



# A Euro vision worth watching

In 2009, Ghent in Belgium announced that the city was having a 'Veggie Thursday' every week, when everyone was going to try to eat vegetarian food. On the second anniversary of this initiative, Olivia Greenway went to find out why this campaign started and how the locals have taken to meat-free days.

Apart from the fact that a quarter of Ghent's population are students and the attitude of the residents can be described as fairly liberal, the vegetarian initiative in Ghent can be traced mainly to one man – Tobias Leenaert – who set up EVA (Ethical Vegetarian Association) more than 10 years ago. Although it was originally formed by several like-minded people on a volunteer basis, Leenaert has stuck to it with wholehearted commitment.

He agrees to squeeze in a meeting with me, despite having a packed agenda that Thursday, including being interviewed by a national television station, fronting a campaign at a well-known butcher to sell vegetarian food, attending a screening of a Belgian film with a pro-veggie storyline, and going to an annual organic fair in Brussels.

'Why did you choose to fight the vegetarian corner?' I ask. He shrugs, as one whose whole life is enveloped by a job that is also his passion. 'It chose me,' he replies.

## Softly, softly...

We all know that the continued eating of meat at its current rate is unsustainable from a global perspective, but how do you persuade people to change? Instead of approaching the move to vegetarianism by focusing on animal cruelty and the negative aspects of meat-eating, Leenaert feels the main incentive should be the positive effects of tasty plant-based food and benefits to health.







Medieval Ghent is famed for its café culture and winding canals



Tobias Leenaert, the man behind Veggie Thursday

'There is a saying in Germany "food first, ethics later" and I think this is particularly true with persuading hardened meat-eaters to try vegetarian food. Dedicated vegetarians have their own reasons for being vegetarian, which often touch on animal welfare, but the meat-eating man on the street will choose vegetarian food because it tastes good, it's healthy and it's better for the environment, or a mixture of these.'

Leenaert is convinced it's best to focus on persuading people to become meat-reducers, believing it's just not possible to turn everyone vegetarian overnight and we should not expect it. He also strongly believes that there should always be a choice. 'We don't force anyone to do anything. If people want to eat meat or fish on Veggie Thursday, it's up to them. But we want them to have the opportunity to eat veggie food if they choose to.'

## On a mission

In 2005 the EVA organisation, having depended on charitable donations for several years, finally secured funding from the Flemish government in response to a successful bid to support a food campaign based on the health and environmental benefits of a plant-based diet. Leenaert chose to focus on a single-issue, uncomplicated campaign that was going to stick. He decided that a 'Veggie Thursday' fitted the bill perfectly.

'If everyone in Ghent ate just veggie food on Thursdays, it would be the equivalent, in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, of keeping 18,000 cars in the garage for a year. Imagine if the whole of

Belgium did this and then other cities in the world.'

Leenaert and his team launched a high-profile publicity campaign. Local and international media were alerted and residents informed of the campaign through local and national press, television and radio; restaurants were offered free recipes, free promotion and cookery lessons; and tasting events were organised. More than 100,000 free 'veggie maps' were distributed through the local paper.

A smart move was to get schools on board. Letters were sent to parents along with a slick, colourful veggie campaign booklet, with enticing recipes. Not only did all the nursery and junior schools in Ghent participate, but over 100 food outlets. A city with a population of 240,000 now has 12 vegetarian restaurants, the most per capita in the whole of Western Europe, and over 100 places that serve vegetarian options.

The statistics collated since the campaign commenced are impressive: 70 per cent of the residents of Ghent have heard of the campaign, 1 in 5 residents participate in it and 15 per cent are eating more vegetarian food due to the campaign.

## Eating out

Leenaert assures me that it continues to be a success. As if to prove his point, I venture into the tourist information centre and I'm handed a 'veggie map' without being prompted.

Taking places randomly from the map, I conduct my own investigations. Starting with where I am staying, I am surprised that the Marriott Hotel offers a veggie business lunch on Thursdays, in addition to

the usual meat or fish choice. Karen Verbiest, deputy manager of sales and marketing at the Marriott, tells me that some businessmen specifically choose to visit on Thursday to try the veggie option. 'There is a choice of vegetarian food on the à la carte menu all the time,' she adds.

There is a similar story at NH Hotels. Christophe Mayhui, food and beverage manager, tells me that their Thursday vegetarian special is 'very popular'. Three out of four of their pasta dishes on the à la carte menu are vegetarian, and there are several veggie starters and soups.

At The Irish pub, Patrick Foley, near the canal, the landlord is bemoaning the introduction of the smoking ban in a few weeks. Vegetarian food, however, has not been shown the door. The Veggie Thursday choice, denoted by a tent card on our table, is tagliatelle with mushrooms, sun-dried tomatoes, peppers and cream, served with garlic bread. Regular veggie options include cheese croquettes, goat's cheese salad, and Quorn pie.

