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Interview with T.K. Pillan and Kevin Boylan

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **T.K. PILLAN** and **KEVIN BOYLAN** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 214.*

JASMIN: T.K. Pillan always considered himself a healthy eater. Based on the advice of his mom, a nutritionist and vegetarian, he pursued a career as a college athlete. But as he got older and had a family, by his 37th birthday he was overweight with high cholesterol. After selling out of a technology company which he had cofounded, and reading an article about pizza and burger chains in southern California, T.K. became intrigued about the idea of creating something better.

Kevin Boylan started drifting towards more wholesome eating in the early 1980s when he was at a Wall Street investment firm and witnessed people collapsing on the trading desk from stress. By 2005, as he was winding down a 25-year career in the investment business, he got together with T.K. while examining the investment potential of a technology company. When T.K. told Kevin about his interest in trying to find a solution to our country's problem of not having any delicious, wholesome, and convenient dining options, Kevin had a eureka moment and the two partnered up.

Motivated by their mutual interest, they spent six months doing market research, researching the benefits of a vegetarian diet, and traveling the United States trying every healthy restaurant they could find. Fueled by their belief in the benefits of plant-based foods and the opportunity to show people how delicious they could be, they set out to make Veggie Grill a reality. Along the way, they met Ray White, and together, the three launched Veggie Grill in November of 2006.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Kevin and T.K.

KEVIN: It is so great to be here with the two of you. Thank you so much for inviting T.K. and me to come on. You guys are some of our favorite podcasts and online magazines that we regularly take a look at.

JASMIN: Aw, thank you so much. We adore you guys and everything you're doing. And we are talking to you partly because we're hoping that by the end of today's interview you will have set up shop in New York City, so that's kind of our ulterior motive, I should say. So, just so you know, I want to be honest about that.

KEVIN: Well, I'm actually a New Yorker, born and raised, and T.K. is from Boston, so our heart lies on the east coast. We're definitely coming your way.

MARIANN: Yay.

JASMIN: Excellent. Oh, excellent news. We just think that not only is Veggie Grill the best restaurant out there, All Hail Kale, blackened tempeh, hold the dressing, in my opinion, but I know that people vary on that. I just think that's the best meal ever created and that Veggie Grill is the best restaurant ever.

MARIANN: You forgot the sides. You gotta include sides.

JASMIN: And the sides, okay, but anyway.

MARIANN: All right, let's move on.

JASMIN: Okay. How did you guys first get interested in vegetarianism?

T.K.: We started on our process or our journey about nine years ago. And we both were in between businesses and were health conscious eaters, and decided that there was a real lack of what we thought was healthy food. But the first thing we did was we started to research, what is really healthy food? What does that mean? And luckily, *The China Study* had just come out, and we both read that and were pretty compelled to change our diet based on what we read there. And we both had great results. And as we learned more about all the other benefits of plant-based eating, the factory farms and the environmental impact and all those, it really confirmed that this was the right way to eat. And once we became educated and then we saw some great person results, we were passionate about trying to create a concept like Veggie Grill to show other people how great this food can be.

MARIANN: So, were you making that journey individually, or how did you guys meet? Did you meet each other as a result of wanting to go into business or have you known each other forever, or how did that happen?

KEVIN: It's a great question. We actually met through mutual friends in the mid-'90s. I was in the investment business, and Pillan had a terrific company that specialized in setting up the backbone of companies having a presence on the internet. He was one of those few companies that actually made money at that point in time. And so, I had some companies that were looking for a presence on the web, and we intersected that way. And we had stayed in touch. And it was simply a matter of, Pillan had sold his company, I was winding down a 25-year career in the investment business, and I was asked to evaluate an investment in a technology company. I asked Pillan to join me in evaluating it. We quickly realized we didn't want to get involved in that, and stepped next door for a cup of coffee and catching up a bit. And to my surprise, Pillan was thinking of, why isn't there a scalable, healthy -- we at that point didn't quite realize that we were gonna end up being vegan -- restaurant company? And so that's where it all began.

JASMIN: So, how did you decide on starting your restaurant? Did you always envision it as a chain?

