

vegan

family values

Can you actually raise a child without feeding her meat, fish, eggs, or dairy? One Florida family is happily doing just that. **BY JENKINOLINPLEY**

THE VITAMIX IS WHIRRING IN Kristen Kelley's kitchen as she whips up a batch of homemade feta cheese. "I'm a total cheese-head. I never met cheese I didn't like," laughs Kristen, a self-employed executive assistant (and Allrecipes Allstar!*) in Royal Palm Beach, Florida, and mother of Leah, 8, and wife to Tim. But the ingredients in *this* cheese never saw the inside of a cow. She's making this concoction by puréeing almonds, water, and lemon juice into a thick—and, yes, cheeselike—paste. The family eats vegan—no meat, fish, eggs, dairy, or other animal products.

It's a big leap for a woman who spent her pregnancy indulging her cravings for milk shakes and cheese fries. "We were really into fried food," recalls Kristen. Then 6 years ago, some "scary" cholesterol numbers for Tim during a routine health check got the family on the path to eating healthier—cutting out fast food and red meat, reducing fat, and tossing flax seeds on cereal and in smoothies. But it was a Netflix night in June 2012 that resulted in

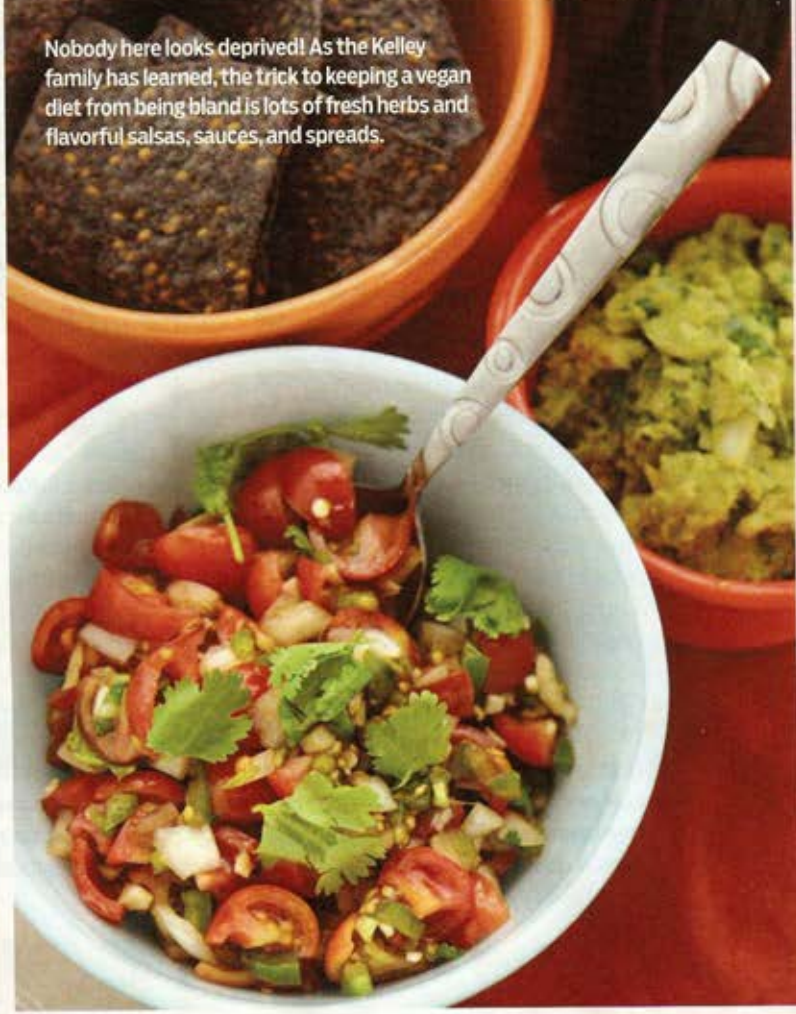
their big leap to veganism. They decided to watch the 2011 documentary, *Forks Over Knives*, which makes a powerful case for the health benefits of a plant-based, whole foods diet. The film argues that populations who don't eat meat or dairy have dramatically lower rates of obesity, cancer, and heart disease. "We saw that movie and thought, 'We really need to start making some big changes,'" she says.