At veggie-friendly café Puur I manage to speak with the chef. She claims many of her dishes are vegetarian. From the menu she shows me cheese croque-monsieur, quiche, and vegetarian spaghetti. They do especially well with vegetarian food on Veggie Thursday, she says, because people make a particular effort on that day.

## Veggie restaurants

On to Avalon, an attractive daytime vegan restaurant overlooked by the medieval Gravensteen castle. It is run by Tine Tomme and Kevin Storms, who set up the place just over two years ago. I ask Tomme what is the point of promoting Veggie Thursday in a vegetarian restaurant? 'Veggie Thursday keeps us on the radar,' she explains. 'We serve healthy food. Most of our customers aren't even vegetarian.' She adds that Thursday is a busy day for her – probably because of the campaign. The restaurant is so successful, they are introducing gourmet evenings once a month.

Komkommertijd is another wholly vegan restaurant – usually reason enough to turn off most people, except the food is delicious and healthy, which is how EVA promote it. The cooperative runs

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an eat-as-much-as-you-like buffet, offering perhaps 10 different main dishes and a couple of fried items together with several salads and dressings. A bonus is the melt-in-your-mouth sponge cake – apple and chocolate on the evening of our visit – moist, light and moreish. With a smart bar, rattan chairs and walls painted in tasteful Farrow and Ball colours, it's as far removed from a hippy hangout as you can imagine.

Finally, Greenway vegetarian café is a fast food revelation. I try a seitan vegan kebab, stuffed with salad, juicy tomatoes and vegan sour cream in a warm wrap. I often avoid fast food, but this is very tasty and not at all greasy. Half the dishes on the menu are vegan. One of the chefs tells me that they have six main options that change regularly, but on Thursdays they have a special for Veggie Thursday. The owner, Paul Floorizone, opened the café 12 years ago and is particularly interested in



meat substitutes and working with soya, tempeh and tofu. He has developed veggie 'meatballs' that he serves with his home-made tomato sauce and is increasing his range of veggie and vegan ready-meals that he supplies to local delicatessens.

## Taking it to Brussels

You would think Leenaert, who manages all his campaigning work with a staff of seven and a budget of 500,000, would be satisfied now, but as with all driven men, he wants more. Some smaller towns have already set up their own schemes, but a roll-out to Brussels due on 26 May is eagerly anticipated.

The most impressive thing in all this, for me, is that Leenaert is himself a vegan. He does not

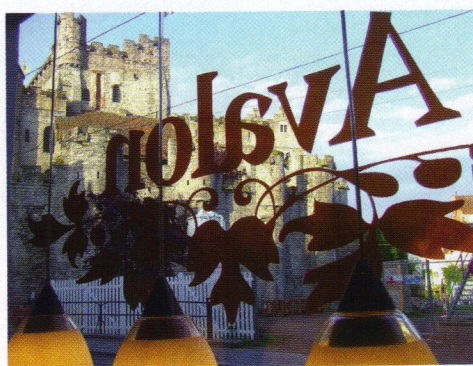
judge or define people by their diet, but works to encourage everyone to eat more plant-based food. He does this by interacting persuasively with people, from café owners and ministers of education to the bureaucrats in Brussels – reaching out, removing imaginary barriers with logical argument and concrete facts. I come away with a mixture of admiration for him and enthusiasm for his homeland.

Ghent itself is a delightful medieval cobbled city, with bridges and canals, pushbikes and trams, quirky shops and friendly pavement cafés. This really is veggie heaven, especially on a Thursday.

With thanks to Ghent Marriott Hotel ([www.marriottghent.com](http://www.marriottghent.com)). For more information on Ghent, visit [www.visitghent.be](http://www.visitghent.be); the 'veggie map' is available to download from the site.

## A TREAT TO EAT

Olivia recommends you try the following places if you're exploring Ghent...



### AVALON

Geldmunt 32, Ghent 9000  
Open: Tue–Sat 11.30–14.30

A pretty vegan café with generously spaced tables. From the English-translated menu, they offer four mains, such as vegetable pie with tofu stuffing served with mixed salad and warm vegetables for €12.50. Portions are generous and there is also a children's menu. Delicious home-made Ayurveda tea with cloves and apple. Attractive wisteria-clad terrace for fine-weather dining.



### KOMKOMMERTIJD

Reep 14, Ghent 9000  
Open: Wed–Sat 11.45–14.30, 18.00–22.30

The unprepossessing exterior has a surprise in store: a smart, bright restaurant with jazz music playing discreetly in the background. The self-service vegan buffet is €15 and may include cabbage and potato with sour cream, spring rolls with sweet chilli sauce, pumpkin curry with lentils and carrots, and pea and onion pakora. Excellent cakes.



### GREENWAY

Nederkouter 42, Ghent 9000  
Open: Mon–Sat 11.00–21.00

Decorated in green, black and orange, this friendly vegetarian fast food café is no shrinking violet. A chalkboard at the counter has daily specials, as well as regulars such as tofu kebabs served in warm wraps, and cheeseburger or hazelnut burger served with or without salad (€8.50/€5.50). Self-clear and recycling are encouraged.