NO MEAT MAY BLOG #1

By: Catherine Causley



REFLECTIONS FROM A FAMILY OF FOUR

This year, our family decided to take part in No Meat May (see over for more about the challenge), with support from Exmouth Town Council. We are a local family of four who love cooking, eating, and trying new foods, so this felt like a good challenge for us. That said, going completely meat-free for a month was still a bit daunting, especially with two teenagers in the house.

Meet the family

Our children are 12 and 14, a girl and a boy, and while they're generally adventurous eaters who enjoy plenty of vegetables, they weren't exactly thrilled at the idea of a whole month without meat. That made my personal challenge very clear from the start: could I make vegetarian food that they'd genuinely enjoy?

We're a fairly typical family in how we eat. We do eat meat, though not every day. One of our children has a dairy intolerance, so we already limit dairy, and we rarely eat fish (aside from the occasional fish finger sandwich). In theory, a vegetarian month should have been manageable but Week One quickly reminded me that theory and practice aren't always the same thing.



I'd forgotten I'd signed up!

A slightly chaotic start ...

The first challenge was entirely my own fault: I'd forgotten I'd signed up. I had some sandwich meat in the fridge that needed using, and I didn't want to waste it. So for the first weekend, the children still had chicken in their sandwiches, while my husband and I stuck strictly to vegetarian meals. I also decided that while I would follow the No Meat May rules carefully, I'd allow the children flexibility when they were out of the house. Twice a week they have school lunches, and I felt it was important they felt comfortable with their choices.

On Bank Holiday Monday, we headed to a local car boot sale. We'd been setting up since 7am and were absolutely starving. Unfortunately, there were no vegetarian food options at all. In the end, I settled for a coffee. It wasn't ideal, but it taught me a valuable lesson very early on: **planning and preparation** are going to be key this month.

Another learning curve came with social situations. I'm visiting my parents this weekend, and my step-mum is a wonderful cook, had planned a roast lamb dinner with all the trimmings. I had to make a quick phone call to explain the **No Meat May** challenge. Luckily, she was completely understanding, and I'll happily enjoy the roast potatoes and vegetables instead.

ADOPTING FAMILY FAVOURITES

Once I got over the initial mindset shift, the week became easier. Rather than reinventing everything, I mainly adapted recipes we already love.

- A cottage pie with tinned green lentils instead of minced meat
- A colourful vegetable chow mein
- Mexican-style spiced beans served on flatbreads with plenty of toppings!

NO MEAT MAY BLOG #1



Cottage pie with lentils



Spicy beans on flatbread

The meals were filling, comforting, and familiar enough that no one felt short-changed. I'm genuinely looking forward to the weekend, when I'll have more time to get creative and try some new recipes. Instagram has also been a brilliant source of inspiration. One unexpected bonus this week has been fibre. Like many people, we probably don't get enough of it day-to-day, and No Meat May has encouraged us to eat more beans, lentils, and tofu.

How has it felt?

Physically, I haven't noticed much difference yet. I do find I need to eat slightly larger portions, as vegetarian meals can be lower in calories, but that hasn't been a bad thing. I'm currently on a weight-loss journey and, despite eating what feel like generous plates of food, I've continued to lose weight this week. More than anything, Week One has been about adjustment mentally, practically, and socially. It's reminded me how ingrained meat is in everyday routines, from takeaway food to family visits, but also how easy many swaps can be once you start.

Looking ahead

Week One hasn't been perfect, but it's been positive, eye-opening, and surprisingly enjoyable. I'm learning, the children are eating well, and I'm feeling motivated to keep going. I'm genuinely looking forward to Week Two of No Meat May – and seeing what else we can create in the kitchen.

ABOUT NO MEAT MAY

"No Meat May started in 2013. We come back bigger and stronger every year, partly because the food keeps getting better! But mostly because of the incredible stories people share with us about how taking part in this 31-day challenge has changed their lives for the better. This is the fuel that keeps our engines firing. 🔥

"We are determined to inspire more people to change the world by shifting to more plant-rich eating. And we are committed to ensuring everyone has a good time & does it well. Funds raised through the No Meat May challenge are directed 100% to improving the event year on year and to supporting more people to shift to plant-rich eating for those 4 BIG reasons."

SIGN UP HERE!

https://www.nomeatmay.org/



Vegan lasagn

By: Catherine Causley



THE ONE ABOUT BEANS

Week two of our No Meat May challenge has definitely felt more “real life” than week one. This week has been about juggling busy evenings, unexpected disruptions, and sticking to our goal as best we can.

