



# Our Hen House

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## Interview with Alessandra Seiter

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **ALESSANDRA SEITER** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 222.*

JASMIN: Alessandra Seiter is a sophomore geography major at Vassar College, and is committed to combating oppression in its many forms through intersectional activism. She serves as co-president of the Vassar Animal Rights Coalition and blogs at Farmers Market Vegan, which you can find at [farmersmarketvegan.wordpress.com](http://farmersmarketvegan.wordpress.com). When she's not writing, blogging, or organizing campus events, Alessandra enjoys cooking, baking, practicing yoga, and biking. You can find her on Twitter at @FarmersMarketVeg and she's also on Facebook. Also, Alessandra is the coordinator for the Our Hen House Hen Press, our new ebook publishing division, and she's also a contributing writer to Our Hen House.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Alessandra.

ALESSANDRA: Hello, Jasmin. How are you today?

JASMIN: So excited that you're here actually in Our Hen House. So frequently, we interview people on Skype or on the phone, but here you are, live and in person.

ALESSANDRA: In the flesh.

MARIANN: Unfortunately, that means that we might have to stop the whole interview for Rose to bark for a while.

JASMIN: Rose is in love with you. I think that you've found a new life partner.

ALESSANDRA: I mean, I'm in love with Rose, so I'm glad it'll work out.

JASMIN: Yeah, it's all good. So we have several things to talk to you about today, but first, you are a vegetable expert, aren't you?

ALESSANDRA: I am indeed. That's why I have a blog all about vegetables.

JASMIN: Tell us what your blog is.

ALESSANDRA: My blog is called Farmers Market Vegan. It's about four or five years old now, and it's basically a collection of wholesome vegan recipes and vegan travel tips and also a lot of ethical musings, I guess, on the interconnections between animal rights and other social justice movements.

JASMIN: And how can people find it online?

ALESSANDRA: You can go to [farmersmarketvegan.com](http://farmersmarketvegan.com).

JASMIN: And Alessandra, of course, is a writer for Our Hen House as well, which is lucky for us. And you also help us manage our ebook publishing division, Hen Press. And yet, you still come over and hang out with us anyway.

ALESSANDRA: It's the best part of my job.

JASMIN: Excellent. Well, now Rose is the best part of your job. And I wanted to talk to you today about vegetables because it's spring. Spring has sprung, and vegetables have sprung along with it, which reminds me, honey, we have to get in our garden and figure out what's a weed and what's not.

MARIANN: I'm too frightened. I'm sure I'm gonna pick all the vegetables and throw them out and then let the weeds grow. But weeds can be good for you too. There's something back there that looks like it might be purslane, which most people think of as a weed, but is actually really, really good for you. So maybe we'll grow purslane.

JASMIN: I like to say, as if I'm from New Orleans, purslane. Anyway, so what are you talking to us about today?

ALESSANDRA: Well, I've got four veggies lined up for you, all of which are seasonal to the spring. Should I list them all first, or should I just start with the first one?

JASMIN: Let's start with the first one. What have we got?

ALESSANDRA: First up, we've got artichokes, which are your basic globe-shaped green vegetables. The flavor is briny, with a tender yet toothsome texture.

JASMIN: Wow. Next time I do a food review, I'm calling Alessandra.

MARIANN: Tender, yet toothsome.

JASMIN: Yeah, I'm very bad at coming up with adjectives for food.

MARIANN: Artichokes frighten me a little bit.

JASMIN: Yeah, well, and I see artichokes frequently at the farmers market.

ALESSANDRA: Mm-hm. Yes, a lot of people are frightened by them. My mom, actually, we just made artichokes for the first time like last week. And it can be kind of intimidating to trim them and prepare them, but all you have to do is trim off the end of all of the individual leaves, fill a large bowl with water and squeeze lemon juice in it, and then once you trim the artichokes you put the artichokes in there and it'll keep them from browning.

JASMIN: Huh.

ALESSANDRA: Yeah.

JASMIN: Wait, why the lemon juice?

