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## Interview with Laura Beck

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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

JASMIN: So today we also have Laura Beck on. Laura is our feature interview today and we got to catch up with her a little bit when we were over in Portland for Vida Vegan Con. But I'm just such a big fan of all she does, and she started Vegansaurus and she's going to talk a little bit about that and she's going to talk about what it's like being a professional writer and inserting animal issues whenever she can and vegan stuff. And I just think that Laura has a unique take on so many different issues and she's got such a great personality. I told her after the interview is done that at some point in our conversation I actually forgot that we were interviewing her and I just thought that we were just bullshitting with each other. So I'm thrilled that you're going to hear from Laura Beck now.

Laura Beck is a writer living in Los Angeles. She is the evening editor for Jezebel, a website about lady things, and a founding editor of Vegansaurus, a website about vegan things. She is also the community manager for vegweb.com, the website with all the vegan recipes. Her website is laurahooperbeck.com and her twitter is @mrpenguino.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Laura.

LAURA: Hi! Hello!

JASMIN: I am so star struck right now. Mariann can attest to this, I am mildly obsessed with you.

MARIANN: Absolutely, I can't believe that we have Laura Beck on.

JASMIN: I can't either. Laura, you're just so talented and you're like a big bright ray of sunshine and I'm so excited that you're on the podcast. I really, really look up to your writing. And in case you're listening to this and you haven't read Laura, what the hell is wrong with you, a, and b, just when you're done just go read it 'cause it's so good. So Laura, we were hoping to catch up with you at Vida Vegan Con but we kept doing kind of drive by hugging.

LAURA: Yeah.

JASMIN: Which was nice, and you smelled good, which was good 'cause some of those vegans, I tell ya. Especially that one... anyway.

MARIANN: And Vida Vegan Con is...

JASMIN: Yeah, well, Vida Vegan Con is of course the big vegan bloggers' conference that we were all just speaking at and it's in Portland.

LAURA: Yes, yes.

JASMIN: And anyway, so it was a great time. And one of the big topics at Vida Vegan Con this year where we ran into you and heard you speak was the messaging within the vegan world regarding body image issues. There were actually several talks on that. Can you just give us your take on that?

LAURA: Yeah! Well, first of all I'm really excited to be here. I love this podcast and I adore you guys, so thank you so much for having me. I don't know, you might want to cut this out, I don't know if this is an awkward time --

JASMIN: No this is staying in! Are you kidding me? Keep going!

MARIANN: Everything else goes.

JASMIN: Yeah, this is it. Thank you for joining us Laura Beck, it's been a pleasure. End scene.

LAURA: And we're done. So basically it's just -- there's a lot of weirdness about body issues in the vegan community I've found. And I just really wanted to talk about veganism as kind of a way to embrace a love of food and a love of your body. It's not about deprivation, it's not a diet, it's a lifestyle, and that means there's going to be vegans who look all sorts of different ways: fat, skinny, pear-shaped, apple-shaped. I don't know, but -- and really what matters is this heart of compassion. And I think sometimes people don't, some vegans don't extend that compassion to other people, and that can really close down the community in lots of ways and like turn people off. And so I just, I was really excited to talk about that at Vida Vegan Con and excited to talk about it today. Just like, veganism is for everybody, it doesn't matter what you look like. It just matters like, do you want to eat a vegan diet? Like, do you want to be vegan? That's rad. Like, let's talk more about that.

JASMIN: Yeah, it's about the animals through and through. And I love JL Fields, how she talks about this and "I'm vegan for the animals!" And she of course is from JL Goes Vegan, and I know she has a book coming out called *Vegan for Her* and she's concerned about the backlash from some of the different subsets in the health community who just equate veganism with being super skinny or something like that. And I agree that frequently when this is in the media -- I get all of these different google alerts for example -- it's frequently tied to losing weight and being thin and you just sort of want to like shake people sometimes and say, "This isn't at the core of what we're doing, this is not about being super skinny, this is about a moral imperative to be vegan."

