

Uncrue Beauty

By RUTH LA FERLA
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HADASS KANTOROWICZ is on the fence. "I eat less meat than I used to," said Ms. Kantorowicz, a self-described tantric healer who stopped in last week at Organic Avenue, a vegan general store in downtown Manhattan. "I'm definitely a lot more conscious than I used to be." While she appreciates the virtues of a meat-free diet, she stops short of embracing a vegan way of life, one that would ask her to forsake a croc-embossed bag or patent leather pumps. "And I'm not ready to wear hemp," she confided.

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Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

CLOTHES WITH A CONSCIENCE A cotton sweater coat by Stella McCartney, with Ecoganik organic cotton pants that are available at Organic Avenue.



But a proliferation of vegan-friendly fashions and stores that ban animal products outright from their shelves may tempt her to change her tune. If she has yet to adopt the zero-tolerance approach advocated by the most militant vegetarians, she typifies the customer that many vegan marketers are now courting.

National chains like Whole Foods; boutiques like MooShoes, a New York outlet for imitation-leather wallets, belts and bags; online stores like Pangea; and eco-minded labels like Moral Fiber, Real Fake, Novacas (no cows) and Matt & Nat are encouraging shoppers, even those merely flirting with a "cruelty free" diet, to embrace its precepts not just in the kitchen but in their wardrobes. To their minds, vegan chic, once an oxymoron, is a glossy new marketing handle. Clothes and accessories once shunned for their aura of hair-shirt deprivation have acquired a hint of luxury.

Vegans, who may be thought of as extreme vegetarians, strive for a diet and way of life that is noninjurious to both animals and the environment, directly or through the processing of materials like leather, wool or silk. From motives of conscience or health, most reject shoes and clothing made from hides, even those made with animal-based glues and dyes.

"People are more conscious today of what they're wearing, why they're wearing it and how it affects the environment," said Robert Burke, a fashion retail consultant in New York. To ignore such issues "is not sexy today," he said.

Six months ago Denise Mari opened Organic Avenue on the Upper East Side. "At the time, I was a vegetarian and

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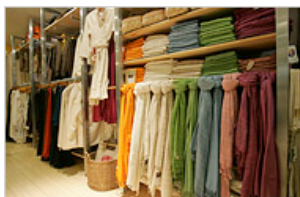
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VIRTUOUS Top, cotton Stella McCartney sweater, Ecoganik pants, tank made of corn fiber by Moral Fervor, Stella McCartney cotton purse, natural stone pendant by Cole Lopez. Above, a denim dress made of hemp and recycled polyester by NaturevsFuture and a woven cotton and wood bag by Stella McCartney.



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

NO ANIMALS WERE HARMED From top: ahimsa silk scarves and a hemp shirtdress at Organic Avenue, 101 Stanton Street (near Orchard); croc-embossed imitation leather bag by Danielle Nicole at NY Artificial, Eighth Avenue at West 12th Street; MooShoes, 152 Allen Street (at Rivington); a microfiber wedge by

the Lower East Side. At one time being vegan meant focusing on what you had to give up,” she said. “Today we’re stepping beyond the mundane what-you-need-to-survive approach” and concentrating instead on “how to make this a fun lifestyle that other people can relate to.”

“We’d like people to say, ‘Wow, look how fashionable this is! I want it for its style.’ ”

At her shop Ms. Mari sells hemp and bamboo tanks and shirtdresses, and even men’s suits made from ahimsa silk, a fiber processed without injuring silkworms (\$700).

Certainly Ms. Mari and other merchants are beneficiaries of a spike in the vegetarian population. As of last year, there were an estimated 4.8 million vegetarians in the United States, one-third to one-half of them vegan, according to the Vegetarian Resource Group, a nonprofit educational organization. That number has nearly doubled since 1997.

But today retailers and designers are aiming at potential customers identified in a survey last year by Mintel International, a consumer research company, as “occasional vegetarians.” They shop vegan selectively, as the Mintel study pointed out, but their “purchasing power is paramount.”

This health- and eco-conscious population has contributed most visibly to the growth of a \$1.2 billion market for vegetarian goods (primarily dairy, egg, cheese, meat and poultry substitutes and tofu), according to Mintel, one that jumped 63.5 percent between 2000 and 2005.

