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Interview with Elizabeth Castoria

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **ELIZABETH CASTORIA** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 225.*

JASMIN: It thrills me that today's episode is focusing on so many amazing new authors. And Elizabeth Castoria has a brand new book out that she's going to be talking to us all about today. I'm so excited about bringing Elizabeth, who I've been a long fan of and have been lucky enough to work with when I wrote for VegNews and she was the managing editor over at VegNews. So excited to bring her to our podcast today.

Elizabeth Castoria is the author of *How to Be Vegan*, which is from Artisan, and is brand new. And she's also the former editorial director of VegNews, where she shared the fun, ease, and variety of the vegan lifestyle with readers around the globe. She is now a freelance writer living in San Francisco, and you could follow Elizabeth on Twitter @ecastoria.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: Thank you, it's so nice to be here.

JASMIN: It's so exciting to talk to you. And as we're recording this, your book just came out today.

ELIZABETH: Yes it did!

JASMIN: And mazel tov. I think maybe you're a little bit excited about it.

ELIZABETH: There's a chance. There's like a 5% chance that I'm like bouncing off the friggin' walls.

JASMIN: And you're over in San Francisco and you're in New York, so it's like first thing in the morning there, so this is literally it. This is the beginning of the rest of your life, right here and right now, Elizabeth. This is so exciting.

ELIZABETH: I'm definitely gonna throw up soon. Like, that's all that's gonna happen.

JASMIN: Oh, good! Excellent.

MARIANN: Do that on the air.

JASMIN: Yeah, do that on the air. We like bodily functions to be magnified on our podcast because it helps with listenership, so...

ELIZABETH: Oh, nice!

JASMIN: Yeah, awesome. So, *How to be Vegan*, I love this book. And I have to admit, when it came in the mail, the first thing I thought was, this is a really beautiful book. It's like I'm holding it with one hand right now. It's a great design. And as I started flipping through it, I thought, well, I'm hearing Elizabeth talking and I'm looking around because admittedly I was in the bathroom for the first 15 minutes. But Elizabeth, what I thought was that this would be a book I would get for other people, and I was right. I will, but I didn't really know that I would also get so much out of it. And I did, and I still am. I'm getting a lot out of looking through this book even though I've been vegan for 10 years. So I wanted to talk to you about what your goal was in writing *How to Be Vegan* and who your intended audience was.

ELIZABETH: Thank you, first of all, 'cause that's really, really nice to hear all those wonderful things. And I just want to say really quickly that I'm completely floored by the design and the look of it and everything too, and the team over at Headcase Design did an amazing, amazing job. So I just wanted to thank them so much because they just took it and like ran with it and I didn't have to do anything and it was amazing, which was so incredibly fortunate. And so to actually answer your question, I definitely am hoping that this has -- obviously I'm thrilled to hear that you are getting stuff out of it and enjoying it. Of course, that's a nice thing to hear.

JASMIN: Well, that was the goal of the book, is that I enjoy it, right?

ELIZABETH: I obviously wrote it for you. That's, duh. No, but I really do intend for it to be people who have heard about veganism or have a friend who's vegan or have some sort of maybe tangential touch point to veganism and are interested to know more because I think that there are so many of those people these days. You can just -- report after report comes out saying that meatless eating is on the rise and people are reducing their meat intake and all that kind of great stuff. And so I really wanted there to be a resource for people who are just getting started and are just kind of thinking about it, and the kinds of things that you have to think about when you start doing something new is what I hoped to kind of capture in the book.

JASMIN: Well, I think you have captured it. And I know that more and more on bookshelves these days you'll find books about veganism. But I think that this is so easy to follow, so easy to navigate. I keep just turning to a random page and getting caught up in your kind of humorous and accessible friendly chat of the book, but also learning something at the same time. Now, I want to take a step back. And I know the story of how this book came to be, but I think that it's really telling of where the mainstream is in terms of accepting veganism. So tell our listeners how this book started.

ELIZABETH: Okay. So I totally agree with you. And I love telling this story for that reason. So basically I won the lottery. And what happened was that the team over at Artisan, my wonderful, wonderful editor Judy Pray, went to the associate publisher there, whose name is Lia Ronnen who I had met a number of years ago, and said, "We should really be covering veganism in more of our books because it's this huge trend, it's on the rise, it's

gonna be big,” blah, blah, blah. So they agreed that this was a great idea and then because I had met Lia, she called me, and then I jumped around like a maniac and they asked if I wanted to write the book and I didn’t even know what to say because it was such an enthusiastic and extreme yes. So then we just went for it and started, and that was kind of the insanely magical story of how it came about.

MARIANN: Well, I just think it’s so exciting when people are reaching out to vegans instead of the other way around. I think that’s a real sign of the times.

ELIZABETH: Oh, absolutely.

MARIANN: So who is going vegan these days, and who is this book going -- what is the demographic?

