

❄ Interview with Patrick Smith of Veggies ❄

Veggies are a volunteer-led, community-based, social enterprise. They have been promoting vegan catering, and supporting campaigns for human and animal rights, environmental protection and social justice since 1984. Their home is at the Sumac Centre, 245 Gladstone Road, Nottingham NG7 6HX (tel: 0115 960-8254).

The Veggies website www.veggies.org.uk was once described by the Guardian as "vast and extensive". It includes the UK Animal Rights Calendar (co-ordinated by Veggies for more than 20 years), and the Vegan Outreach Diary (listing the increasing number of food-based vegan outreach events).

If you are involved in issues broadly benefiting humans, animals or the environment you are invited to add an entry at www.veggies.org.uk/directory (vegans in business, including sole traders or those offering a skill or service quite informally, can add an entry in the 'Vegan Business Connection' section).

Along with everything else they do, Veggies offer printing at cost price for all kinds of good campaigns- and they are printing Vegan Views for us, and will be selling it at the many events around the UK at which they provide catering.

So how do they manage to do all this? We asked Patrick Smith (the master chef at Veggies) a few questions...

How did Veggies start up, and when did you first become involved yourself?

In 1984 local vegan animal rights campaigners, Tom and Clare, held a demo at which they presented a large 'veggie burger' to the manager of the local McDonalds, representing an alternative to their products of death and hunger (this was the era of 'Live Aid'). Inspired by this, and supported by other local environmental, veggie, animal rights and peace advocates, they acquired a camper van to promote a similar message on a daily basis, initially pitching up outside a Pork Farms factory.

As well as catering on the streets, and at monthly animal rights meetings, Veggies bought burger mix from a local wholefood shop, formed it into frozen burgers, and sold it back to the same shop!

Veggies now makes and distributes its own burger mixes, handmade by vegans in our own kitchen, from organic, vegan ingredients, totalling a thousand kilos a year, equivalent to the meat yield of about ten cows!

Tom and Clare later moved to Bangor to take on board the work of the Christian-inspired Fellowship of Life. Other volunteers continued to run Veggies, running a daily stall on Clinton Street Market. In 1985 I became an ex-manager of a (now defunct) pizza chain restaurant, and I had time to pitch in increasingly often.

How did the Sumac Centre come about? Are Veggies and the Sumac Centre essentially the same thing?

Veggies worked from home kitchens in the early days, then shared office space was found above an 'Environmental Factshop' run by the local Friends of the Earth group. Supported by peace campaign activists, some of whom were vegan, and Veggies supporters, this evolved into the Rainbow Centre, an independent green and peace centre, with the Veggies kitchen at the back and an animal rights resource centre above.

When the Rainbow founders moved on, Veggies took on the running of the whole place, cementing an ongoing commitment to link all issues for the protection of humans, other animals and the environment.

Despite being based in run-down rented premises, the Rainbow Centre gave a solid base from which another project evolved to purchase a permanent centre, the Sumac Centre, which opened in 2001. Veggies is just one of a number of projects based at Sumac (and contributing towards the mortgage), but may be more active than many, travelling as we do to events all over the UK.

Tell us about your typical working day, and your involvement with the other workers and volunteers.

I am still excited and motivated by Veggies as there is no chance to get into a rut. My supposed '16 hour' working week can be done on day one, but there is plenty of campaign volunteering to keep me occupied way beyond. Our week runs from baking and ordering supplies on Thursday, and loading vans on Friday, ready for catering events over the weekend. On Sunday or Monday we are unloading and packing away, to leave the kitchen clear for the weekly run of frozen Veggies Burgers for Lembas Wholefoods, our wholesale supplier and distributor from Sheffield. Finally on Wednesday our 'weekend' arrives!

As a volunteer-led organisation we have just two workers sharing one minimum wage. The awesome level of Veggies campaigning, catering and networking, is only possible with the help of Chrissy, our dynamic one woman production team, and a cracking crew of volunteer co-workers. Thanks go to them for every Veggies burger and carrot cake you've ever enjoyed!



Chrissy and the ever faithful Veggies oven

What regular projects and activities are Veggies involved with? How often do you get to do catering events, and how far afield do you go?

Veggies Diary and the associated UK Animal Rights Calendar went live in January 2005. Since then we have catered for

over 430 events - that's over 70 a year (see www.veggies.org.uk/events).