T.D.: Well, it was always about trying to really make an impact from a societal standpoint. And back in 2004, 2005, and it's obviously still today that the country is in pretty poor shape when it comes to eating habits. And so we wanted to do something that would really make an impact there.

KEVIN: And it was later that we became more aware of the real horrors involved in factory farming, and we became very interested in the animal rights side of it after we looked at it from the health side of it. We were ignorant, and quickly became educated and more passionate.

MARIANN: That's really great that you started on the health road and found out some of the other reasons. But just getting back to the health road for a minute, clearly your own results eating in a healthy manner really motivated you. Can you tell us a little bit about how much eating healthy really changed your own lives, your energy or your performance?

KEVIN: Well, speaking for myself, I'm 6'5", and at the time when we started this, I was 234 pounds, my cholesterol was 210, and I had just gotten the word from my doctor he wanted me to start to take statins. And so the timing was perfect, and my cholesterol went from 210 to 120 over the course of 90 days, and my weight dropped from 234 to 214, and I didn't count a calorie. Pillan and I, at that time, were tasting a lot of dishes that Ray White was coming up with and were eating a lot of Veggie Grill carrot cake, so we were doing quite a bit of testing to get to the perfect formula.

JASMIN: All in a hard day's work, eh?

KEVIN: Yeah, anything for the greater good.

JASMIN: Right.

KEVIN: So, we found that our [?? 7:38] energy improved substantially, and slept better. I've always been fairly active. I found that I actually became stronger, and it was all these together was very compelling. My body fat dropped -- it must have been from about 16 to 9 in that same time period.

JASMIN: So, what's your business model? Are your restaurants franchises or all they all company-owned?

KEVIN: They're all company-owned. We've been approached over 1000 times to franchise, I'm talking about worldwide, anywhere from Shanghai to Dubai and all spots in between. And we just decided that the best way to control this and make sure that the quality was consistent was for us to have them all be company-owned. And at some point in the future that might change, but at this juncture we have 22 restaurants, we have seven more in development, and all of those are company-owned.

T.K.: I'm only 6'1", so Kevin likes to bring up that he's taller than me.

JASMIN: Just a shorty, jeez.

T.K.: Yeah. But I was in better shape, so... But I still lost 15 pounds, and my cholesterol went from 205 to 140. And as Kevin said, just an overall higher energy level and just feeling great. And so we really became convinced that this was a better way to eat.

JASMIN: Now, how many stores did you start with?

KEVIN: We opened up one to start with, and Pillan and I, we put up all the capital for it. And we had never been involved in the restaurant business before, so we went into this with great trepidation, knowing the high failure rates of restaurants. And we found a spot that a

restaurant had gone bankrupt in across from UC Irvine. And we picked that because we believe that Whole Foods and Trader Joes are pretty good markers for us. We have a real strong belief that educated women are a wonderful audience for us because wherever you guys go, we eventually go. Women make about 80% of dining decisions. You're more likely to try something new. You are more aware of yourself and thinking more along a holistic approach to living your life. And so we targeted that area with that in mind, and it worked pretty quickly.

JASMIN: You mentioned that you got sort of the light turned on for you about the horrors of factory farming and animal agriculture. I'd love to know how that light got turned on for each of you.

T.K.: Well, it started with online research. And then the more we read, I think one of the early impactful books was *Food Revolution* by John Robbins. And then more recently, there's great books out there like *Eating Animals* and *Food, Inc.* But I think *Food Revolution* was really the first eye-opener for us.

MARIANN: So, what percentage of your customers are not vegan or vegetarian?

T.K.: I think we would say about 70% of our guests eat meat or fish.

MARIANN: Wow.

JASMIN: You know, we were talking a little bit before we pressed record. And we were in Portland for six months, and we went to Veggie Grill, like, I swear, every day.

MARIANN: It wasn't every day. But it was close.

JASMIN: It was practically. It was very close to every day. In fact, we were driving back to New York, and our last meal, our last supper was at Veggie Grill, and we wept into the kale salad because we were so sad. But anyway, that being said --

T.K.: And every day is something to be proud of.