ALESSANDRA: It keeps the artichokes from browning, the acid. Yes, indeed.

JASMIN: Wow. I was actually just this morning reading about the miracle of lemon juice because it's supposed to also be able to help with everything from mouth sores to lightening your hair. And now I know that it also helps with artichoke de-browning.

ALESSANDRA: Indeed. Indeed, it does. So after you've put your artichokes into the lemon juice and you've trimmed them, then you can steam the artichokes whole for about 30 to 40 minutes. And then you eat them by peeling off each individual leaf of the artichoke and dip them in some Vegenaïse. And it is succulent and delicious.

JASMIN: I have an important question.

ALESSANDRA: Yes, please.

JASMIN: Vegenaïse or Veganaïse?

ALESSANDRA: Vegenaïse.

JASMIN: No way.

ALESSANDRA: Yes way.

JASMIN: See? Just when I think I can't learn anything else about veganism.

MARIANN: Or Just Mayo, which I haven't tried yet.

JASMIN: Have you tried Just Mayo?

ALESSANDRA: I haven't. I just first tried Vegenaïse, so I'm working my way through the vegan mayonnaïse.

JASMIN: Okay. I'm sensing a review coming, by the way.

ALESSANDRA: Ooh, let's do it.

JASMIN: Okay. So we have our artichokes. We're dipping it in our Vegenaïse. And that sounds like odd. I mean, to be honest, the only thing I've ever thought to do with mayo, vegan mayo of course, is to put it on a sandwich.

ALESSANDRA: Well, in France, you know, they dip everything in mayonnaïse, from French fries to artichoke hearts, so let's do it the vegan way.

JASMIN: In France, do they call French fries "French fries"?

ALESSANDRA: I do not know.

JASMIN: Because, I mean, wouldn't that be redundant?

MARIANN: Don't they call them "pomme frites"?

JASMIN: Probably, pomme frites. Okay, so is this it for artichokes, or do we have some more tips or some more suggestions?

ALESSANDRA: Well, I just wanted to offer some other recipe suggestions.

JASMIN: Wait, you had me at just like steaming and dipping. That's basically my culinary skills. But for people who are maybe more talented than I am, what else do you have?

ALESSANDRA: Well, you can put some artichoke hearts on a Mediterranean-style pizza or pasta, along with some other salty ingredients like capers and olives. And artichokes also complement tomatoes really, really well. I personally like chopping up little cherry tomatoes with some artichokes, olive oil, salt, and parsley and then serve them over a slice of bread. Oh, and the best thing to do for that is to rub the slice of bread with a cut garlic clove and then toast it and then put on your bruschetta.

JASMIN: Holy crap! I have to go back to cutting the cherry tomatoes, because every time I try and cut a little tomato, it like flicks across the kitchen, and then I'm like, "ah, fuck it, I'm just gonna have the cherry tomato whole."

MARIANN: Maybe you should sharpen your knife, sweetie.

JASMIN: Maybe I should go to Alessandra's for dinner.

ALESSANDRA: You've got to use a serrated knife for tomatoes.

JASMIN: We have one knife, and it's made out of like ceramics. It's white. It's like those white ceramic knives, and it's missing a piece, like as if someone took a bite out of it, 'cause it broke. But we still use it. That's the beginning and end of our knives. Maybe I need to go knife shopping.

MARIANN: We have other knives. She's totally making this up.

JASMIN: We do not have. That's like it. That's the only knife. Anyway, okay, moving on, so that sounds delightful and delicious and I'm in.

ALESSANDRA: So we've got one of our green vegetables down. Now we're gonna move onto a red vegetable. And it is often prepared as a fruit; it is called rhubarb.

JASMIN: Mm! Or as my grandpa from Boston used to say, rhubahb.

ALESSANDRA: That's not how I say it. Sorry to say.

JASMIN: Okay.

ALESSANDRA: So it's got a sour flavor and a crunchy texture, and when you cook it down, it cooks to a thick jelly consistency, but only the stalks are edible. The leaves are toxic, so do not eat them please.

