

Published in Sauce Magazine, June 2006

At the Table With Mars and Venus ***Merging different food preferences means compromise for couples***

By Lisa Lance

Before deciding to take the plunge and move in together, couples often discuss many important issues – values, personal goals, the future of their relationship... but do they discuss the smaller things, such as what and when they like to eat? What if one partner is a health food nut and the other a junk-food junkie? Can a vegetarian and a carnivore learn to happily co-exist?



Bob Lewis, a psychologist who practices in Clayton, said sharing meals is important in a relationship because it gives the couple a chance to talk and share quality time together.

Although he said he has not found a difference in eating styles to be one of the issues couples deal with, these differences can lead to other relationship issues in the future. For example, if one spouse is very conscious about eating healthy and exercising and the other spouse doesn't exercise and eats mostly fast food, "that's certainly going to surface as a conflictual issue in the marriage over time," he said.

What should a couple keep in mind to avoid conflict? "Be respectful of different eating habits and styles," said Lewis. He suggested finding a happy medium when addressing differences, such as one person indulging in dessert while the other goes without or making stir-fry with the meat on the side if one spouse is vegetarian.

Fran Vinnacombe, an advertising art director, has lived with her husband, Paul Ivkovich, for 23 years. For the past four years she has been a vegetarian, though she said she occasionally eats fish, and he has remained an avid meat-eater. The couple does try to eat dinner together since, Vinnacombe said, "lunch is out and they don't do breakfast."

Ivkovich, a carpenter and artist, has lately done most of the cooking because he arrives home before she does in the evenings. Although he does not share her vegetarian preference, "he's very supportive and encouraging," said Vinnacombe.

The couple asks each other what each would like to eat and compromises accordingly. For example, if he is making a kielbasa dinner, she will eat the side

dishes and omit the sausage. Vinnacombe said one reason her husband may be so understanding of her eating preferences is that he was a vegetarian for nine years before the two met. One thing he will not do, however, is try the vegetable protein, or “faux meat”, that she likes to add to dishes such as vegetarian chili.

Since they have been together, the couple has made some common changes to their diets – eating spinach salad every day, for example – and, although Ivkovich does eat meat, he has cut down considerably on red meat and now eats more chicken and fish.

Have they faced any major issues due to their differences in eating styles? Not so much as a couple, Vinnacombe said, but “eating with friends, in other people’s homes – I feel like a pariah, like I’m an annoyance.”

Nima and Josh Rothmel, a marketing account director and project manager, respectively, have lived together for about five years. They come from very different backgrounds: Her family is from India, and his family is Jewish. Although neither observes a restrictive diet, their cultural differences have come into play, especially during holidays.

For example, one winter it somehow happened (neither one remembers this specific detail) that Nima Rothmel volunteered to bring latkes, a traditional Jewish dish, to Hanukkah dinner her in-laws’ house. She thought the latkes were to be the main dish, and was nervous to serve them. “When it’s a holiday you haven’t celebrated,” she said, “you want it to be right and you don’t want to disrespect them.” Despite her anxiety, the experience turned out to be a positive one: The Rothmels had fun making the dish together, and the dinner was a success.

How do they differ in everyday eating styles? Nima Rothmel’s upbringing has given her a preference for spicy food and, though her husband likes Indian food, she said some foods she enjoys are very authentic and much spicier than he would like.

Her advice for other couples with different food preferences? “Always be willing to try new food,” she said. If one spouse or partner likes a certain type of food that the other doesn’t, she suggested being open to having it for dinner once in a while. “If you don’t like it, you can always have a bowl of cereal!”

Sometimes the challenge centers on when to eat rather than what to eat - a challenge my own husband and I have faced in the past five years. We both work full time, and since my husband began the MBA program at Washington University nearly two years ago, he attends class most evenings until about 10 p.m.

Through trial and error, we have found that making adjustments to our habits allows us to continue to spend time together over a meal. During the week, I make dinner for both of us; I eat earlier in the evening and then sit with my

husband while he eats dinner after he gets home from class. This way, we still communicate and spend time together, just not at the traditional dinner hour.

And, ultimately, it's the time together that's important. Lewis said in his 25 years of practice he has found it is not what people eat, but sharing meals together that makes a difference in their relationship. "Meals give you a chance to talk," he said. "Even if it's only 15 minutes, that's important quality time."