

TELEVISION IS SHOWING VEGETARIAN CHARACTERS IN A NEW LIGHT

PRIME TIME



FOR *Veggies*

Like any group going against the mainstream, vegetarians have often struggled to be taken seriously. It wasn't so long ago that some of television's most popular shows resorted to rolling out a veg character (or, rather, caricature) to elicit a laugh. "It's always been easy to tack the vegetarian label onto a character to further accentuate their eccentricity," says Brittany Shoot, contributor to the *Cultural Encyclopedia of Vegetarianism*. Cases in point: Phoebe Buffay on *Friends* and Darlene Conner on *Roseanne*. "They were stereotypical portrayals, with Darlene being the rebellious teenager and Phoebe being kind of quirky and eccentric," says Beverly Kaskey, senior director of the Humane Society of the United States's Hollywood Outreach, presenter of the Genesis Awards, which recognizes news and entertainment media for spotlighting animal protection issues.

But the times they are a-changing. Now, "smart" and "respected" are qualities that Jane Dollinger, senior media liaison for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, sees in vegetarians and vegans depicted on TV. The result? "Viewers are subtly prompted to think more about social issues and make changes in their lives," Dollinger says. Also, as plant-based diets have become not just accepted but also embraced by more people, including the actors, writers, and producers working in television, more veggie characters are filling main roles. "This tells us that vegetarianism and veganism are becoming a part of the taken-for-granted social fabric," says Arlington, Mass.-based sociologist Donna Maurer, PhD, author of *Vegetarianism: Movement or Moment?* What's more, being meat-free is an inherent part of who the characters are and helps to define them in positive ways, notes Kaskey. Consider the following four—who aren't just ready for, but rocking, prime time.

WISE CHILD

Arguably the moral compass on Fox's long-running animated series *The Simpsons*, **Lisa Simpson** is known for being smart, eco-conscious, and compassionate. In the 1995 episode "Lisa the Vegetarian," the Simpsons visit a petting zoo, and Lisa subsequently finds herself haunted by the little lamb she met there and unable to eat meat. Ridiculed by friends and family for her protests, she runs away and winds up at the Kwik-E-Mart, where she encounters Paul and Linda McCartney. Together with storekeeper Apu (revealed to be a vegan), the McCartneys help Lisa embrace her new beliefs while still respecting others' views.

The episode was partly informed by the experiences of *The Simpsons* producer David Mirkin, who was going vegetarian around the same time. "I'd recently seen film footage about factory farming, and I was never thrilled with the idea of eating animals," says Mirkin, who *was* thrilled with the idea of getting Paul McCartney to make a cameo. "His only request was to keep Lisa a vegetarian, and I was very happy with that. It was so true to who she is, and we've explored



that aspect of her character several times since." Meeting the McCartneys also made Mirkin's vegetarian conversion complete. "I was still eating a small amount of fish, and Linda said to me, 'You know, it's not seafood—it's sea *life*,'" he recalls. "I was able to get completely off fish soon after that." Of course *The Simpsons*'s top priority has always been making people laugh, and nobody (vegetarian or omnivore) was spared in the episode, but Mirkin was happy to make a deeper impression on a lot of viewers too. "The reaction to the show was terrific," he says. "So many people have told me that it was responsible for their own switch to vegetarianism."

READER FAVE

“LISA FROM *THE SIMPSONS*. SHE IS A GIFTED YOUNG LADY, AND MADE A VERY HEALTHY, CONSCIOUS DECISION TO GO AGAINST THE GRAIN.”

—Ellie DeMilt, via Facebook

LONE WOLF

Based loosely on the dark fairy tales penned by the Brothers Grimm, the NBC crime series *Grimm* follows Portland, Ore., homicide detective Nick Burkhardt, who discovers he’s descended from a long line of hunters capable of seeing, and slaying, gruesome supernatural creatures—which he does alongside trusty but reluctant sidekick **Monroe**, a reformed “Blutbad” (the show’s name for the Big, Bad Wolf). In a modern-day twist, Monroe suppresses his predatory urges through a combination of Pilates, vitamins, and—yes!—adhering to a strict plant-based diet.

According to series co-creators Jim Kouf and David Greenwalt, Monroe’s going meat-free compares with an alcoholic giving up drinking. “He can’t go near meat because he’s trying to keep this aggression, particularly toward humans, at bay,” Greenwalt says. Alas, fighting those primal desires isn’t always easy. “When my old flame, Angelina, showed up, she lured me back out to the hunt,” recalls Silas Weir Mitchell, who plays Monroe. “I awoke next to a rabbit carcass, smeared with blood. Serious backsliding!”

