



Going vegetarian in Geneva

For Indians far from home, meat was the ultimate foreign object

By Savita Iyer-Ahrestani
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In 1963, my father had already been in Geneva — the Swiss city that was to become his permanent home — for two years. He had never been to the West before and, until the day he first tasted it, could not have been any further removed from animal flesh.

A **Hindu Brahmin** whose religion strictly forbade meat-eating, he had been raised in India on a vegetarian diet that consisted of rice, vegetables, and lentils. He had never tasted cheese. Until he arrived in Geneva, he had never eaten sliced bread, either.

Explaining vegetarianism to the Swiss locals in the early 1960s was nearly impossible. His landlady was convinced my father would die an early death. She didn't know that he had already transgressed the boundaries of caste before coming to Geneva: in Bombay, where he went to university, he had secretly tried an omelet. This act of rebellion (observant Hindu Brahmins do not eat eggs) helped him a great deal during his first two years in Geneva.

During that time, my father's daily luncheon consisted of a thick omelet, served with a heaped plateful of crisp French fries. He faithfully ate this same meal day in and day out, until someone told him it was all right to add pasta to his repertoire. So, during his third year in Geneva, my father alternated his lunchtime omelet-and-fries with a meal of spaghetti and tomato sauce.

Back then, Switzerland was even more the land of plenty than it is now, and each time he ordered his pasta meal, my father would be served a saucepan full of spaghetti, accompanied by a cauldron of hot tomato sauce, a cereal bowl heaped with freshly grated Parmesan cheese, and two whole bars of creamy yellow butter. (The butter was for either melting into the steaming pasta or spreading onto the entire loaf of crusty bread that came, *de rigueur*, with every restaurant meal.)

But after two years of omelets and spaghetti, eating had become a punishment. For lack of choice, it was time to move on in the dreaded direction.

"Chicken," a friend told him, when my father approached her to ask for her guidance. "Chinese-style."



The author's newly married parents in Geneva.

Chicken was the least offensive kind of meat, she said. And the Chinese sauces would dull the flavor so he would not even know he was eating it.

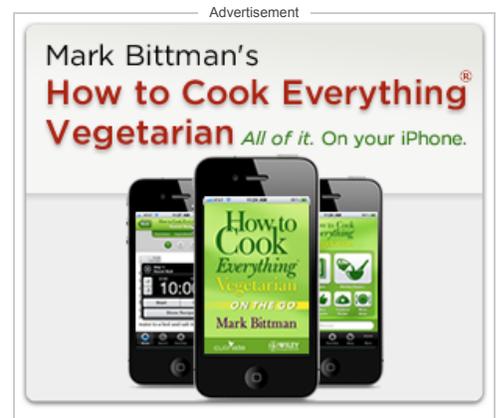
It was a question of survival and of acceptance. Once he did it, it wasn't so bad. True, the chicken had a rubbery consistency and exuded a funny smell that my father could actually taste. But after a few mouthfuls, he got used to it. And his friend had been right about the Chinese sauces.

Next, she said, was beef — filet mignon, *bifteck haché*, and her personal favorite, the *entrecôte au fromage aux trois étages*, a three-tiered cheese-and-meat creation that must have been the European cousin of the Philly cheesesteak.

No problem, apparently, for my father to stomach. Indeed, he became something of an instantaneous carnivore, relishing his meat in all shapes and forms. His non-vegetarian self became more confident; he went to parties, danced the cha-cha and the foxtrot, and drank a lot of wine.

Until the summons came from back home: It was time for my father to settle down.

My mother was dressing up to go to a friend's wedding when my father arrived at her home in Calcutta. She had no intention of canceling her evening plans, even though her parents had begged her to stay home to meet the prospective bridegroom.



My mother, at 22, was a stubborn old maid. Several potential alliances had already come her way, but my mother had rejected them all. Every day, her mother cried and wrung her hands in desperation, while aunts and other female relatives offered comfort and begged the gods not to saddle my grandparents with an unmarried daughter.

“There are two of them sitting out there,” my eldest aunt, coming into the room after scoping out my father and his cousin, warned my mother. “One looks like a gollywog. That’s not the one, so don’t panic and run out screaming. It’s the other one.”

My mother says she decided to marry my father because, in her brief passage through the room, she noticed that he had fashionably cut trousers. My father says my mother’s sleeveless sari blouse and silver earrings — unheard of and extremely risqué attire for a South Indian Brahmin girl in those days — is what attracted him.

They got married in a week, and one week after that, my mother was put on a plane and packed off to Geneva with a virtual stranger. Her mother couldn’t get over it and cried for days.

“I don’t understand why you’re crying,” my youngest uncle said in surprise. “First you cried because she wasn’t getting married; now you’re crying because she is married. Make up your mind!”

My parents arrived in Geneva in early September, a perfect time of year. The skies are blue and the afternoons are warm, and only a light evening chill hints of autumn to come.

In his apartment, my father — accustomed to eating all his meals in restaurants — had only a kettle. My mother took one look at it and wept. She wept for days to come. She knew no one in Geneva; she didn’t speak a word of French. She wasn’t even a great cook. She spent the days waiting for an envelope from home, which always included a recipe carefully scripted by her father.

My father was a good man, and he was very eager to make my mother a part of the new world he had joined. Shortly after their arrival in Geneva, he took her out to the **Relais de L'Entrecôte**, a restaurant renowned not just for its meat but also for its inimitable *sauce maison*. But things did not go quite as he had planned: My mother took one bite of her steak and gagged.

“Never again,” she swore. “Never.”

“Really?” My father was incredulous.

“Really.”

It was at that juncture that the practical sense we all admire my mother for got the better of her. Swallowing her tears in one big gulp, she went forth into her new life. She learned to drive a car and wear pants. She bought an array of pots and pans, took French classes, and cut her hair into a shoulder-length bob. Somehow, she taught herself the basics of chicken curry. To this day, my mother — a strict vegetarian — has never tasted her own chicken curry, but anyone who has can vouch that it's top-notch.

In an aggressively non-vegetarian city, my mother somehow managed to keep our kitchen meat-free. We ate fresh, wholesome food, prepared with little oil and virtually no salt. From the one and only health-food store in town — a tiny, easy-to-miss hole-in-the-wall — my mother scouted out the grains and lentils that would become staples of our diet. She ordered turmeric, cumin seeds, and red chile powder from Indian grocery stores in London. She took simple cauliflower and frozen carrots and spiced them up so flavorfully that my father swore off meat, happy to forego his steaks for my mother's fresh and flavorful curries.

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Geneva Chicken Curry
Everyday Cauliflower
Curry

Years later, vegetarianism became the order of the day. Even those who had been hardcore carnivores were advocating its merits. The menu cards at some of Geneva's oldest restaurants featured vegetarian options, while supermarkets boasted a cornucopia of vegetables and all manner of tofu products.

“I told you,” my mother scoffed.

In fact, things have now changed so much in Geneva that even the infamous *entrecôte au fromage aux trois étages* has long since ceased to exist — at least, that's what I think.

*After living in Switzerland, India, Malaysia, Myanmar, Britain, and the Netherlands, freelance journalist **Savita Iyer-Ahrestani** now lives in Westfield, New Jersey. She writes about business, parenting, travel, and food.*

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