JASMIN: Okay, really? I feel it's so odd when there's something toxic that you have to remember to discard. It's like the seeds of apples. If you ever like eat an apple core, you could just get poisoned.

MARIANN: Well, I've always thought that apple thing was a little exaggerated. But that's because you've always gotten all of your vegetables from the supermarket where they've

already fixed them. Now you have to like think about what it's like to live in the real world, especially if we're gonna grow them.

JASMIN: Yeah, and we also have a composter in the backyard, so we could just compost away the poisonous parts.

ALESSANDRA: There you go. And if the thing about apples is true, then I am in big trouble, 'cause I ate the seeds of an apple today.

JASMIN: Uh-oh.

ALESSANDRA: Uh-oh.

JASMIN: We better hurry up and finish this review.

ALESSANDRA: So when you're looking for rhubarb, you want to look for moderately thin, crisp, dark pink to red stalks because the green stalks are sour while the red stalks are sweeter. So when you cook them, remember to remove the leaves, and don't peel off the fibrous skin because it contains a lot of flavor. So to cook it down into like a simple jam, you just mix the rhubarb with sugar at a ratio of one cup of sugar for every six cups of rhubarb, bring it to a boil, reduce the heat, and stir until the rhubarb breaks down.

JASMIN: I've never had rhubarb jam before.

ALESSANDRA: It's good stuff.

JASMIN: Can you have it with peanut butter?

ALESSANDRA: You can have anything with peanut butter.

JASMIN: That's a very good point.

MARIANN: That's a rule of thumb for vegans. I love rhubarb, but I have to say I'm not a big fan of adding a lot of sugar, but when it comes to rhubarb you really gotta throw in the sugar 'cause it's sour.

ALESSANDRA: It's true. I mean, if you're avoiding sugar, maple syrup goes well with anything, so you can use that instead.

JASMIN: Mm-hm.

ALESSANDRA: So that jam recipe is great to just fill like a pie shell and bake. And rhubarb also complements strawberries perfectly. You can add strawberries to basically any sweet rhubarb dish.

JASMIN: Mariann's funny about strawberries. You just think they're a little too tart.

MARIANN: Well, I just don't like sour foods. I don't mind bitter, but sour, it really puts me off.

JASMIN: This is when that whole maple syrup and peanut butter thing come in handy.

MARIANN: Well, let's just forget everything else and have maple syrup and peanut butter.

JASMIN: Good point.

ALESSANDRA: Could I do a maple syrup review?

JASMIN: Yes, please.

ALESSANDRA: You have no idea how obsessed I am with maple syrup.

JASMIN: Okay, you could go tap the tree and everything.

ALESSANDRA: Yes, please. I would love to. So moving onto our next vegetable, we have fava beans, which you may be familiar with from *Silence of the Lambs*, Hannibal Lecter's favorite food. Indeed. So they're a large Kelly green bean that has a soft green pod on the outside, and it's white and fuzzy on the inside. And cooked fava beans are tender with a delicately sweet nutty flavor and a -- vegan, of course -- buttery texture. So you want to look for sturdy, firm, green pods without any slimy green spots. And the hardest thing about fava beans is shelling because you have to shell them twice. You have to shell first the outer pod, and then you have to remove the individual husks from every bean.

JASMIN: Well, this seems a little laborious.

ALESSANDRA: But they're so good! It's worth it! It can also be a meditative process, so you know, when you're shelling your beans you get into the groove.

JASMIN: Yeah. Well, Mariann's a lot better at that kind of thing than I am. I'm better at the, I don't know, like throwing it all on and making it into something creative. But Mariann is very good at the like preparation, the cutting, the shelling.

MARIANN: I'm just more patient than you are. I like that meditative thing. If you have the time and you're just sitting at the table shelling peas, or shelling fava beans. I *love* fava beans. Does that make me like Hannibal Lecter?

JASMIN: Uh, no comment.

ALESSANDRA: So regardless of whether Mariann is like Hannibal Lecter...

JASMIN: A sentence that has never been uttered on Our Hen House before.