Although Mitchell isn’t veg, he acknowledges that playing Monroe has influenced his choices: “Going without



COURTESY NBC

READER FAVE ▲ “MONROE FROM *GRIMM*. HE EXHIBITS A REAL KNOWLEDGE OF NUTRITIONALLY HEALTHY FOODS.” —Julie Meek, via Facebook

meat lightens the load on my system, and it feels good to do that every so often.” About veganism, he says, “It’s an ethical choice more people are making, and I think it’s an important component of human progress.” It’s this philosophy, say the show’s creators, that makes Monroe such a compelling character.

“When faced with his own nature and traditions, Monroe realizes they no longer make sense in a modern world,” says Kouf. “He’s almost become the most human character on the show, because he’s trying so hard to stay in touch with his true humanity,” adds Greenwalt.

CRIME SCENE CRUSADERS

Sara Sidle became a vegetarian on the CBS juggernaut *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* thanks in part to actor Jorja Fox’s own plant-based preferences. “It was very early in the run of the show, when a pig was used to calculate how long a woman had been dead,” Fox says. “I asked the writer if they would be using a fake pig, and he asked if I was a vegetarian.” When Fox said she was, the writer suggested he make Fox’s character a vegetarian. “Of course it worked because it was an authentic choice for Sara,” Fox notes. “It suits her character.” Not only did Sara become vegetarian during that episode, they did indeed use a fake pig. “We had him created for the episode,” adds Fox, “and he’s made several cameos since.” That was a relief for Fox, an animal rights activist who’s endeavored to bring the issue of animal welfare to light on the show. “*CSI* has done several animal welfare stories over the years, including ones about dog fighting and canned hunting [where people pay to



READER FAVE ▲ “TEMPERANCE BRENNAN ON *BONES*. SHE’S A SCIENTIST AND UNDERSTANDS NOT ONLY THE ETHICS OF NOT EATING MEAT, BUT ALSO THE FACT THAT THERE ARE NO ADVERSE HEALTH CONSEQUENCES FOR HUMANS.” —Katrina Voss, via Facebook

kill animals on private hunting reserves or game ranches],” she says. Actor Emily Deschanel, who plays forensic anthropologist **Dr. Temperance Brennan** (aka “Bones”) on the Fox series *Bones*, has had a similar impact on her show’s story lines. “We’ve done a few episodes discussing issues such as exotic animals as pets, dog fighting, and factory farms,” says Deschanel, a longtime vegan and advocate for animals. Also similar to *CSI*’s consideration of Fox’s preferences, *Bones*—which can be grisly at times—is sensitive to Deschanel’s ethical code. “We did an episode about a body that’s found inside a meat stew, but they made the [prop] stew completely vegan,” Deschanel says. Although Deschanel is vegan for ethical reasons, her character became vegetarian for health reasons—following several episodes set in the world of food production, notes series creator Hart Hanson. “Brennan feels things deeply but wishes she didn’t, so she must always find a totally rational reason for acting on her feelings,” Hanson says. “Vegetarianism is a supremely rational choice in terms of human health, ecology, and our ability to feed everyone on the planet.” 🌱

Like Lisa Simpson, Los Angeles-based writer Alexa Joy Sherman believes that you can, in fact, win friends with salad.

Time on Our Side

Like the hardest vegetation, the list of TV characters embracing a plant-based diet just keeps growing.

1966 Spock (Leonard Nimoy) <i>Star Trek</i>	1991 Darlene Conner (Sara Gilbert) <i>Roseanne</i>	1993 Topanga Lawrence (Danielle Fishel) <i>Boy Meets World</i>	1994 Phoebe Buffay (Lisa Kudrow) <i>Friends</i>	1995 Lisa Simpson (Yeardley Smith) <i>The Simpsons</i>	1996 Maggie Doyle (Jorja Fox) <i>ER</i>
1997 Abby O’Neil (Mimi Kennedy) <i>Dharma & Greg</i>	1998 Valerry Irons (Pamela Anderson) <i>VIP</i>	2000 Sara Sidle (Jorja Fox) <i>CSI: Crime Scene Investigation</i>	2002 Lisa Kimmel Fisher (Lili Taylor) <i>Six Feet Under</i>	2005 Angela Martin (Angela Kinsey) <i>The Office</i>	2005 Dr. Temperance Brennan (Emily Deschanel) <i>Bones</i>
2009 Rachel Berry (Lea Michele) <i>Glee</i>	2010 Aria Montgomery (Lucy Hale) <i>Pretty Little Liars</i>	2010 Nikita (Maggie Q) <i>Nikita</i>	2010 Gale Boetticher (David Costabile) <i>Breaking Bad</i>	2011 Monroe (Silas Weir Mitchell) <i>Grimm</i>	2011 Stephen Holder (Joel Kinnaman) <i>The Killing</i>

FROM TOP: COURTESY FOX; CBS



Jorja Fox as Sara Sidle