We have an aspiration to reduce our radius of operations by 10% year-on-year, currently 'thinking twice' before travelling more than 100 miles. However, whilst Veggies will emit 120kg CO2 to get to an event a hundred miles away, by helping each hundred people eat vegan we will 'offset' 200 kg CO2. If just one customer goes vegan for life, they will save 1.5 tonnes CO2 every year, as well as saving 4022 animals' lives, and enabling all the world's peoples to receive a fair share of the world's resources.

Is Veggies self-financing, do you manage to cover costs without too much of a problem?

For over 25 years Veggies has supported hundreds of campaigns at thousands of events, but at many campaign events we cater by donation, chancing that income will cover all the costs involved. With our mission to make vegan, organic and wholesome foods readily available to all, we run on a much smaller margin than is typical in the catering trade.

Whilst most caterers spend perhaps 25% on ingredients, we typically spend 60% or more, partly due to the disproportionate cost of ethical and wholesome ingredients, and also due to our commitment to local and independent purchasing. The resultant higher costs are considered to be part of our campaign funding.

A £9000 deficit a few years ago has been reduced, thanks to the support of some of our members, but we still need to raise £150 each week, beyond trading income, to cover costs.

Do you promote both vegetarianism and veganism, or is the emphasis mainly on veganism?

Everything at Veggies is completely vegan and this is the main emphasis of our work. We are Local Vegan Contacts (and Trademark holder) for the Vegan Society, and support the work of Animal Aid and VIVA! We have for many years printed and distributed the writings of Kathleen Jannaway for the Movement for Compassionate Living.

However we are also pleased to continue to act as the local branch of the Vegetarian Society, and support many of their campaigns (from a vegan perspective). Indeed the Veg Soc has invited us to cater the launch event for National Vegetarian Week, in Manchester on May 22nd. We are also members of their Food and Drink Guild.

In addition to supporting all the above groups (and Vegan Views), we coordinate many vegan initiatives in Nottingham, including the East Midlands Vegan Festival which last year took to the streets with ten vegan free food stalls across the city. The Vegan Business Connection section of our Networking Directory, and Vegan Outreach Diary, gives supports to hundreds more.

How does Veggies decide whether or not to support or promote a particular group or campaign?

Requests to support an event or campaign are circulated to the crew for consideration. We have a feel for mutually supportive campaigns, and are limited only by the time and volunteers available. We have a unique role in the movements we are part of, in that we are not directly tied to any one group or issue. We can therefore uphold values across the whole spectrum of concerns for humans, other animals and the environment. It may be partly due to our support for them that groups such as Earth First, Climate Camp and Peace News embrace a broadly vegan perspective. Mutual support and mutual respect are the watchwords that we encourage in all those who we work with.



Patrick in action on a Veggies stall

In an article in The Vegan in 2007 you said "We are very keen to support anyone wishing to set up a similar project elsewhere" - to what extent has that happened?

Through our Networking Directory we list details of many other caterers. We need and support anyone with the drive and initiative to get more vegan food out there – and we are pleased to offer help and advice to others.

In particular we have converted one of our trailers to 'the world's first vegan fish and chip stall', and it's on free loan to Something Fishy, an independent vegan catering campaign based in Manchester. We would also name check Vegan Campaigns and Shambhu's in London, Fair Foods in Devon, and Green Garden Cafe in Coventry.

We have no hesitation in referring enquirers to these, and others, if we receive requests to cater in their areas.

How have things changed since Veggies started in 1984? Have you seen an expansion of interest in veganism and green issues generally?

Veggies have been promoting vegan catering since 1984. Partly due to our work vegetarianism is now mainstream, and veganism widely understood.

When we joined vegan pioneer Arthur Ling (RIP) of Plamil in founding the Vegan Business Connection in the late 80s we knew of about six other vegan proprietors. A few years later we were listing over 350.

There must now be many more, and we invite any vegan in business, however informal, to add themselves to our Networking Directory.

What would you like to do as time goes on? Have you got any new ideas you'd like to put into practice?

Supported by Lush (yes, the High Street toiletries company) we are developing a much better Campaign Networking Exhibition space, offering 'Information for Action' at many summer events and gatherings, including Glastonbury Festival.

There is a limit to the amount that a few of us in Nottingham can do, so we are very keen to see more vegan catering campaign projects established elsewhere. This is already happening, with many groups holding Vegan Food Fairs and Free Food Giveaways, so much so that we now have a specific Vegan Outreach Events Diary on our website.

These are but a short step to providing a catering service to other campaigns and events, thereby spreading the vegan message further and wider.