches far beyond the limitations of the so-called 'in crowd'. Unlike our restaurant, where individual consumers intentionally choose to come and eat vegetarian, our catering service also reaches large sets of 'non-converts', people who would generally order meat, fish or poultry.

Our guests savor a nice vegetarian lunch, a glass of organic wine or fair-trade juice with some tasty veggie tapas and appetizers. People generally appreciate the food, and rarely ask questions about missing animal ingredients. One would be truly astonished to discover just how little omnivore fellow diners notice the absence of meat or fish. We never tell them everything is vegetarian. Some people find out, some don't. Nevertheless, at the end of the event, everyone has always enjoyed a constructive meal. From our side, we contribute to the culinary appreciation of vegetarian food and to increasing consumer awareness. In most cases, we dispel some obstinate prejudices against vegetarian food. And from time to time, we win a soul and convert someone.

Annabel Meuleman is the founder and manager of Picnik, a vegetarian catering business. She has a Master in Media Studies from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). Cooking and traveling are her favorite hobbies. She worked as a public information officer with UN Peacekeeping mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA) for four years. Back in Belgium, she was introduced to the food business while working as a vegetarian cook in two social restaurant projects in Brussels (Recyclart and Elane). After another two-year assignment as communication officer with a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Ecuador, she returned to Belgium with her husband, child and an entrepreneurial spirit to start her own project. She launched Picnik in 2004, a small vegetarian restaurant in the center of Brussels. Since 2009, vegetarian catering has become the main activity.

- 1 Livestock's long shadow: environmental issues and options, FAO, Rome 2006.
- 2 CO₂ besparing: Achtergrondinformatie, EVA, Verleidelijk Veggies, 2009.