How did they explain the family's new diet to a first-grader who enjoys ice cream as much as the next kid? "She's a really intelligent girl and always wants to know the reasons for everything anyway. So we sat down and explained we found out some things that weren't so good about eating meat and drinking milk." Leah did have some worries—she loved scrambled eggs, for instance, and didn't want to give them up. "Now we do scrambled tofu instead," says Leah. But as an animal-lover, Leah instantly got the animal-welfare reasons for going vegan. "I like that I know I am helping animals!" she says.

Indeed, the family's love of animals has been a big part of their motivation. Three

rescued shelter dogs are part of the family: Salsa and Harley are miniature pinscher mixes. The newest member is Tyson, a gentle pit bull—"He's the biggest baby!" Kristen says. She cooks the dogs' vegan chow, mainly because she worries about what's in commercial dog food. "I'm crazy, I know," she laughs. Early on, Leah went through a phase of trying to recruit her friends to eat vegan too. "She was going around telling them, 'If you love animals you can't eat them,'" recalls Kristen. "I told her, I appreciate your enthusiasm but don't do that—their parents will be the ones to tell their kids what to eat."

While there were some foods that were difficult to part with ("Tim had a hard time with chicken"), a year and a half into their vegan diet they've found many new favorites. They now use soy milk or almond milk on their cereal, and get their protein from whole grains such as quinoa or legumes like beans and lentils. "I make lentil 'meatloaf' and chickpea cutlets," she says. Avocados, baby carrots, and fruit are



Nobody here looks deprived! As the Kelley family has learned, the trick to keeping a vegan diet from being bland is lots of fresh herbs and flavorful salsas, sauces, and spreads.



always on hand for snacks. Leah loves the family tradition of "Taco Tuesday," featuring tacos stuffed with beans instead of meat. "I make a nacho 'cheese' sauce out of nutritional yeast that's killer," Kristen says. For Leah's 8th birthday, Kristen cooked her a banana split-ice cream cake featuring Rice Dream and vegan chocolate chips. Kristen shares her experiments and recipes on her blog, www.theveganweirdosnextdoor.com. For inspiration, she often turns to other blogs like the Post Punk Kitchen (theppk.com) or her favorite cookbooks, including *Veganomicon: The Ultimate Vegan Cookbook* or *The Joy of Vegan Baking*.

As in any busy household, meals are not always a gourmet production. The family's go-to weeknight dinners include egg-free pasta with a quick vegetable-based sauce. "I was a vegetarian when I was in grade school, and there were maybe four options of food for me. Now that vegetarian and vegan are more mainstream, there are a lot of convenience foods we can grab out of the

freezer, like frozen pizza with vegan cheese," she says. And Leah still gets to indulge in junk food occasionally, just like any other kid. "Oreos are vegan!" notes Kristen. As for eating out: "Eating vegan is easy as long as you're willing to ask questions about how something is prepared, and to ask for replacements or to leave things off."

Kristen admits there was a learning curve. Take her experience with tofu for instance—a prime source of protein for many vegans. "I had no idea what I was doing. You can't just take tofu from the box and dump it in a bowl. It won't taste like it does at the Chinese restaurant," she says. To get the right texture, Kristen learned to freeze it first, then thaw it, removing the extra water in her trusty tofu press before cooking. "It improves the texture and it sucks up the marinade much better."

Not that the whole experience has been a bowl of organic cherries. "I get questions

from everyone," she sighs—families, friends, acquaintances. "How do you get your protein? Doesn't Leah need fat in her diet? Aren't humans supposed to be omnivores? You would never think what was on your plate would be a matter of so much strife."

At school lunch one day, another child made a hurtful comment about Leah's tacos being "weird," and she came home upset. "My first instinct as a mom was to feel defensive for her, but then I felt bad for those kids who don't have the opportunity to try new foods. I told Leah, 'Next time, you should just ask them if they want to share some and see for themselves that it's not weird.'"