LAURA: Yeah, and I think -- yeah, no, absolutely. And I think we need to separate health from weight in lots of ways. Like, you can have amazing -- you know what? Honestly anyone can be skinny on a vegan diet and anyone can be skinny on a paleo diet, you know?

JASMIN: Right, right, yeah.

LAURA: But it's like, when we start talking about the health ramifications of a paleo diet versus a vegan diet there are differences. And a lot of people can be healthy on a paleo diet, that's also true, but I do believe that a path to optimal health would be through a vegan diet. Like, the science is there, it shows like people -- cholesterol goes down. My dad still pronounces vegan "vaygan."

JASMIN: Oh yeah.

LAURA: I've been vegan for over ten years now, Dad, but that's cool. And he had some heart issues. His doctor advised cutting out -- he never said vegan but he said more of a plant-based diet and cutting out meat and cutting out cow's dairy, and my dad's cholesterol went down. Like, there's -- proof is in the pudding in lots of ways. So I think when we can separate -- but he didn't lose any weight, but his blood work is significantly different. So I think the more that we can separate health from weight in lots of ways, the better it is for our community.

JASMIN: People really seem to use the word "vegan" in so many different ways, you just -- or "vaygan" as it were. And by the way I totally think you should get him a Suzanne Vega album for Christmas next year.

LAURA: Oh my God, that's brilliant, and I'll change her name to be "vaygan."

JASMIN: Exactly, exactly. You're welcome.

LAURA: Thank you.

JASMIN: And so some people who use the word "vegan" include other social justice issues like palm oil or slavery-free chocolate, and others take it to mean a super healthy whole-foods diet. Do you find that folks have confusion with this? And how do you define the word?

LAURA: Yeah, no. I think that that's totally true. I think of vegan as just a person who doesn't eat or use animal products, like period. And I think like, it's exciting when people expand their compassion to include like being thoughtful about palm oil and being thoughtful about where their chocolate comes from and being thoughtful about where their sneakers were made and how they were made, you know? Like, those are all things that I think a lot of vegans naturally gravitate towards more because when you start thinking about your food in terms of animals it kind of expands from there, you know? You start to think, oh, well I don't want like child slaves picking my chocolate, I don't want to participate in that either, so you kind of -- But I really think the essence of vegan is animal products. I don't consume animal products and I don't purchase animal products, I don't put them on my body. Which is also -- we're probably not going to talk about plus size fashion in general, but that's

another thing where it's like really -- it's hard when you *fit* sample sizes to find really compassionate clothing but when you're plus size that's a whole other issue. This is off topic, I'm going to stop.

JASMIN: No, we like off topic. I think that's a really important thing to talk about.

MARIANN: Yeah, and I find a lot of confusion about the word vegan. And one thing that I find annoying is that sometimes if I object to using the word vegan to include things like palm oil or slavery-free chocolate or whatever, people act as if I don't care about those issues! I care a whole lot about those issues. It's just the word that -- I want the word to mean something coherent, so...

LAURA: So people know when you go out to eat, oh, here's what vegan means.

MARIANN: Exactly.

LAURA: Absolutely. When you travel, oh, vegan. Like, it would be so exciting maybe one day in the future to be able to travel around the world and to -- you know, right now we can say different things to make people understand what vegan means in different places. But I think it would be exciting if people knew what vegan meant everywhere. I think that can happen but I think you're right; we need to stick to the definition.

JASMIN: Right, yeah, it's true. Also, beyond that, if "vegan" did encompass all of these things that we're talking about I can see people just putting their hands up and being like, "Okay, end of discussion. I could never be that person," because we're always challenging our own evolution and our own consciousness and we're always trying to reach the next way that our ethics live in harmony with our beliefs. But let's actually talk about feminism, which is something else I wanted to talk about with you.