ELIZABETH: I think it really reaches through a lot of demographics. Traditionally it’s been like teenage girls who are the leading demographic of people who are adopting vegan lifestyles. But these days, there are so many different ages of people and different locations of people and that kind of stuff. So I think it’s really reaching a much bigger audience than even, say, like five years ago.

JASMIN: Yeah, it’s true. It’s definitely everywhere. We were just in Basel, Switzerland, and I was walking around. I saw this bookstore had a little table display with their books out front, and there were all of these books about veganism... in German, so I didn’t know what they say except for I saw “vegan”! And I was like, “yay, vegan here in Switzerland!” So it’s everywhere. And speaking of my traveling, one chapter that I particularly like about your book, *How to Be Vegan*, was about traveling. And when our listeners found out that we were traveling, we got bombarded with questions about how you travel as a vegan. And I would like to hear some of your top tips for traveling as a vegan.

ELIZABETH: Sure. Well, I think, though I’ve been vegan for a really long time so I don’t know if I’m right about this, but it’s like doing any other kind of traveling, where you do your research before you go. It’s not like -- I don’t think most people these days think, “oh, I’m gonna go to Basel, Switzerland. I will do no internet research before I leave and I’ll just drop myself off at the airport and then run into the street,” you know? I don’t think that that happens. And so especially for vegans, it’s always so, so exciting, and you guys know this for sure, but finding a really great vegan restaurant in a place that you wouldn’t expect it or something like that is so satisfying. So I love of course happy-cow.net. I think that that is one of the most useful resources on the internet for people who want to travel as vegans. And then also, I always recommend just googling because somebody has already been to the place that you want to go to, and they’ve already written about it and they already have posted their findings and all that stuff online because that’s the age that we live in and it’s great.

JASMIN: And it’s also like a hobby in and of itself to just kind of seek these entries out and to travel based on where the vegan restaurant is. I don’t know. Maybe that’s just me.

ELIZABETH: Absolutely. The first thing I always do is plan where I’m gonna eat.

JASMIN: Obviously, exactly. But about the actual traveling, you had some really great tips about the airport and things like that. And one thing that struck me, Elizabeth, was the condiment sandwich. What is the condiment sandwich?

ELIZABETH: I thank you. This was actually something that I started as a joke when I was in summer camp when I was like 17, when they would have these all-camp barbecues and of course I wasn't eating the burgers or anything. So the condiment sandwich basically is you get the best kind of bread that you can find, and then a little mustard, maybe a tomato, maybe a piece of lettuce, and then definitely some avocado. So basically any kind of vegetable that you can collate from the sort of toppings they have at a sandwich shop, or like even sometimes coffee shops or whatever in airports will have a variety of offerings, so you can just cull together every possible vegetable, and then especially avocado 'cause that makes everything good.

MARIANN: Yeah, avocado really does make everything good. I think that's one of the most important rules of being vegan.

ELIZABETH: Or being human.

MARIANN: Yeah, actually, which should be the same thing actually, shouldn't it? After this book it will.

ELIZABETH: I hope so.

JASMIN: You had a lot also about manners, and okay, this is something I have to definitely read over and over again a few times, I admit it. And you tell people, don't be a jerk. I like how you're just whittling it down to that, and it's true. Don't be a jerk. Well, what do you mean by that?

ELIZABETH: Well, again, I don't mean to repeat myself. But I feel like it's the same kind of rules that you would want to have for being a decent human. Like, nobody wants to interact with a jerk. And I think that especially and unfortunately for vegans, we still -- even though there's so much more enthusiasm about the lifestyle and everything, there is sometimes still that kind of mental block for people where they think that vegans are all like aggressive and really preachy and there's that kind of mental picture that people have. So I definitely find that just being nice is A, something that's good to do in general. But B, if you're a nice person and someone has an experience with you, then they think that vegans are nice people. It just sort of follows logically and nicely. So I try not to be a jerk. I don't always do it well, but I try.

MARIANN: Oh, you're pretty good at it, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: Shucks.

JASMIN: Good at not being a jerk.

ELIZABETH: I'm putting that on my resume. That's going up.

MARIANN: Seriously. You could put that on the book blurb when the next edition comes out.

JASMIN: Yeah.

ELIZABETH: Thank you.

MARIANN: So we mentioned traveling. And I think traveling is one of the things that really intimidates people who are thinking of going vegan full time and just think, “well I won’t be able to do that.” What are some of the other fears that people face as they think about going vegan?

ELIZABETH: That’s a really good question. I think a lot of people still -- and people still ask me these kinds of things all the time -- it’s like, “well, what do you do if you go to a restaurant? Or “what do you do if you go to a birthday party and the cake isn’t vegan?” It’s like, well then, you don’t eat the cake one day. Like, there are a lot of kind of social situations that you kind of have to learn how to navigate through when you first change something that you’re doing in your life, and that’s true for anything too. If you start reading six books a week, then you’re gonna have to cut down on some of your other activities. It’s like, it’s just an adjustment that you need to kind of take time with. So I think that knowing that whatever you do if you’re working toward something that you want to do, it’s gonna be okay.