JASMIN: Yeah, well, exactly. When we were there, I would say like five out of ten times we were there, I would overhear a conversation from people just talking about veganism. And like, they just worked near the location in Portland because it was in, I don't know what district it was, maybe, I don't know. It's where people work, it's that district. And so a lot of people went there on their lunch break, and a lot of people just had no idea about veganism. And it was this perfect blend of really healthy, whole food, but also, you had your food that was reminiscent of meat and food that people are kind of used to. Was that something that was an intentional choice on your part, to make the menu like that?

KEVIN: Oh, absolutely. The one problem with being vegan, and we're all four of us here vegan, is that we only make up, it's somewhere between one and two percent of the population. Now obviously all four of us have seen people dipping their toe into vegetarianism and veganism much more. But when Pillan and I opened up our first restaurant, and this was over seven years ago, it wasn't like it is today. And we believed that we needed to make sure that omnivores found what we were offering to be cravable. And we made sure that we did not preach. Speaking to somebody about how they eat is akin to speaking to them about their religious beliefs or their political beliefs. We were so

enthusiastic when we first began our journey that we couldn't help it. We would proselytize. And we quickly found out that that turned people off.

MARIANN: Yeah.

KEVIN: And so we decided, listen, we're gonna get people hooked because it's enjoyable. So, we made it all about enjoyment.

T.K.: Yeah, and to add to that, we personally as you probably can tell, we're very passionate about veganism and all of the benefits. But during that early research, we concluded that the best way to get people to eat vegan food was just to focus on delicious food and familiar food, and so that's what we did. We just focused 100% on doing whatever we could to show people how delicious plant-based food could be. And then hopefully by doing that, they would start building their own awareness through all the great work that you do and everybody else out there who's part of this movement is doing to help build the awareness of the other aspects of plant-based eating. And we would focus 100% on just showing people how delicious the food could be.

MARIANN: Yeah, I just think that's the new ethos in people going into business and succeeding in vegan business. They're not trying to be the best vegan restaurant; they're trying to be the best restaurant. And I think that's what you guys have succeeded in doing. What are the plant proteins -- obviously one part of that is to appeal to people with things that remind them of meat and you do that. And what kind of plant proteins do you serve, and which ones do the best with people?

KEVIN: Well, we try to mix it up a little bit. Pillan and I are big fans of tempeh. It can be somewhat of an acquired taste for people, so we were seeking to find the best omnivore-friendly plant protein. And just at that time when we were launching, Gardein came out with their chicken breast and it was a pretty darn good product. And we also liked the fact that it was a mixture. It wasn't just soy, it wasn't just wheat gluten, it wasn't just pea protein. It was a mixture of all three of those, which we found attractive as well. They still have, we think, probably the best product out there. We get the calls from everyone who's developing plant proteins because no one at this juncture buys more plant protein than we do in the country. We've served over a million people in the last four months, and that's a lot of plant protein. You know, we buy it by the ton. And Beyond Meat does a wonderful job. We're evaluating their products all the time. They're coming around. But Gardein still has the top spot at this point.

T.K.: Yep, but we're also working with Field Roast and we're working with a company called Match Meats, so we're rooting for everybody.

KEVIN: Yeah, we are completely agnostic when it comes to who has the best, where we have a completely open mind. And Match Meats, which is out of St. Louis, Allison Burgess, she's terrific. They have a wonderful crab product. And Field Roast, I'm sure you both know their sausages are bar none the best out there. We just launched our first offering with them, our new harvest bowl on our new winter menu.

T.K.: And then what it really comes down to is we have our kitchen team. They're in every day at 7 am, preparing all of our marinades, all of our sauces, and then preparing the proteins with those marinades and sauces. And that's really where the magic happens.

MARIANN: I cannot believe you have introduced a Field Roast dish when we're not in driving distance of a Veggie Grill. I am furious.

JASMIN: Okay. It's okay.

MARIANN: Oh, my God!

KEVIN: I have to tell you, it's my go-to dish at home. Just absolutely love it. Great people involved in that too.

