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Interview with Kristin Lajeunesse

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **Kristin Lajeunesse** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 182.*

JASMIN: We have two people on today I'm thrilled about. First we're going to talk to Kristin Lajeunesse. I love that name, but I find it so hard to say! And she is from Will Travel for Vegan Food. She's parked here in New York City right now and I got to chat with her recently. Her website is wtfveganfood.com. Isn't that cool?

MARIANN: I love that website.

JASMIN: Yeah, I know. You could actually get -- she has like bling that you could get, t-shirts and bags and stuff and stickers that say "WTF vegan food." And you weren't even there when I got to go to 'sNice with her recently. You weren't even with me so this is going to be the first time that you're going to hear what she has to say about how she has literally traveled the whole country eating at every vegan restaurant in the country and she's incorporated animal advocacy into it as well. And when we get back from her we're going to talk to Laura Beck who is just basically my favorite writer of all time ever and is just a phenomenal vegan. But first let's talk to Kristin.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Kristin!

KRISTIN: Hi! Thanks for having me.

JASMIN: We're sitting outside of 'sNice in SoHo on a beautiful, beautiful June afternoon, and I'm so excited that you're here in New York, that you arrived safe and sound. Tell us about Will Travel for Vegan Food, what is this?

KRISTIN: Sure. Well, I have spent the last nearly two years traveling around the country in an effort to eat at and write about every single vegan restaurant in the United States. So I'm just winding down now, finishing out in New York City and I have about 30 places left here to eat.

JASMIN: I love that you have 30 places *left* to eat at in New York City. Would you say that New York City is one of the more vegan friendly places?

KRISTIN: Absolutely. From the research that I did going into the trip it's one of the most highly concentrated cities in terms of vegan food kind of per square mile. So I think from

what I found the entire state of California has the same number of vegan restaurants as just the city of New York.

JASMIN: That is so interesting and I wear that proudly! So how many restaurants will you have eaten at by the time this journey is over, which it's almost over?

KRISTIN: A little over 500.

JASMIN: That's amazing! I'm so excited that this many vegan restaurants exist. Did you have any idea when you started this journey that so many would be out there?

KRISTIN: I had a rough idea. I didn't exactly know what I was getting into, but the kind folks from Happy Cow actually sent me a spreadsheet at the very beginning, an Excel sheet with the list of all the vegan places. So I used that and kind of knew from the outset that it would take a little while to eat through the whole country.

JASMIN: And here's a question I'm sure you get asked all the time. I know you're not finished and for all we know your 500th place will be your favorite, but do you have a favorite so far? Are you able to say that?

KRISTIN: I do, I do have a favorite. Okay, I have a few favorites. But the one that I can never shake is in Philly, a place called Vedge.

JASMIN: I am with you there, sister! We've had the owners, Kate and Rich, on the podcast. And even though I have also traveled extensively and eaten at many places, Vedge is my favorite restaurant in the world. What is it about Vedge that makes it stand apart from the others?

KRISTIN: Well, I'll be honest. Going in, because of the hype around the restaurant -- I think it was open for maybe six months before I got there and I was thinking, "Okay, we'll see how it is. Everyone's excited about it which means it might not be that great." So I go in and from the outset it was just a beautiful experience. The service was amazing, the décor is absolutely delightful. And then the food, which of course is the main highlight, they do incredible things with just fresh veggies. I don't know how they do it, but however they flavor it and infuse it with spices and seasoning it's just incredible. And I really appreciate the fact that they don't do as much with the faux meat stuff. I was really impressed with all they could do with just the vegetables.

JASMIN: I totally agree. The power of the vegetable, I hope it's coming back because we've been through the kind of seitan and tempeh and vegan meat stuff and I think that's beautiful too. But the power of the vegetable is an important force. But let's back up a little bit. What happened, what got into you to make you think Will Travel for Vegan Food? Actually, I want to say to you, "Did it just occur to you one day?" but you already told me that yeah, it literally just occurred to you one day.

KRISTIN: Yeah, kind of exactly right. I was going through a period in my life where I was feeling a little unsettled, even though I had a great job and everything was seemingly falling into place in terms of what my life is supposed to look like from the standard American point of view. But I was just feeling a little like something was missing. So I kind of stumbled upon

some books and blogs about nomadic living and lifestyle design and creating passive income and just learning how to take what you love and make that your career. So this really resonated with me and I just couldn't get enough of this material so I was reading and just taking all of this in. I started dabbling with blogging and creating little side projects to see if I could make money online. And then like you said, as I told you earlier, I was sitting at my desk at work and I just saw the name "Will Travel for Vegan Food" and that's when I knew I had to do something about it.

JASMIN: I think that's, it's actually giving me chills because I can relate, so many people can relate to having these little dreams, these little pipedreams in the back of our heads. But you actually made this happen. How did you make it happen?

KRISTIN: Well, I think I just started talking about it so much with friends and family and the concept and the idea. And I think I knew that I had to move forward with something when I realized that despite any negative feedback or people who were skeptical about the idea, despite that, I still felt very strongly and motivated to spread the message about vegan food, because I loved vegan food and how could I get the word out there? How could I start traveling and bring all of these pieces of my life together that I really want to do?

JASMIN: And you got some support along the way from some other people who believed in your mission.

KRISTIN: Yeah. I was very fortunate. I decided to do a Kickstarter project on kickstarter.com to raise some money, and of course you were one of the early supporters of that. You helped guide me through that process, which really I think helped in the success of the Kickstarter campaign, so thank you for that. But yeah, I had an amazing network kind of that developed around the Kickstarter campaign and then kind of launched the Will Travel brand itself, which is actually today kind of taking on a life of its own, which is really cool.

