

# By Any Greens Necessary

A Revolutionary Guide for Black Women  
Who Want to Eat Great, Get Healthy,  
Lose Weight, and Look Phat

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# Introduction

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## *My Story*

**D**o you know any black women in their seventies who have excellent health? Who do not suffer from any chronic diseases, including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or arthritis? Who can walk five miles a day; do aerobics, yoga, and tai chi; and maintain a shapely 37-26-37 figure?

Can't name one? Then you haven't met my mother. At seventy-three, she's healthy and *phat!* And there aren't many like her. In fact, out of fourteen siblings, she's the only one who's remained completely disease-free into her senior years.

What makes her different is that, in addition to exercising, she eats plenty of foods that we all know are good for us. Foods like fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and legumes (beans, nuts, lentils, and split peas). Just as important, she never eats foods made from beef, pork, poultry, fish, milk, cheese, or eggs, which are notoriously loaded with saturated fat, cholesterol, and animal protein that can cause chronic diseases.

In other words, she fills her plate with foods made from plants, not animals. Consider black bean chili with cornbread, spicy col-

lard greens with garlic and sun-dried tomatoes, and homemade apple crumb pie. Surprised? We'll talk recipes later.

If you want to put a label on my mom, call her a vegan. While you're at it, call me one, too. I'm the one who encouraged my mother and middle sister to go veg with me more than twenty years ago. Today, we're living proof that eating delicious and nutritious vegan foods can keep you healthy, happy, and hippy.

Now I know what you may be thinking. A vegan lifestyle doesn't sound all that appetizing, right? Well, I was right there with you until the day I heard an unexpected talk that would change my life.

It was 1986, my sophomore year at Amherst College. Our Black Student Union brought legendary humorist and civil rights activist Dick Gregory to campus to talk about the political, economic, and social condition of black America. But Gregory flipped the script. Instead of talking about the state of black America, he talked about the *plate* of black America—and how poorly black folks eat.

I didn't know then that Gregory was a vegetarian who had changed his diet in 1965 as a result of his work in the civil rights movement. In his memoir, *Callus on My Soul*, Gregory wrote about that time:

I had been a participant in all of the “major” and most of the “minor” civil rights demonstrations of the early sixties. Under the leadership of Dr. King, I became totally committed to non-violence, and I was convinced that nonviolence meant opposition to killing in any form. I felt the commandment “Thou Shalt Not Kill” applied to human beings not only in their dealings with each other—war, lynching, assassination, murder and the like—but in their practice of killing animals for food and sport. Animals and humans suffer and die alike. Violence causes the same pain, the same spilling of blood, the same stench of death, the same arrogant, cruel and brutal taking of life.

By the 1980s, when Gregory spoke at my college, he had expanded his advocating of vegetarianism to include health concerns and had become a successful nutrition guru, famous for his Bahamian Diet Nutritional Drink.

But, as I said, I knew none of that at the time. Instead, I sat captive as Gregory extolled the virtues of vegetarian foods, which I had no interest in whatsoever because of an unforgivable experience during my seventh-grade year at Sidwell Friends School.

That year, two of my teachers decided that the food on our class camping trip should be all vegetarian. I looked forward to this camping trip all year long. It was a big deal. The other classes got to have “regular” food like hot dogs and hamburgers and s’mores on their camping trips. But just because my teachers were vegetarians, they thought they could ruin the camping trip for the rest of us.

So there I was, in seventh grade, faced with this grave injustice. I decided to write a petition and collect signatures from my classmates to try to stop it. Unfortunately, not everyone saw having vegetarian food on the camping trip as such a huge problem, and only a few other students signed the petition, which my teachers then promptly overruled. I was forced to drink fruit juice and eat granola and peanut butter and honey sandwiches on whole wheat bread for an entire weekend.

That was my introduction to vegetarianism. Honestly, I thought it was something that crazy white people did, and I had not given it a second thought since seventh grade.

All of this ran through my mind as I waited for Dick Gregory to finish his lecture. I thought, OK, obviously crazy black people are vegetarians, too. But then he had the nerve to graphically trace the path of a hamburger from a cow on a factory farm to a fast-food restaurant to a heart attack. That’s what got me. The way the cows are raised and slaughtered sounded cruel and gross, and almost unbelievable, not to mention how much artery-clogging fat and cholesterol is in a single hamburger. (I’ll talk more about

that in chapter 2). I wondered why no one had ever told me this before. Even my seventh-grade teachers never told me *why* they were vegetarians. Then again, I never asked.

But in college, I questioned everything. My political science and African American studies classes had fostered in me a growing awareness around issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and imperialism. It was with this emerging consciousness that I digested Dick Gregory's words. I was open to questioning the way I had eaten all of my life as well. I left the lecture feeling less hoodwinked by Gregory and more duped by society.

At lunch that day, I couldn't eat another hamburger. I also couldn't eat hot dogs, chicken, or any other meat. For the next few days, I ate bread and pasta and cheese.

I felt dazed. None of my friends seemed bothered by Gregory's lecture, at least not enough to change their diets. I called my mother and my middle sister, a senior at nearby Tufts University, and told them I thought I should become a vegetarian.

The problem was that I hated vegetables. Growing up, I was always the last one left at the dinner table, pushing the broccoli or peas or brussels sprouts around on my plate until my mother finally came back in the kitchen and put her foot down. Then we'd start all over again the next night.

I also hated any other kind of food that looked healthy. If it wasn't greasy, I didn't want it. In fact, I used to dip the bacon *back* in the grease can on the stove when my mother wasn't looking. We didn't eat a lot of junk food at my house. There was no Kool-Aid or cookie jar or candy bowl, and desserts were reserved for a weekend treat. But I did pig out at school.

Lunch was an all-you-can-eat affair where I could have as many helpings as I wanted. Nobody forced me to eat the vegetables, and I could gorge on the desserts I didn't have at home. On days when they served chocolate pudding, my friend Gina and I would spend recess in the cafeteria eating trays and trays of the sweet chocolate goodness.