JASMIN: What are your most popular dishes?

KEVIN: Well, the Santa Fe Crispy Chicken has historically been the most popular sandwich and the All Hail Kale is the most popular salad.

T.K.: We just launched a new salad called the Quinoa Power Salad that's starting to give the All Hail Kale a run for its money.

JASMIN: I don't buy it. I'm sorry.

MARIANN: No way.

JASMIN: Fine, you talk -- well, okay, actually, yeah, it sounds great! More for me, more Hail to Kale for me. Where in God's name do you get all that kale?

KEVIN: Well, that's a very good question. I'll tell you, sourcing kale initially wasn't that hard because no one else really considered it anything else than a garnish that you would put underneath a nice buffet line. But now it's much more competitive trying to find kale, as it is with quinoa. Quinoa's becoming hard to source. And the expense of both these products has increased. We try to source it all locally. Obviously you can't source quinoa locally, but the kale, we source locally right up in Ventura.

JASMIN: You must go through so much of it. I can't even imagine. I mean, it's constant, constant kale coming out of Veggie Grill. Can you explain for our listeners the process of attracting venture capital investment and how necessary that is for growth?

KEVIN: Sure. Well, as I mentioned earlier, when Pillan and I first launched we had had some success in our prior businesses and so we did not need to go out and attract venture capital initially. So, when we finally did decide to go out and bring in more capital from outside sources, given that this is a very capital-intensive business, we decided not to go to the venture capitalists because it's a very expensive capital, very expensive. And you can quickly give up control of your company. So, we decided instead to offer the opportunity to friends and family, and it was extraordinary, the outpouring of support that we received immediately. As soon as people try the food and they see the united nations of people who are in our restaurants, they get it. So, all we needed to do was just bring somebody who was a potential investor in the restaurant, sit them down, and they would look around, lines out the door, having delicious food, and seeing that it just wasn't white girls between 24 and 30. It's across the board. So, we were very fortunate. It's been lucky for us to attract capital, and a good part of that is because we were able to launch the company with our own money and forge success before going out to attract additional capital.

MARIANN: Do you see that there's additional opportunities for venture capital investment or other types of investment for plant-based businesses? Is this something that's growing?

T.K.: Absolutely. We've seen, as Kevin mentioned, seven years ago versus today, the awareness of the benefits of plant-based food, especially on the environmental standpoint, has really grown. People like Bill Gates are now looking at it and investing in it, so a lot of people. I think things move slowly, but progress is happening. And so, for the right products that can really meet needs in an effective manner, there's huge opportunities.

JASMIN: Now, I know that a lot of our listeners are people who are entrepreneurial and they are trying to create new ways to make change for animals. Would you have advice for people who want to create vegan businesses?

KEVIN: First of all, don't name it a "vegan" business. Unfortunately, the word that describes the four of us is still politicized. And what you want to do is create a business that is as all-embracing as possible and then just happens to be vegan.

T.K.: From the end user, from the consumer standpoint, which is what Veggie Grill is. People, they love Veggie Grill. The nonvegans kind of learn after the fact that it's vegan, so I think that's one of the keys to really building a larger business that's gonna have the consumer base to really succeed.

MARIANN: Yeah, I think from an activism point of view even, not that you're necessarily coming at it from that point, but it all works too. We don't want to be just spreading the word about how delicious this food is just to other vegans. The vegans will find you!

KEVIN: Correct.

MARIANN: But we want those other people to find you as well.

JASMIN: Yeah.

KEVIN: Absolutely correct. I mean, look. If Pillan and I had framed this business as The Vegan Grill, and had posters up saying how bad meat is and how bad the dairy industry is, it would not have the reach that we now have. The fact that we've made it friendly to everyone has meant that we have a much larger, more successful business. And what good would it have done to have one more single storefront vegan restaurant? Our goal is to reach as large a cross-section of people as possible, and making it approachable is the key to doing that.

MARIANN: Well, you've certainly achieved that. And you had mentioned before how many restaurants you have. And can you tell us where they all are?