JASMIN: Your background is in marketing and communications and helping people to connect the dots, and we obviously live in a time where social media is the way to get the word out there about anything. How did you bring all of that together with Will Travel for Vegan Food in order to do your part in changing the world for animals?

KRISTIN: Well, the cool thing about this project is that it was really kind of heart driven or passion driven. So I actually, going into it, I didn't even think about how to directly apply my marketing background. I just noticed one day that it was happening, that I was pulling from grad school and from working with Vegan Mainstream and at the WSPA and all of these different places and realizing that I was applying some of the stuff that I had learned. But it was so much easier because I loved what I was doing. So it just kind of came together on its own. And now of course today that I'm growing the Will Travel for Vegan Food brand more aggressively, I'm thinking more about how to do that in a way that makes sense marketing wise. But I guess the short answer is it just kind of happened, it came together on its own.

JASMIN: Well, I think it's really cool that you were taking what you're good at and you were helping to make your dream a reality but also fulfill your life's mission of helping animals and advocating for veganism. Let's go back to the restaurants themselves. You mentioned your

favorite, which is Vedge. I concur. Were there any areas that particularly surprised you by how vegan-friendly they were?

KRISTIN: Yeah. I was actually surprised to find a couple of really amazing options in Memphis, Tennessee.

JASMIN: Wow.

KRISTIN: Yeah, I -- there were only two places.

JASMIN: But still, I've never been to Memphis. I see a trip in my future.

KRISTIN: Yeah, so there was this really great raw juice bar which was awesome, and then they had this really great kind of diner style restaurant called Imagine Vegan Café, and the two of them kind of perfectly balanced each other out. So I would get fresh juice in the morning and then go have like a maybe less healthy lunch or dinner later. But I'll tell you what, the food at Imagine Café was outstanding. It totally blew me away.

JASMIN: How long have you been on the road total?

KRISTIN: By the time I finish with my little end of trip party here in August it will have been two years.

JASMIN: Oh my goodness! That's -- then you've been sleeping in your van?

KRISTIN: Almost this whole time. I'm fortunate now that I'm actually subletting a room here in New York City for the summer because it just wasn't feasible to bring the van into the city, but for 18 months I was living out of the van, yes.

JASMIN: So I asked you this before. When you were driving across the country was there ever a moment when, oh shoot, a vegan restaurant opened up and you were past that area of the country?

KRISTIN: Yeah. I think I was actually two or three months out of Philly and Hip City Veg had opened and I heard all the buzz about that. And of course there are now two all vegan ice cream shops in Boston which opened well after I was gone. But I am fortunate that I was able to go back and try that place. But I haven't been to Hip City Veg yet. But yes, there have been places that have opened since I stopped.

JASMIN: Hip City Veg is good. It's definitely worth a trip to Philly. You're only like an hour and a half away, and I think that the buses are like ten dollars or something like that. So I guess lastly Kristin, you really have your finger on the pulse of what's going on with veganism, more so than probably anyone else at the moment. What do you think is next? I mean you've been on the road for almost two years, you probably already saw shifts happening in the time that you've been away. So actually, tell me what kind of shifts you've seen happening and what you anticipate the trajectory will be for veganism.

KRISTIN: Whew, that's a tough question. Well, I'm happy to report that from what I saw during my travels it's very clear that veganism and just awareness on the basic level is on

the rise. A lot of people are talking about it, even in random obscure places in the Midwest or the South where you wouldn't expect people to know what the term meant. People get it and I don't think it mattered that I was going to cities that just happened to have a vegan restaurant or I was there because of the vegan restaurant. It actually, I was seeing it in coffee shops that I would go to work at during the day. They had almond milk or soy milk or I could ask if their mocha latte mix had dairy in it or whey or casein and they understood what I was asking. So that was really cool. And then being so involved in the social media and online realm I've been kind of keeping up on the news related to this stuff too and it's very clearly becoming the talk of the town. So I think, I would be willing to bet that within the next three to five years it's gonna be, everyone's going to be giving it a try.

JASMIN: You are aware that you are living everyone's dream who's listening to this right now?

KRISTIN: Yes, I'm sorry.

JASMIN: Can you just like start sending us meals? I don't know, something like that. So how can people find you online and read about your travels and the restaurants and your journey?

KRISTIN: Sure. Well, you can search on Google for "Will Travel for Vegan Food" and my social media handles are wtfveganfood, of course that's Will Travel for Vegan Food, well, wtfveganfood.com, or wtfveganfood on Twitter and Instagram. Yeah. And you can email me, kristin@wtfveganfood.com.

JASMIN: Kristin, is there a book in your future?

KRISTIN: Yes, actually. I'm happy to say that a few months ago I received a call from Vegan Publishers, which is a brand new vegan publishing company. And they asked if I was planning to write a book about my trip and I said maybe and they said, "Well, if we pay you to do it would you write it?" And I said yes, and so I am officially currently working on my first ever book.

JASMIN: Well, mazel tov. That is very exciting. You are fueled by plants and I am just so psyched to be able to talk to you. And I hope that we can hang out again while you're here in New York City, and I look forward to watching how your brand grows and how you continue to advocate for animals. I'm sure that you're not only living people's dreams but you're also inspiring people along the way. So thank you so much for talking to me today and in front of 'sNice at Our Hen House, which is currently on Sullivan Street and Houston.

KRISTIN: Thank you so much, it was great to be here.