MARIANN: Yeah, one thing that I really noted, because this was my first time at Vida Vegan Con that, well, as we all know the animal rights world intersects -- is largely populated by women, although certainly not exclusively. But the vegan blogging world is a very, very female world, though there were some men there and there certainly are some, but it's a very female world. And I just wonder, how does veganism and this world intersect with feminism for you?

LAURA: Yeah, it's a good question and it's something that I think about a lot because I write for a feminist blog and I am always trying to -- like, I incorporate veganism into a lot of the things that I write and almost all of the readers know that I am vegan now. Like, the other day, I wrote something about oatmeal, I forget, and then someone said, "Well if you're really looking to be healthy then you should be eating bacon and eggs," you know, like started going through the paleo spiel. And so many readers came to my defense being like, "Idiot, don't you know she's vegan?" And I was like, that's really rad. And I found that actually the support for veganism in community -- I was really nervous about writing about my veganism at first because I was scared that a lot of people would be like, "Oh, we thought you were cool but you're actually just a big weirdo." And the response has been really positive and a lot of commenters have been like, "Hey I'm vegan," or "I'm interested in being vegan," or "I'm vegetarian and I'm thinking about it." By and large -- or even the people who aren't vegan are like, "I'm not vegan but I totally get it," are really positive about it. And so I feel

like there is a lot of openness to the idea in the feminist community because feminism is about anti-oppression and equality and there's so many parallels there with veganism. And so I have been grappling with writing a feminism and veganism piece specifically for the blog, but I really want it to be something that doesn't shut people down. And so I've written a couple of things that have been really like, "You're a feminist! Don't you get it? You should be vegan too! Duh!"

JASMIN: "Love, Laura."

LAURA: "Love, Laura. P.S. Now everyone's going to go eat a steak." So I've really been grappling with a sensitive way to talk about the issues and make the connection for people because I know that this is a community that's really open to being progressive and thoughtful and compassionate. And I think I just haven't figured out, personally, how to tap into that directly but I just try and write about veganism in general a lot and kind of just set the ground work. Like, "Oh, Laura's vegan and she's not a total freak." And then I can be like, "Yeah, actually most of us aren't total freaks. Your idea of veganism probably comes from some guy who had a cousin who once went vegan and she was a bitch at Thanksgiving." It's always like a friend of a friend of a friend who's a jerk. And it's like, just statistically there are more omnivore jerks than there are vegan jerks because there's just a hell of a lot more omnivores. But when you start talking about veganism you just, it's like people want to go there. And I think a lot of that is they just don't want to think about it.

JASMIN: Yeah, I think that's a really, really good point. And I know that you do a lot of writing outside of just the animal rights world, as you're talking about. The one that you're talking about now, are you talking about Jezebel, or?

LAURA: Yes. Jezebel, sorry, yes.

JASMIN: Yeah, so that's a really big deal. Jezebel is a major online publication and I think it's great that you're even going there at all and that people are starting to make the connection with you in that way. I know that at Vida Vegan Con a lot of food writers, people who are mainly vegan food writers, actually want to include messaging about animals and animal rights into their blog, but they're nervous about it and maybe their blog focuses on something very specific like gluten-free or some shit like that. Now, because of your experience with it, do you have any, do you think that there are risks for food bloggers who decide to go there with the animal message?

LAURA: I think like, jeez, it's delicate. It's about integrating it in a way that it's part of you but not all that you are. Obviously food bloggers that are vegan care a fuck ton about food -- excuse me, a --

JASMIN: No, fuck ton, don't.

LAURA: Care a *lot* about food and so their veganism is part of that and it's also not part of that. They care more about food than -- I care a lot about food, like, I love good food and I seek out good food. But I don't care so much about food that I have a cooking blog, you know?

JASMIN: Isn't it -- I couldn't *believe* how much these people cared about food.

LAURA: I know, right?!

