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THE BIGGER READ

Comedy duo know healthy eating is no laughing matter

Veganism is enjoying a surge in popularity as more people explore the benefits of a diet that avoids animal products. Sister act Gavin and Sharon are not joking when they say it works for them

Feature

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There was a time when Sharon and Laretta Gavin might have enjoyed a giggle at the expense of 'hippy-dippy vegans'.

Like most people, the thought of switching to a plant-based diet had never entered their heads.

But the past few years, starting as Sharon battled a devastating illness, have changed their minds.

Now it would be hard to find two more committed crusaders for veganism.

The sisters – also known as comedy duo Gavin and Sharon

– say it has transformed the way they feel.

They have been won over so completely they now spread the word by hosting vegan detox weekends at their family's Suffolk home.

Recent years have also seen a growing change in attitudes. Supermarkets where you would once search fruitlessly for almond milk or quorn now routinely stock vegan products.

And more people are re-thinking their eating habits, trying a diet that is wholly plant-based with no meat, fish, dairy produce or eggs.

For the Gavin sisters it started when Sharon fell seriously ill with a rare autoimmune disease.

Laretta was desperate to help and they began researching ways to ease the symptoms and cut down on the need for drugs,

"The word I kept hearing was veganism," says Laretta. "I thought, what? Really?"

But Sharon was keen to give it a try and her sister wanted to support her. "I thought if she's going to do it, I will do it with her.

"Attitudes have changed a lot in the last few years but when we started we had this impression of hippy-dippy vegans.

"I knew I couldn't just live on salads so I really started looking into it. There are so many delicious meals you can make."

Some people become vegan due to animal welfare concerns, others believe it is more sustainable and environmentally friendly.

Sharon and Laretta did it for health reasons – although they say the fact no animals have died to feed them is also

a plus.

The sisters are divorced and live together in London. Laretta has a daughter Florence, eight, and Sharon a five year-old son Carter.

Both trained as actresses before starting to write and perform comedy including gigs at the Edinburgh Festival. They also write sitcoms, and top up their income doing voice-overs, adverts and TV work.

But for their vegan weekends they abandon the bustle of the Capital for the tranquility of the Suffolk countryside.

The events – where mobile phones are banned – include country walks, yoga, and massages. They are held at their parents' holiday home near Bildeston.

Sharon explains how illness struck her down while she was pregnant. "I got very sick with a disease called dermatomyositis.

"It came out of the blue, I was fit and healthy but I was in quite a stressful relationship.

"I was filming something for a Sky hidden camera show and my forehead kept burning in the sun.

"I thought it was prickly heat. Then every time I went out in the sun I got this rash." The rash spread all over her body. Her muscles became so weak that at times she had to use a wheelchair.

"At one point it was so bad I had to go into hospital and be wrapped in bandages.

"I was on lots of meds, like steroids and immune suppressants. Some of them were really toxic.

"Dermatomyositis can be really dangerous. It can affect your internal organs, and some people never get better. In the end I stopped Googling it.

"When my son was born I was so weak I couldn't carry him.

"Then I saw a documentary by a man who had a similar illness who did a two month juice fast, then went onto a plant-based diet.

"I started to watch lots of documentaries, and tried



SISTERS: Laretta (left) and Sharon believe passionately that going vegan has improved their health

juice fasting myself."

Gradually she was able to cut down the amount of drugs she took.

"I did it all under my doctor's guidance. Over three years I have got better and better. I'm now on only a very small dose of drugs, and am back running again.

"I had an amazing doctor who gave me lots of vitamins, and support.

"And I found someone in America who had the same disease who is now running ultra-marathons, and she became my mentor.

Sharon believes the support she got from moving in with her sister also helped.

They also gave up alcohol. Laretta says: "I did it when Sharon got sick.

"I thought I can't go through a divorce, and looking after my child, and my sister in a wheelchair, if I've got a hangover."

Cutting out alcohol was also the first step for Sharon, before she became vegan. "Changes don't happen overnight, and I think it's about your mindset as well," she says.

Now they both eat a mostly raw vegan diet, starting the



day with a breakfast smoothie of apples, celery, cucumber, spinach, bananas, avocado and dates. "It's really filling and keeps you going till lunchtime," says Sharon.

Lunch is soup or a salad then supper could be curry, or a dish made from lentils or chick peas.

Children Florence and Charlie are predominately vegetarian but will be able to choose what diet they follow

when they are older.

"We just try to keep it healthy, without being killjoys. If they go to a party they have sweets," says Laretta.

"We have made granola together from toasted oats, mixed fruit, date paste, honey,

neither hankers after the foods they no longer eat. "The more you don't have meat the more you don't miss it," says Laretta.

"There is a freedom in being strict about exactly what you eat. Being healthy is really

addictive."

Sharon, who used to love seafood, admits to a pang the first time she went out to dinner as a vegan and saw the squid, prawns and crab on offer.

"I thought, I can't just not have this now, I can't have it ever. But after that I was fine."

For more details about the detox weekends go to their website www.thedetoxbarn.co.uk



HEALTHY START: Laretta (left) and Sharon begin the day by whizzing up a filling smoothie

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