For the most part, however, those around them have been very supportive. At school and friends' houses, Leah knows which foods to pass up and which she can eat. "She's become an expert label reader," says Kristen. If Leah is invited to a birthday party, Kristen might talk to the parents in advance and offer to send vegan cookies to

Harley literally jumps at the chance for a homemade vegan dog biscuit; Tyson knows his turn will come.



share, or a vegan cupcake for Leah when birthday cake is served. "Usually the other kids love the stuff I make," she says.

The Kelleys are convinced such small challenges have been well worth it. "None of us has gotten a cold since we starting eating vegan. Leah used to get sick constantly—now her immune system is a powerhouse." Tim, who works out regularly, says, "It's a common misconception that vegans lose muscle tone and aren't fit or strong. That's false. I'm just as strong, if not stronger, than I was before, and my body recovers faster." Their big next step: The couple is working on plans to open a vegan grocery store that will include staples as well as specialty products that Kristen now has to buy online, like Tim's favorite "honey" (made from apples) and vegan soy "bacon" bits.

"It's been an adventure," concludes Kristen. "People think a vegan diet is restrictive, but, in fact, it opens all kinds of doors because you're trying so many new things."



Kristen, Tim, and Leah try to make meals together, as a family, whenever they can—it's part of what keeps them on track with their diet. Leah is a pro with the tofu press, an essential tool in a vegan kitchen, as Kristen learned early on.

raising healthy vegans

EATING VEGAN MAY BE A

healthy option for adults, but is it safe for growing kids?

"A vegan diet can be healthy and nutritionally adequate for all stages of life, as long as it is well-balanced and includes a variety of foods," says Vandana Sheth, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (formerly the American Dietetic Association).

The key, Sheth says, is careful planning so that all the nutrients your child would get from animal products are provided by plant-based alternatives. "You can't just say, 'OK, I'm going to take away the meat and dairy.' You need to substitute the dairy with a nondairy beverage such as fortified soy milk. You substitute meat with a plant-based protein like beans or lentils."

Some nutritional pointers if you're thinking about going vegan:

PROTEIN

Though many of us associate protein with meat, Sheth notes we can get plenty of protein from plant sources. "A half cup of beans has the same amount of protein as an egg."

CALCIUM

While milk is a typical source for omnivores, you can also get calcium through plant-based foods—a fortified beverage like almond milk, calcium-set tofu (tofu made using calcium sulfate as a coagulant), or leafy greens such as kale, bok choy, or broccoli.

CALORIES

"Plant foods have a lot of fiber, so children may feel full quickly and not get enough calories to

grow well," says Sheth. Nuts, peanut butter, avocados, and dried fruit are calorie-rich, kid-friendly options.

B12

Produced by microbes that live in animals' digestive systems, this vitamin is not typically found in plant foods. "You need to make sure your vegan child is getting foods fortified with it, such as breakfast cereal," she says. A vegan multivitamin can supply B12, along with Vitamin D and iron, two other nutrients that typically come from dairy and meat.

Jack Maypole, MD, a pediatrician and director of the Comprehensive Care Program at Boston Medical Center, cautions there's no substitute for getting professional advice when planning a vegan diet for children, especially during the

crucial 0- to 3-year-old window of growth. "They're not just building bone, they're building brain," notes Maypole, himself a vegetarian. Kids can be notoriously picky eaters, making a varied and well-balanced diet for vegans extra tricky. Consultation with a Registered Dietitian who specializes in pediatric and vegetarian nutrition can help you develop a balanced plan. (The Academy's website, eatright.org, has a searchable list of dietitians.) Sheth and Maypole agree you should alert your child's pediatrician that your child is eating vegan, as they may want to monitor growth rate and levels of certain nutrients more carefully.



Inspired to try some vegan recipes? Blipp here (details on page 5), or go to armagazine.com/vegan-recipes