When time is tight

Monday night tested us straight away. We needed something fast, we were back from work late and (with after-school activities for one of the children), we had 30 minutes to get something on the table before heading out again. This meant we had no energy for experimenting or spending ages in the kitchen. So we turned to a classic: beans on toast.

We turned to a classic ... beans on toast!

We used homemade brown bread, which meant together with the beans it provided a complete protein, something I’m becoming much more aware of as we eat less meat. It was a great reminder that simple meals can still be nutritious and satisfying.

Preparedness pays off

Tuesday brought something unexpected, an emergency trip to A&E, my son hurt his arm and needed an X-ray. Thankfully, nothing was broken but he did sustain a fracture. Under normal circumstances, this would have meant relying on takeaway or ultra-processed convenience food. But the one thing I did take from last week was the importance of planning. At the weekend, I had batch-cooked and frozen some meals in family-sized portions so dinner was already sorted. When we got home, we could just heat and eat! It removed what could have been a very stressful end to an already difficult day; definitely a habit I want to keep going beyond this month.

National Bean Week

This week I’ve been leaning more into dried beans and pulses, which feels especially fitting as it’s **National Bean Week**. I read that the average person in the UK eats around one portion of beans per week and we are on track for six portions this week alone! And honestly, it’s been a bit of a revelation:

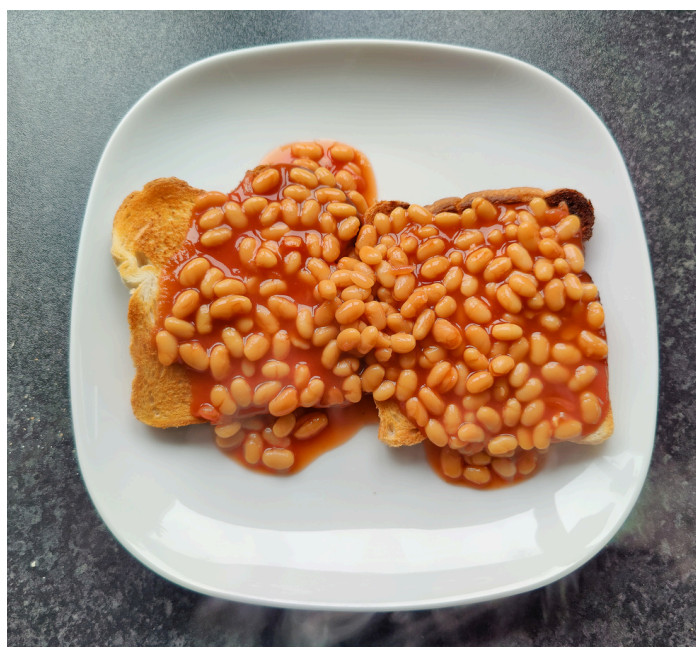
- *They’re packed with protein and fibre*
- *They’re significantly cheaper than meat*
- *They’re incredibly versatile*

From quick meals to batch cooking, beans are starting to feel like a cornerstone rather than a substitute. You can use tinned beans or lentils, which are great as no soaking is required. I am trying to use dried beans as they are more economical. I also have a pressure cooker, which means cooking them, ready to use in dishes, is quick and easy.

THE CLASSIC

A family favourite, beans on toast ticks all the boxes:

- Quick
- Cheap
- Minimal washing up
- Made from store-cupboard staples!



Beans on toast

NO MEAT MAY BLOG #2


‘Like Meat’ sausages


Thai style butternut squash curry

Not all veggie sausages are equal

My takeaway for the week was that not all vegetarian sausages are created equally. The ones we tried were questionable so I reached out to a few vegetarian friends for recommendations, and now have a shortlist of trusted brands to try next time we’re craving sausage and mash. It’s been really helpful to tap into other people’s experience rather than relying on trial and error alone.

Looking beyond “swap” cooking

I’ve also realised I don’t enjoy most heavily processed meat substitutes. So instead, I’ve been exploring cuisines where vegetarian food is part of the culture, rather than an adaptation. With my love of cooking this has been really exciting. I’ve found some great looking Chinese and Indian recipes that focus on vegetables, pulses, and bold flavours and aren’t trying to imitate meat, but instead celebrating plant-based ingredients in their own right. I’m looking forward to trying more of these in the coming weeks.