JASMIN: Yeah, totally. I think that that’s something that I almost feel it’s bigger in people’s minds before you take the plunge. I think people tend to be scared of the word “vegan.” And that’s one of the reasons I love how much of a kind of nutshell you put all of this into with your book. Now, I’m looking at the recipes, and you have a whole section of recipes at the end of this. Did you concoct these recipes yourself?

ELIZABETH: Oh, thank God I did not. If it had been me, it would have been like, “Eat toast. I don’t know. Do what you want.” No, thankfully, the publisher had the brilliance to contract out to Robin Robertson, who I’m sure you guys know. She’s just unbelievably amazing at what she does, and so she came up with all 50 of them. A couple were based on things that I had sent her, things that I like cook myself somewhat frequently, like the Soyriso pasta which is the easiest thing to make in the entire world. That was inspired by me, but she came up with all the good stuff.

JASMIN: All right. However, I have stayed at your apartment in San Francisco, and you have fed me Elizabeth Castoria Smoothie. And I saw this smoothie in the book, and I thought, “oh yeah, I’ve been there, done that, and that is one good smoothie.” And it’s just so simple. It’s like a frozen banana, a scoop of chocolate protein powder, some coconut milk, and some kale and that’s it. It’s just so good. And so I was excited to see that in there. Now you mentioned you’ve been vegan for a long time. About how long have you been vegan?

ELIZABETH: It’s been roughly 15 years, which just makes me feel insanely old to say.

JASMIN: Well, how have things changed since you first went vegan?

ELIZABETH: I have to say there really has never been a better time to be vegan. Like, I remember, I was 17 when I first went vegan, and so there were a lot fewer options in terms of products you could buy at the store and that kind of stuff. The way that the market has just exploded with delicious, insane stuff to eat has been amazing. And of course, produce has always been there, and all the bases for an amazing vegan lifestyle have always been available. But like, all the ice creams and the milks and the veggie meats and stuff, like, it’s just unbelievable.

JASMIN: Yeah. I've been vegan for about 10 years, Mariann's been vegan about 20. And it just blows my mind. I feel like it's every day. And now I haven't even heard of a lot of the stuff that's out because I can't keep up.

ELIZABETH: No, it's totally true.

JASMIN: It's really exciting too. Now, I know that you also got into some advice-giving in the book regarding specifically dealing with difficult people, like the instigator at the family meal or that friend who's just joshing you. Can you just give us some tips on how to deal with these situations where people are just trying to kind of put you in the corner and tell you that what you're doing is unhealthy or radical?

ELIZABETH: I'm sure you guys know that I'm like a super radical. And yeah, like I said in the book, I want to just mention really quickly that none of my friends or family have ever done anything like this. But I've heard from other people that sometimes people can be a little bit pokey in their jokes. So there's always gonna be that person who has some sort of agenda when they're talking to you and wants to be like, "Well, what if you were on an island with a chicken and like other stuff? What are you gonna do then, vegan?" And it's just something that they probably are struggling with a little tiny bit. I think if somebody's naturally really, really, really defensive to something, that maybe it struck a chord with them in some small way that they might not be aware of, or that they might be aware of. So again, I think the overarching comment is those people are going through their own stuff. Like, you don't know what's happening in their lives, maybe. And maybe they're actually trying to find some way to relate to you even though they're not going about it in a terribly nice way. So don't be a jerk.

JASMIN: Right. Exactly, don't be a jerk. Well, I'm so excited about *How to Be Vegan*. And I just think that this book is going to be such an important tool for so many people who are listening to this today because a lot of our listeners are already vegan and are working on their communities and their friends and their family. And as I have said about other books that we've featured on the podcast, I encourage people to get themselves a copy of this but also get one or two extra copies to just give away. Maybe one copy could be a loaner copy. I'm a big fan of having multiple copies of books.

ELIZABETH: I appreciate that.

JASMIN: Yeah, and I'm just really so thrilled about everything you're doing and everything you are. So to hear your voice in this book, Elizabeth, especially 'cause you're so funny and that really comes out in the writing, I'm thinking that that's gonna really resonate with people and make them want to keep reading it 'cause it feels like they're having a chat with a BFF, so...

ELIZABETH: Aw, thank you. I was worried that I was gonna put in too many bad jokes and then people would think all vegans make fucking terrible jokes all the time. So I hope that that's not the case.

JASMIN: Well, I think that would be a much, much better generalization for people to make about us than the old one of being completely humorless. So anyway, thank you so much for joining us today in Our Hen House and for writing this book. I can't wait to see all of the change that it makes in the world.

ELIZABETH: Thank you so much for having me. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it.

JASMIN: That was Elizabeth Castoria, and the book is *How to Be Vegan*.