ALESSANDRA: So, some great things to do with fava beans... They're great in a really silky soup with some coconut milk and mint.

MARIANN: Well, what isn't?

ALESSANDRA: Right? I also, a while ago, made the *best* mashed potato and fava bean cakes, like little fritters fried in coconut oil.

MARIANN: My God!

JASMIN: My God, Jesus Christ. I want you to like move in and be our personal chef and shell fava beans and put coconut oil in them and coconut milk and rhubarb jam. I'm like drooling over here all over the microphone.

ALESSANDRA: I don't blame you.

JASMIN: Yeah. That's pretty good. Okay, so fava beans, is that it for fava beans?

ALESSANDRA: That is it for the fava beans. Moving onto our final vegetable of the review, we have ramps, which are kind of an uncommon vegetable. They're a cross between a spring onion and a wild leek, and they look like a scallion but with a more bulbous white end and a leafier green end, and then they have a reddish pink middle. Yeah. They have a really short season.

JASMIN: Do you ever take a step back and just think how amazing it is that like the world makes these foods? I do that every now and then when I have like a beautiful grapefruit or something like that.

ALESSANDRA: Mm. I see what you mean.

JASMIN: It's amazing, what you're saying, like all of these colors. Not to get too hippy dippy, but this is like Mother Nature giving this to us.

MARIANN: Oh, sweetheart, you're so philosophical today. I just wanted to say that ramps are always a very big item in the spring in high-end restaurants, not just vegan restaurants, any kind of restaurants, I guess 'cause they have such a short season and they're considered very, very hot stuff.

JASMIN: I always call them romps.

MARIANN: Oh.

JASMIN: I was wrong.

ALESSANDRA: But you also call it Veganaise.

JASMIN: Oh, right. Okay. I don't know, maybe I'm the one who's right here? I'm gonna put some Veganaise on my romps.

MARIANN: Vay-ganaise.

JASMIN: Vay-ganaise, right.

ALESSANDRA: But on the subject of ramps being a hot item in restaurants, I think it's because they're a foraged food, like foraged mushrooms like morels, foraged ramps. I think they're kind of a hip thing because of that. So some ways that I like to use ramps is to toss whole ramps in olive oil and roast or grill them, and they get this great charred flavor with a sweetness. They also complement potatoes and asparagus really well, so I like to put them into creamy potato salads, also with more Veganaise. Also, you can make a ramp pesto with olive oil, lemon zest and salt. Just whirl ramps and all of those ingredients up in the blender.

MARIANN: Oh my God!

JASMIN: That sounds delightful!

MARIANN: I'm gonna pass out here.

JASMIN: How do you come up with these recipes? Do you just sort of dream them up, or are you inspired by other recipes?

ALESSANDRA: Looking at recipes is kind of just my big hobby, and I read cookbooks like novels. So after doing a lot of that, I just kind of get into my head of what can be done with vegetables.

JASMIN: I mean, you're young now. You had to be *very* young when you started your blog. How old were you when you started it?

ALESSANDRA: Oh gosh, I think I was a junior in high school, I want to say?

JASMIN: And what was it that made you feel compelled to start it?

ALESSANDRA: Yeah. So I was getting a lot of questions from my friends because I had just gone vegan and they were like, "Well what do you *eat*?" And I'm like, "you know what? I'm not gonna explain it to you. Just go to my blog and you'll see, and it'll be better because you'll have pictures."

JASMIN: Can you just give me like your final thoughts on how people like me who aren't great cooks but are very passionate about produce, and I'm looking forward to going to this new farmers market -- new to me -- here in Park Slope. Can you give me any advice on how to go about buying new vegetables that I wouldn't otherwise buy, or maybe even growing them, since we're gonna be growing them in our backyard? 'Cause I'm intimidated.

ALESSANDRA: Well, my favorite place to buy vegetables is the farmers market, as you can tell from the name of my blog.

JASMIN: Farmers Market Veg.

ALESSANDRA: That's right. And I think the best way to introduce yourself to new produce is to ask the vendors about it. If you see something that you've never seen before, ask the people behind the counter, "hey, what do you like to do with this?" And they're the experts on it.