A current favourite

Tonight’s dinner is a firm favourite in our house: a Japanese vegetable pancake (**okonomiyaki**). It can be served with meat or seafood, but works well as a vegetarian meal, which is how we have always had it. What I love about okonomiyaki:

- *It’s completely adaptable*
- *It works with whatever vegetables you have to hand*
- *It’s a brilliant way to use up white cabbage (a nice change from coleslaw!)*


Okonomiyaki


An Okonomiyaki bar in Tokyo where you make it yourself

The unexpected wins

One of the biggest surprises so far has been the impact on our food budget and time:

- *Our food spend is down by about a third*
- *Cooking is generally quicker as vegetables simply don’t take as long as meat to cook*

Week two reflections

This week has felt less about “trying something new” and more about making it work in real life with busy schedules, curveballs, and all. The biggest takeaways so far:

- *Simple meals are often the best ones*
- *Preparation really matters*
- *Beans and pulses are more powerful than I realised*
- *Exploring globally-inspired vegetarian dishes feels much more natural than relying on substitutes*

On to week three and hopefully a bit more experimenting, depending on what life throws at us!

By: Catherine Causley

FINDING A RHYTHM ... AND UNEXPECTED WINS



Vegetarian roast



Japanese vegetable pancake

This week felt noticeably different. What started as a bit of a challenge at the beginning of the month is now starting to feel normal. We've found our rhythm, and I have to say, it's been a really enjoyable week.

One highlight was a work event where lunch was provided by the students at Exeter College. Now, if you've ever been to events like this before, you'll probably know the usual vegetarian options consist of egg sandwiches or cheese sandwiches. But this time, there was a fantastic selection of vegetarian and vegan dishes, all thoughtfully prepared, varied and very fresh. It was so lovely to see such creativity and care put into plant-based food. It genuinely made me realise how much more could be done in everyday catering if people just moved beyond the "egg or cheese" default.

At the weekend, we took inspiration from further afield and treated ourselves to a Nepalese takeaway. Exmouth has a great selection of restaurants and takeaways, so choosing was a challenge. Asian cuisine is brilliant for vegetarians, and this didn't disappoint. We tried a range of dishes and discovered some favourites – including an exceptional chickpea curry, and I got to try a paneer curry for the first time. Better still, there was plenty left over, so we had an easy, delicious dinner sorted midweek without any extra effort. That's definitely a win in my book.



Toby

Speaking of easy meals, I've started to get a bit more organised. At the weekend I batch cooked a big pot of Mexican-style green lentils and froze portions ready for the week ahead. One evening, when time was tight, I simply reheated it and served it on slices of garlic bread, for a quick, hearty, and really satisfying meal. It's a good reminder that a bit of preparation goes a long way in making this 'no meat' process easier.

The weather didn't exactly inspire outdoor activity this weekend, so instead of being in the garden we stayed inside and tackled a few jobs, we are still finishing off our house renovation. So it felt like the perfect excuse for a proper roast dinner. Now, for me, the best part of any roast is never the meat it's the roast potatoes and gravy. So we decided to go all in on a traditional roast just without the meat. We had Yorkshire puddings, sage and onion stuffing balls, steamed vegetables, and beautifully roasted potatoes and parsnips. I did also cook braised leeks but managed to totally forget about them and found them virtually cremated in the over later on! Opps. We didn't feel like anything was missing at all. It was just as comforting and satisfying as any roast we've had before.

Another proud moment this week came courtesy of my son, who has really started to get involved. He made one of our family favourites katsu curry but instead of the usual chicken, he used crispy tofu. He did a brilliant job and was clearly very proud of what he'd made (as he should be!). It's been lovely to see him engaging with the process and realising that these swaps don't mean missing out.

It feels easier, more natural, and more enjoyable.

Overall, this week has been less about "giving something up" and more about discovering new habits, flavours, and ways of cooking. It feels easier, more natural, and more enjoyable.

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GETTING THE FAMILY INVOLVED



Chickpea flatbread with harissa mayo



Quorn nuggets

We've reached week four of No Meat May, and something has definitely shifted in our house. This week, it hasn't only been me driving things … my husband and son have got involved, searching for recipes and giving new dishes a go.

Their highlight? A roasted chickpea wrap with guacamole, pickled onions, sweetcorn salad and a harissa mayonnaise … one of those meals where everyone goes quiet because they're enjoying it so much. Safe to say, it's earned a permanent place in our weeknight rotation.