Just a half-dozen years ago, shoppers searching for cow-friendly wares had to resort to shoes from Payless, “vegan” by virtue of their synthetic materials, or to utility plastic or canvas boots, wallets and backpacks sold through Vegan Essentials, one of a handful of online stores. Now even a few mass marketers are incorporating stylish vegan products into their lines. Vans promotes its Geoff Rowley vegan skateboarding shoes, made from synthetic nubuck and rubber. Rampage, a mall brand, is advertising “cruelty free” imitation leather styles.

In New York an outcropping of eco-conscious boutiques carries goods that would pass muster with even the strictest vegetarians. Kaight, a five-month-old store on the Lower East Side, offers hand-stitched dresses of recycled cashmere and wool; organic denim jeans; and Linda Loudermilk dresses made from Lyocell, a biodegradable wood pulp fiber (\$275). NY Artificial, in the meatpacking district of all places, sells one-of-a-kind synthetic suede and leather bags (\$275 to \$475) and corset-wide belts made from vegetal, a canvas coated with tree sap.

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Charmoné, at Kaight, 83 Orchard Street, near Broome; and a dress of recycled cashmere by Eko Logic, also at Kaight.

“There is a market for these designs,” said Alex Guzman, an owner. “People want to do something about protecting animal and human rights and the environment. But they don’t want to be carrying a canvas tote, the kind you buy in bookstores.”

On the luxury level, Stella McCartney, long an activist for animal rights, sells canvas, linen, Lucite and imitation leather shoes and handbags, which, despite prices in the \$800 range, have an avid following.

Some of the new customers are picky, cooling their cowhide heels as they hold out for quality wares. Judith Green, a education consultant, was happy to try on a wrap dress made of recycled cashmere at Kaight, but balked at the selection of synthetic shoes. “I haven’t found the wear and the comfort of a hand-stitched Italian leather shoe,” she said. “If I did, I would trade in my own.”

There is a strong incentive to offer vegan versions of products seen in more conventional stores, said Deborah Wasserman, a director of the Vegetarian Resource Group. It is not uncommon, she noted, to find sexy, form-fitting PVC biker jackets, plastic iPod cases and stilettos. Such styles appeal to environmentalists and dedicated vegans alike, she said, contributing to a measurable growth in the vegan fashion resources.

To find them, “you don’t have to go to the hemp store,” said Marcia Mogelonsky, a research analyst at Mintel. Whole Foods and health food co-ops are becoming general stores, selling hemp shower curtains, bamboo flooring and organic cotton T-shirts along with flaxseed and tofu turkey.

Last year the vegan movement spawned the Vegan Fashion Blog, which trumpets the aesthetic virtues of Rampage cotton canvas totes, Chinese Laundry gold-tone plastic sandals, Baby Phat boots with ankle charms and Lands’ End “toasty” faux-suede gloves.

Such items have particular appeal to fashion indies, whose numbers proliferate on college campuses, where vegan dining rooms are no longer uncommon. “College students are much more invested in a lifestyle that allows them to think nothing of wearing pleather,” Ms. Mogelonsky said. “They have grown up on the three R’s: reduce, recycle, reuse.”

“They are more likely to adopt vegan fashion,” she added, “because unlike the baby boomers, to them it isn’t ‘weird.’ ”

Indeed, there are hints that some young would-be hipsters are feeling the pressure to conform. “Here all my friends think eating and shopping vegan is the cool thing to do,” said Ms. Kantorowicz, the healer, who recently moved to New York from Seattle. The movement has derived impetus from fashion celebrities like Ms. McCartney and from the entertainment world as well.

“Certainly Hollywood has been a big promoter,” Ms. Wasserman said, citing the powers of professed vegans like Natalie Portman, Alicia Silverstone, Woody Harrelson and Joaquin Phoenix.

Their vehemence has prompted some trend-conscious shoppers to embrace vegan wares, if not vegan values. At Stella McCartney, they buy the shoes and bags favored by Ms. Portman and her peers. “Most of these people don’t care whether the shoes are leather or not,” said Tiziana Lanza, the brand’s retail manager in the United States. “They buy for the cachet and the design.”

Jack McKeever, a singer, musician and sometime vegetarian, stopped by Organic Avenue

last week partly because he was hoping to buy an ahimsa silk suit that had earlier caught his eye. He admired the fabric and the look, he said. "If these people can compete aesthetically, I say, 'Rock on!'"

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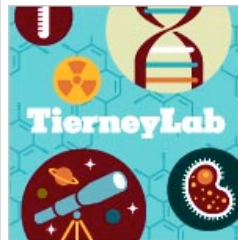
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