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The “Annoying Vegan” in Today’s Food Culture: A Conversation with Nina Guilbeault

Nina Guilbeault, who completed her dissertation on veganism at Harvard University urged the greater public to rethink their opinions on veganism in our current society.

“I feel that the decision to choose a vegan lifestyle is the best one I've ever made, and my only regret is not having done it sooner,” said Guildbeault, reading from her new book, “The Good Eater: A Vegan’s Search for the Future of Food”.

Michael Pollan, 69, author of the New York Times bestseller “The Omnivore’s Diet”, moderated the talk.

Pollan opened the conversation with, “So why are vegans so annoying?”, leading Guilbeault to describe how veganism is a contradiction to our societal norm of meat-eating.

“Vegans are just in their very nature, even if they are being annoying, a reminder of that collapse, you know, cognitive dissonance, where we actually have to look at something that we otherwise don't want to see,” said Guilbeault.

Guilbeault and Pollan discussed the practices within the meat industry and its effects on climate change being the ethical reasoning behind the vegan movement. However there are still challenges within the movement and practice.

“The biggest challenge is that we don't live in a society that supports this lifestyle,” said Guilbeault, mentioning how the movement is still in its early adopter phase.

She noted the de-emphasis of cooking in our culture and how reclaiming the practice makes veganism less daunting.

“If people see that as a very nourishing experience, you know, to do it as a family, as a family, as a community, is, I think it can be really beautiful,” she said about cooking and eating plants.

Guilbeault credited Pollan's book “The Omnivore's Diet” with helping her reform her eating habits, starting with vegetarianism at age 16. She transitioned into veganism after her grandfather got sick in 2015 and the doctors switched her grandfather's diet to be more plant-based.

Guilbeault concluded with a quote from her book, “Most profoundly, I've discovered that the choice to be vegan every day has led to an existential sight of relief that comes from knowing that I'm living in alignment with my own values.”

The crowd applauded after the conversation. A majority of the crowd identified with being a vegan when Pollan asked the audience.

“I like that she navigated her thoughts very beautifully. She would say, on one hand, I see this, but on the other hand that. I find that refreshing and honest,” said Rakesh Rajani, a lifetime vegetarian interested in transitioning into veganism.

Maggie Bangser, a vegetarian of over 50 years, said, “I really enjoyed it. I learned some new things and some new ways to think about things. Because being vegan is not normalized, [...] being vegan is still seen as a bit outside and unusual, and people question it. To kind of be in a space where it's being discussed from many different angles in a very more wise way that feels kind of inclusive.”

Guilbeault ended the event with a book signing of her new book.

“She is the least annoying vegan I know,” Pollan said about Guilbeault.