What I've learnt so far …

1. A little preparation goes a long way
Being even slightly organised is a lifesaver on busy evenings. Soaking dried beans and legumes takes some forward planning, but actually, it's no more effort than remembering to take meat out of the freezer.

2. Staples are your best friend
I've always batch-cooked, but having versatile staples on hand has been a game-changer. Things like cooked beans, grains or roasted veg can be quickly transformed with different spices and flavours into entirely new meals.

3. Explore cuisines that naturally celebrate vegetarian food
One of the biggest joys has been trying dishes from cultures where vegetarian food isn't an afterthought. It's opened up a whole world of exciting flavours and meals that I might never have considered before.

4. Picnics beat unpredictable food options
We had a family day out over the bank holiday, and as expected, vegetarian options at places like theme parks were hit-and-miss. Bringing a picnic saved money, and meant we had fresh, healthy food we actually wanted to eat.

5. Some swaps are surprisingly easy
Quorn nuggets dipped in ketchup? Completely indistinguishable from chicken nuggets, according to my household critics. Another win!

6. Familiar meals make the transition easier
Most "meaty" meals can be adapted to vegetarian, and this has been a helpful way to introduce new foods, keeping things familiar while gently shifting habits.

7. Beans really are a superfood
We've eaten more beans this month than ever before, and it's reminded me just how important fibre is for our health. This way of eating really supports that without feeling restrictive.

8. Letting the kids lead works
Giving the children some freedom to choose what they want to eat has been a key driver of success. Interestingly, they often picked vegetarian options without any prompting proof that sometimes less pressure works better.

NO MEAT MAY BLOG #4

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A BBQ day feast

The BBQ moment I didn't expect

One thing I really struggled with this week came during the hot bank holiday weather. All I wanted was a burger or a hot dog in a bun, that classic UK BBQ food that's so tied to sunshine and family time. It caught me off guard and made me realise just how deeply food is woven into our culture and expectations of certain moments. Even knowing that meat-free alternatives aren't really to my taste, didn't stop that craving. In the end, I adapted. I popped to M&S, picked up some picky bits, and put together a lovely spread that we ate in the garden. And once I accepted I was going to be eating a vegetarian meal, I genuinely enjoyed it. But I'll be honest, the strength of that initial reaction surprised me.

Final thoughts

This week has felt like a turning point. It's no longer just an experiment I'm leading; it's something the whole family is participating in, shaping and enjoying together.

There have been challenges (hello, BBQ cravings), but also some real positives new meals we love, healthier habits, and a growing confidence in cooking without meat.

My food bill has reduced. I used to buy meat and maybe have it five out of seven weeknights. I have found that my food bill is about 1/3rd lower. And that's despite buying more spices, trying new ingredients and experimenting. I also had to go food shopping more frequently, as I used a lot of vegetables in my meals and my fridge only holds so much!

The children were hungrier, so I made more puddings (not that they minded!) and had some home-made low-sugar treats for when they came in from school to tide them over to dinner. Sandwiches were a challenge. It's easy to fall into a ham sandwich standby, but I discovered I love hummus with grated carrot. And I experimented with veg-packed bread spreads that I could prepare in advance for working-from-home days when I wanted a speedy, easy lunch.

The environmental perspective is very important to me. I estimate we have reduced the carbon footprint of our meals by around 50%. Dairy has a fairly high carbon footprint, but that didn't increase. We bought locally grown food where possible, supporting local growers.

Animal welfare is also a key concern. Having worked in the meat industry, I fully understand the reality of industrial meat production and it felt good not to be contributing to that system.

Overall, we have enjoyed this experience and although we'll be including some meat in our diets, we have some new recipes for our family meal rotation.

No Meat May – Week 3

Finding the Rhythm (and Some Unexpected Wins)

This week felt noticeably different. What started as a bit of a challenge at the beginning of the month is now starting to feel like just normal life. We've found our rhythm, and I have to say, it's been a really enjoyable week.

One highlight was a work event where lunch was provided by the students at Exeter College. Now, if you've ever been to events like this before, you'll probably know the usual vegetarian options consist of egg sandwiches or cheese sandwiches and not much else. So I wasn't expecting anything particularly exciting. But this time was completely different. There was a fantastic selection of vegetarian and vegan dishes, all thoughtfully prepared, really varied and very fresh. It was so lovely to see such creativity and care put into plant-based food. It genuinely made me realise how much more could be done in everyday catering if people just moved beyond the "egg or cheese" default.