JASMIN: Okay, that's good, and just sort of play with it. For years, we belonged to a CSA, and we would kind of be forced to bring home these items that we never would have bought, and frequently there were a lot of them. And in a way, it was lovely because we considered it a challenge, and we said, okay, now we have all -- Well, like sunchokes, for example. Remember *all* of those sunchokes we had.

MARIANN: They were so good.

JASMIN: They were -- Talk about, though, it was hard to get the mud out of like the little elbow creases.

MARIANN: I had never had them before and they were delicious.

JASMIN: But my point is I guess I should get over being intimidated and just play with it, because like, what's the worse that's gonna happen? And at the end of the day--

MARIANN: You could eat the toxic leaves from the "rhubarb."

JASMIN: That's true. But if you at the end of the day put some oil and salt on it, or peanut butter, it's gonna be good! And I mean, you don't even need to follow a recipe to know that it's gonna be good.

ALESSANDRA: And when all else fails, just roast them. Roasting things can never, never go wrong.

JASMIN: Yeah, okay, good point. Now, Alessandra, in addition to making and creating these amazing vegetable dishes and fruit dishes and just vegan dishes in general and all of your writing, we have mentioned on the podcast before that you actually head up the Vassar animal rights group. You are the co-president, I believe, is that right?

ALESSANDRA: Yes! I am the co-president of the Vassar Animal Rights Coalition, otherwise known as VARC.

JASMIN: VARC. And can you tell us a little bit about VARC and how this position of yours came to be?

ALESSANDRA: Yeah. So I first got involved with VARC, it was an existing group, when I was a freshman. And I got involved and helped them organize a bunch of events and I went to conferences with them, and veganism and animal rights had been my passion for a couple of years before that, so it seemed like a logical progression for me to become president this year.

JASMIN: And you're a sophomore now. You're finishing up your sophomore year.

ALESSANDRA: That's correct.

JASMIN: Mariann and I are so wildly impressed with everything that VARC does and everything that you do, and there's just so many passionate people. We were really honored to go there and speak a couple months ago. And it gives me real hope to see passionate people like you organizing these events. Talk about some of the highlights of the events that you have been involved with organizing with VARC.

ALESSANDRA: Yeah. So just in these past two semesters, we've hosted Carol Adams, author of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, we've hosted James McWilliams, who's a board member of Our Hen House and he writes and blogs; we've hosted Jasmin and Mariann, you guys, of course.

MARIANN: Oh, my God!

ALESSANDRA: Oh, my God! And we also hosted Lauren Ornelas of the Food Empowerment Project. And my personal favorite event was our vegan wine and cheese tasting at the beginning of the year. We got a bunch of vegan cheese donated from various cheese companies and also this great non-alcoholic grape juice from...

JASMIN: Elianni?

ALESSANDRA: Elianni, that's right, thank you.

JASMIN: Yeah, I remember that from after our talk, you had made tacos. Was it tacos?

ALESSANDRA: Yeah. After your guys' talk, we made a vegan taco bar.

JASMIN: Right. It was so good. And we were talking to people, and I was like, why don't I recognize that person? Oh, because they *just* came for the food, not the talk. And I think in a way that's great. I mean, I was sad they weren't there for the talk, but the point is, you're bringing vegan food to the students at Vassar, and it's *really* good. Those of you listening to this can probably get an idea just from the way Alessandra was passionately talking about ramps that she knows her way around a vegetable. And so I love that you're truly changing the world through these incredibly impressionable 19-year-olds', 20-year-olds', 21-year-olds' heads by feeding them amazing food.

MARIANN: So what is the atmosphere on campus vis-à-vis animal rights? Do you get a lot of people interested in the issues? Do you get a lot of people going vegan or is it just one of many issues that people touch upon? How would you say -- just give us folks who aren't on campus an idea of what's going on there.