JASMIN: Honestly Mariann and I kept looking at each other and saying, "It's *just* food!" Like, it was unbelievable, it was impressive.

LAURA: It's kind of cool. It's like food is their thing and also probably a lot of them, veganism is very important to them but ultimately they want to make a delicious food blog. And I think that if they can just tell their story really naturally, like fit in a little antidote about being vegan or just mention, "Oh, I'm vegan so blah, blah, blah," just like throwing in little things here and there, not like here's my animal rights screed. It's part of who they are and food is part of who they are, so combining them and writing about that and not being scared to say "vegan," because people are still going to come to their website for their gluten-free apple cobbler recipes, and say, hey, they learn, "Oh, she's really cool and she's vegan, this is kind of cool. What's that about?" People can find out more about that on their own too, but just I think it's important not to be shy about it.

JASMIN: Well, and also to be honest, you were just talking about bringing feminism into what you write a little bit more and you were very honest about your process. You were saying "I'm not ever sure how to do this yet exactly." I think even just saying that sentence in a blog would be really powerful.

LAURA: Yeah, totally.

JASMIN: Like, "Okay gluten-free apple cobbler lovers, I'm not actually sure how to go here but I'm going to anyway. The reason there's no butter in this and instead there's coconut oil is because of the fact that butter is produced..." and going there and just being honest about where you are. And that's one thing that I love about your writing is that you're so honest in it and you're so real and you're so hilarious. And you're also, you're one of the founding editors of Vegansaurus.

LAURA: Yes.

JASMIN: In case there are any vegans out there listening to this who were literally just born like while we are interviewing you, in which case, welcome to the world, you're fucked. Can you just tell --

LAURA: We're all fucked!

JASMIN: We're all fucked, but especially you because you are significantly younger than any of us. Can you tell these newborns about Vegansaurus?

LAURA: Yeah, so Vegansaurus was founded, me and my friend Maeve Gallagher, who is awesome and recently moved to your great city.

JASMIN: I totally met her.

LAURA: Isn't she great? I love Maeve.

JASMIN: Yeah, she's great, yeah, she's fabulous.

LAURA: She's so fabulous and funny and weird and cool. And she and I met through Yelp. We both used to write a lot of vegan reviews on Yelp in like 2005 and 2006 and we were like really vocal vegans on the site. But I found that it was really weird when they started adding this feature that let you know if you had fans and then all of a sudden I had tons of fans and I was like, I'm this obnoxious vegan girl who goes everywhere and is like, "Fuck foie gras, where's the quinoa?" How do people like this? And so it was kind of exciting. And Maeve was also writing a lot of reviews and getting really positive feedback and then we decided we -- and at that time in San Francisco there weren't tons of vegan brunch spots, so Maeve put out a thing that was like, "Let's have a vegan brunch club," and I was like, "That sounds amazing, let's do that." And we started meeting once a month and making these kind of epic brunches and we became friends from there. And then Yelp started censoring my reviews for too many swear words, which is a thing that I love to do and so I was like, "Well, fuck this!" And Maeve and my boyfriend Jonas were like, "Let's have our own site" and so we brainstormed names and we kind of threw it up the next day and we moved over a lot of our reviews from Yelp. And then we started off as a Bay Area vegan lifestyle blog and then expanded a little bit 'cause we added writers, Megan Rascal who's in New York who's amazing and hilarious and just started getting amazing guest posters.

And what's really cool is vegans are really fucking funny. Like, I think we get a really bum rap for being uptight assholes who knit our own shoes from leftover garbage. But we're -- like, the guest posts that we were getting were some of the funniest things that I've ever read. Like, we had one writer who was basically like a young David Sedaris, and I would never just say that and blow smoke up his ass. Like, it was some really funny amazing writers. It became just an enjoyable blog to read on its own. We have lots of readers who aren't vegan who are like veg-curious or just want to read a funny review of a restaurant. So I'm really proud of Vegansaurus and everyone involved in it and yeah, I love it.