At the weekend, we took inspiration from further afield and treated ourselves to a Nepalese takeaway. Exmouth has a great selection of restaurants and takeaways, so choosing where we went was a real challenge. Asian cuisine is brilliant for vegetarian options, and this didn't disappoint. We tried a range of dishes and discovered some real favourites – including a chickpea curry that was absolutely exceptional and I got to try a paneer curry for the first time. Better still, there was plenty left over, so we had an easy, delicious dinner sorted midweek without any extra effort. That's definitely a win in my book.

Speaking of easy meals, I've started to get a bit more organised. At the weekend I batch cooked a big pot of Mexican-style green lentils and froze portions ready for the week ahead. One evening, when time was tight, I simply reheated it and served it on slices of garlic bread, this was a quick, hearty, and really satisfying meal. It's a good reminder that a bit of prep goes a long way in making this whole process easier.

The weather didn't exactly inspire outdoor activity this weekend, so instead of being in the garden we stayed inside and tackled a few jobs, we are still finishing off our house renovation. So it felt like the perfect excuse for a proper roast dinner. Now, for me, the best part of any roast is never the meat it's the roast potatoes and gravy. So we decided to go all in on a traditional roast just without the meat. We had Yorkshire puddings, sage and onion stuffing balls, steamed vegetables, and beautifully roasted potatoes and parsnips. I did also cook braised leeks but managed to totally forget about them and found them virtually cremated in the over later on! Opps. We didn't feel like anything was missing at all. It was just as comforting and satisfying as any roast we've had before.

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On to week four!

No Meat May: Week 4 – Getting the Family Involved

We've reached week four of No Meat May, and something has definitely shifted in our house. This week, it hasn't just been me driving things my husband and son have fully got involved, searching for recipes and giving new dishes a go.

Their highlight? A roasted chickpea wrap with guacamole, pickled onions, sweetcorn salad and a harissa mayonnaise. Honestly, it was delicious one of those meals where everyone goes quiet because they're enjoying it so much. Safe to say, it's earned a permanent place in our weeknight rotation.

What I've learnt so far

This month has been a real learning curve, and I've picked up a few key things along the way:

1. A little preparation goes a long way

Being even slightly organised is a lifesaver on busy evenings. Soaking dried beans and legumes takes some forward planning, but actually it's no more effort than remembering to take meat out of the freezer. It just requires a small shift in mindset.

2. Staples are your best friend

I've always batch cooked, but having versatile staples on hand has been a game changer. Things like cooked beans, grains or roasted veg can be quickly transformed with different spices and flavours into entirely new meals.

3. Explore cuisines that naturally celebrate vegetarian food

One of the biggest joys has been trying dishes from cultures where vegetarian food isn't an afterthought it's central to that country's way of eating. It's opened up a whole world of exciting flavours and meals that I might never have considered before.

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It really caught me off guard how strong that feeling was. It made me realise just how deeply food is woven into our culture and our expectations of certain moments. Even knowing that meat-free alternatives aren't really to my taste didn't stop that craving.

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Final thoughts for this week

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There have been challenges (hello, BBQ cravings), but also some real positives new meals we love, healthier habits, and a growing confidence in cooking without meat.

My food bill has reduced, I used to buy meat and maybe have it 5 out of 7 weeknight meals. I have found that my food bill is about 1/3rd lower and that is with buying more spices, trying new ingredients and experimenting more in general. I did have to go food shopping more frequently as I used a lot of vegetables in my meals and my fridge only holds so much.

The children were a bit more hungry so I made more puddings not that they minded and had some low sugar treats that I baked for when they came in from school to tide them over to dinner. Sandwiches were a challenge, its easy to fall into a ham sandwich standby but I discovered that I love hummus with grated carrot as a filling and I also experimented with veg packed bread spreads that I could prepare in advance and were quick on working from home days when I wanted a speedy, easy lunch.

Overall we have enjoyed this experience and whilst we will start including some meat in our diets and not be 100% vegetarian, we have certainly learnt some new recipes that we will include in our family meal rotation.

The environmental perspective is very important to me, I estimate that we have reduced our carbon footprint of meals by around 50%, It would have been more had we relied more on red meat in our standard diet. Dairy has a fairly high carbon footprint but that didn't increase any more than usual and we always focused on locally grown food where possible, supporting local growers. Animal welfare is also a key concern, having worked in the meat industry, I fully understand the reality of industrial meat production and it felt good to not be contributing to that system.