ALESSANDRA: Well, Vassar is very progressive in its nature in terms of like social justice issues. Veganism is still small there, but just with the general atmosphere of people being so involved in social justice, I think when we present it as just another social justice issue, people are receptive to it, which is good to see.

JASMIN: Have you had any people kind of just sort of see what VARC was doing and dip their toe in a little bit and then just make a full transition in terms of their attitude and their behavior?

ALESSANDRA: Yeah, actually. So one member of VARC, she was a vegetarian for a little bit but then she went back to eating animals. But then after the Carol Adams lecture, she was like, "you know what? I'm going vegan."

JASMIN: Wow, well done. Yeah, Carol Adams has that effect on people. And not to be ageist, but she has that effect on a lot of people in your age bracket I think. I mean, especially for me. I went vegetarian when I was like 18 or 19. I didn't go vegan till I was 24. And I think at that time, just the information wasn't as available as it is now, which is no real excuse. I just never thought of it beyond just, "ew, meat is gross!" But the point is, I was just very taken with Carol Adams when I first went vegan, and that message really resonated with me as a young feminist. And so I'm so glad to hear that you had her out to speak at VARC.

Now, I know a lot of our listeners aren't in college anymore. I was wondering if you think that there is any lessons that you've learned through your organizing that our listeners who might not be in school anymore might be able to kind of bring into their own life of advocacy.

ALESSANDRA: Well, I think what surprised me so much about heading up an organization is that the opportunities for organizing events and community outreach are so vast. Like, if you bring together a group of activists, like you can basically just do anything. And there are a lot of people willing to help. So say you want to organize a vegan wine and cheese tasting, for example. Go to your local vegan restaurant. Say, "hey, I've got an idea for this." They might be totally jazzed about the idea and want to help you pull it off.

JASMIN: I sort of like the idea of doing that, not even necessarily at a vegan restaurant, but even at, let's say, a cheese store, 'cause there's actually a cheese store here in Park Slope

that we keep passing. They might be worth approaching about doing something like that, because I have no reason to believe that they would be opposed to it or offended by it.

ALESSANDRA: Totally. And once you start doing that kind of stuff, you just start seeing opportunities everywhere. You're like, oh yeah, that cheese store around the corner, we could do something there!

JASMIN: It's just about thinking a little bit outside of the box, and just sort of jumping onto any opportunity you can, you know, passing the library and seeing, oh it has a story time hour on Sundays, and then thinking, I wonder if I could go there and read a story about animals. Like, just starting to think in that realm can really open up possibilities. Any other organizing tips?

ALESSANDRA: Yes. One organization that VARC uses a lot is VegFund.

JASMIN: Ah, yeah.

ALESSANDRA: Yes. So basically if you want to host any event that's giving out vegan food, VegFund will give you money for it. And that's basically how we fund all of the food at our events.

JASMIN: Is VegFund not the biggest unsung hero to ever join our movement, ever in the history of the world?

ALESSANDRA: I love them. I first learned about them when I was interning with Compassion over Killing, and oh my God. I can't say enough good things about them.

JASMIN: So what was that like, interning at Compassion over Killing? Tell us the real skinny on Erica Meier. Come on, the real skinny, nobody's listening. What is she really like?

ALESSANDRA: I wish I had some dirt to tell you, but she is literally the sweetest woman I've ever met.

JASMIN: Goddamnit! I was hoping to start some rumors here. Yeah, I love Erica, like so much. She's amazing. Anyway, Alessandra, I'm so excited that you are here in Our Hen House and that you're not only enlightening us with vegetables, but you're also inspiring us with different ways of going about change making. I mean, you already gave me this idea just through this conversation of going to this cheese store around the corner. And I hope that you will come back and review maple syrup and review Veganaise and Just Mayo, and maybe one day, romps.

ALESSANDRA: I would love to do all of the above.

JASMIN: Excellent. Thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House.

ALESSANDRA: Thank you so much for having me. Can't wait until next time.

JASMIN: That was the amazing Alessandra Seiter. And be sure to find her at [farmersmarketvegan.wordpress.com](http://farmersmarketvegan.wordpress.com).