JASMIN: It's definitely become a real go-to website for so many people. It's funny just bridging that last conversation we were having about how some people get so into food and so obsessed with food with what you're talking about with Vegsaurus. I have written quite a lot of articles on this and that, and the absolute most difficult thing I have ever written was any food review I've ever had to write, any restaurant review rather. If I'm asked to write a restaurant review I like weep because how -- I just think it's good! That vegan bacon cheeseburger, it tastes good, that's all I have to say.

LAURA: I know. I'm done!

MARIANN: Delicious, you can always go for delicious.

JASMIN: Delicious, yeah it's a little better than good. I'm on thesaurus.com, it's so obvious that, "Oh, Jasmin's on thesaurus.com right now." But some of these -- we wrote a -- I say "we" because if you ever read a restaurant review that I wrote, you know that Mariann was sitting next to me. I think we described like a sauce as "moody" and I always think that's so funny. And I'm sure that some people were like, "Oh, let's go get that because that sauce on that sandwich is moody."

LAURA: Yeah.

JASMIN: And no, I was actually the moody one while I was writing that. But anyway it's great that these people, that you're saying that about vegans and a sense of humor because I think that's true. And you were just talking about San Francisco, but am I right that you recently actually moved to LA from San Francisco?

LAURA: I just moved to LA last month.

JASMIN: Wow, so how is that going? How does LA's vegan scene stack up?

LAURA: Oh my God, LA's vegan scene is insane, you guys have to move here immediately.

JASMIN: Okay.

LAURA: Seriously the food is ridiculous. I live in this neighborhood that's called Echo Park and I'm like a block from Sage which has a KindKreme in it, so you can -- and KindKreme is like mind-blowingly delicious vegan ice cream. And so I can walk and get vegan soft-serve in five minutes, and we just -- in my neighborhood alone there are three vegan restaurants in a two block stretch. I think a lot of people in LA are confused about veganism equals health food, so it's beneficial to the vegans because we have a really wide array of options, and if people are going to be confused that their bacon cheeseburger is all of a sudden healthy, it is healthier than a bacon cheeseburger so it's better that they're eating it. But I think if they think it's diet food, I don't really care. I get to eat it too and it's delicious. And then they get to eat something that's vegan that like blows their mind.

So yeah, I'm all about L.A. The weather is not great so far, it's super-hot. But the East Coast is way worse because you have the humidity too, at least we have a dry heat. I'm sorry, I'm giving an LA spiel, but I really think everyone should move here. Like, I was really surprised. I thought -- Northern California, we have a really big bias against LA, we think everyone here is a bimbo idiot. But the actual scene in LA is really progressive and cool and there's a lot of neat stuff happening here. And the food's really delicious.

JASMIN: Yeah, the activist scene there is bigger than San Francisco or New York. I totally agree with you. I think that -- well, I do want to say that I did the city showdown for VegNews for New York City versus LA, and I did the New York City side and New York City won, I'm just throwing that out there. But I do think that LA is just an incredible mecca.

MARIANN: And didn't Tal Ronnen just open a new restaurant there?

LAURA: Yes, Crossroads. It is unbelievable. It's, you guys have to come just to eat there. You can stay with me, it's ridiculous.

MARIANN: Are you talking to all of our listeners now?

LAURA: Yes. Everybody just shoot me an email, include like a picture and a bio to make sure you're not a serial killer.

JASMIN: Make sure you knit Laura some shoes out of your garbage.

LAURA: Knit me some shoes, I'm a size nine.

JASMIN: Oh, so am I! I'm totally going to borrow your shoes when I go out there.

LAURA: Yes! We can do shoe trades.

JASMIN: That will be so romantic.

LAURA: I love it. And yeah so it's so good. It's Italian food, and I was really -- no offense, I think Tal Ronnen is an amazing chef but I was a little bit worried that it was going to be Gardein central.

JASMIN: Right.

LAURA: I love Gardein but I can make Gardein at home. But the food is not at all like that. It's amazing homemade pastas and pizza salads with these incredible dressings and cocktails to die for and the space is fucking gorgeous. It looks like, I don't know, it's just like such a cool restaurant and the staff is great and everything. It's going to be up there with Millennium. It's just a gorgeous night out.

JASMIN: Wow.

MARIANN: That's really exciting because I would say that if there was one thing that the LA scene was missing it was kind of that high end scene. The middle priced healthy food beats New York's by a mile, but the high end scene, that was really needed. I know that in addition to doing all of the many other things you're doing you're also a community manager for VegWeb. Does that mean that you write all of those recipes?

LAURA: No. I've written a couple of recipes for VegWeb, but the majority of them are liquor recipes and infused vodkas because I went through a real phase where I was infusing everything.

JASMIN: How many different ways can I get drunk? It's breakfast, put some beer in those waffles and we're set.

LAURA: Exactly. And we'll put some pumpkin spiced vodka into the sauce and I think it's going to be good. Sometimes it was, sometimes it wasn't.

JASMIN: Sometimes it was moody.

LAURA: And sometimes it was moody, which I'm totally stealing, Jasmin.

JASMIN: You're welcome. Thesaurus.com.

LAURA: I'm going to TM it "Jasmin and Mariann."

JASMIN: I've actually already trademarked, I own a copyright to the word "moody," so... It's true.

LAURA: I think that that's the best word ever that you could trademark.

JASMIN: I do too.

LAURA: So good. I will definitely be paying you residuals or however that works.

JASMIN: Okay.

LAURA: So, wait, what were we talking about?

JASMIN: We were talking about VegWeb, which is a comprehensive resource of so many different recipes with the best search optimization of any recipe site I know of.

LAURA: Right? And we recently did a site redesign and I think that it looks gorgeous. It does look gorgeous and we get probably five to six recipes -- so, recipes are submitted from people, so anyone could -- if you don't want to start your own food blog you can put your recipe on VegWeb and then we broadcast it to hundreds of thousands of people a day. So our traffic is insane and the recipes, we have some really -- we have a couple recipes for like cinnamon toast and stuff where it's like, okay. But the majority of our recipes are amazing. I cook off of it all the time. We have the best lasagna recipes, the best carrot cake recipes. And so if anyone wants to, has an amazing recipe they want to share, you can just go and join VegWeb, it takes five minutes, and then throw the recipe up on the site. And then it's so cool because you get feedback from people being like, "I made this and it was great" or "I made this and I subbed this in" and I love the site.

JASMIN: Yeah, I always read the comments on that. It's the only time in the world I read the comments, by the way. I read them on VegWeb and other recipe sites just because I find it really useful. Like, "if you just add oats" or something, or "if you add vodka" if you were Laura, I dunno.

LAURA: Yes, exactly, I always add vodka.

JASMIN: Well, I feel like I could talk to you forever and ever because I just feel like we clearly are soul mates.

LAURA: We are soul mates and best friends forever.

JASMIN: Yeah, and best friends and we should share shoes and when we're not sharing shoes we should paint each other's toenails blue or something. I don't know.

LAURA: Yes! I am in.

JASMIN: I am too. But Laura, thank you so much for continuing to inspire us and honestly any time I get a writing assignment I just read something you wrote first because I want to just a, steal it; and b, be inspired by you. And I just love all that you bring to veganism and the animal rights world. And I hope that we catch up with you again soon, maybe at Tal Ronnen's new restaurant, who knows!

LAURA: Hell yeah, let's do it.

JASMIN: Let's do it. Thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House.

LAURA: Thank you, you're the best. I had such a great time.

JASMIN: Me too. Bye, Laura.

LAURA: Bye!

JASMIN: That was Laura Beck. Go to [laurahooperbeck.com](http://laurahooperbeck.com) to find out more about this fabulous woman.