KEVIN: Well, we have 22 restaurants. They're all on the west coast currently. We have three in Seattle, three in the Portland area, one in northern California in San Jose, and one down in La Jolla, and then the balance are either in Orange County or LA County proper. But we do have seven more in development, including several in northern California, around the San Francisco Bay Area.

JASMIN: Any coming to the east coast any time soon?

KEVIN: We will be there in 2015.

JASMIN: Yes!

T.K.: Knock on wood.

KEVIN: Knock on wood, right.

JASMIN: Okay, knocking. I just actually bought all of the wood in lower Manhattan and I'm knocking on it. So, Mariann likes to say that the single most effective way we can change the world for animals is to feed people delicious vegan food, and that's exactly what you're doing. And you're really creating new inroads for creating change and for mainstreaming veganism. And I think you're already doing that. You're already mainstreaming veganism. And we are just so thrilled to get to talk to you today. Do you two have a favorite item on your menu, by the way?

KEVIN: Well, it's interesting. That's like asking, which one of your children is your favorite?

JASMIN: Right, yeah.

KEVIN: It's tough. And Pillan and I eat our food -- and keep in mind, it's over seven years -- absolutely, we have at least 10-12 meals a week at a Veggie Grill. And that's fairly amazing when you consider eating at the same restaurant 10 or 12 times a week for seven years. I think it's a bit of a testimony to the taste profiles being broad and deep. My current favorite is the new harvest bowl. I just love the Field Roast sausage.

JASMIN: Mariann just fainted.

T.K.: And I go through phases myself. And I'm a big fan of the harvest bowl as well. I still go back to the tried and true All Hail Kale quite a bit. We've got these new Buffalo mini-wraps that are really good. And there's always the Buffalo chicken sandwich and the VG-Cheeseburger.

JASMIN: This is pathetic. That is not an answer. What's your favorite menu item? Oh, all of them. No, that's not okay. Okay.

KEVIN: Well, I have to tell you, though. I did have -- we finally found vegan bacon that we were really enthusiastic about after about seven years of looking. And I had our VG-Cheeseburger with bacon, so it was a bacon cheeseburger, last night. It was just ridiculous.

JASMIN: Wow.

KEVIN: It was ridiculous.

JASMIN: What was the bacon that you liked so much?

KEVIN: The bacon is Soyboy. Pillan, isn't that it?

T.K.: Yeah.

KEVIN: And what we do is we take it and then we enhance it further. We're not just taking it as it comes to us and serving it. We actually add more smoke to it. It's the same with our cheese. We add the -- Daiya has a very good product, and we take it and we enhance it a little bit further, make it richer and more cravable.

JASMIN: So, where do you see Veggie Grill in five years?

T.K.: Well, our mission is to be the next Chipotle, so that's the goal.

JASMIN: All right. Excellent. Well, I'm down with that, and I'm happy to be your mascot. And I'm just --

MARIANN: And I'm willing to be your taster!

JASMIN: Yeah, I'm sure you are.

KEVIN: By the way, I just wanted to say something else, talking about cheese. And cheese and bacon have been two things that we have been frustrated about for some time. Tal Ronnen, he has cofounded a company called Kite Hill --

MARIANN: Yeah.

KEVIN: -- that has, I mean, they're doing some real groundbreaking work on vegan cheese. It's just extraordinary.

JASMIN: Yeah. Do you guys remember the dark days of vegan cheese?

T.K.: Yeah.

KEVIN: Oh, absolutely.

JASMIN: Can we have a moment of silence for those dark days? They were bad. I mean, like, it was awful. And that just changed within the last few years.

MARIANN: Yeah. And it looked like cheese.

KEVIN: Yes. You remember, if you tried to heat it up, it basically liquefied.

JASMIN: Yeah.

KEVIN: It was grim. Another great product, Hampton Creek Foods, Josh Tetrick's company, they've come out with a wonderful new vegan mayo, and their cookie dough is just coming out. And they're getting ever closer to a plant-based egg product. Very exciting stuff.

JASMIN: Mm-hmm. Josh is one of my favorite people on the planet.

KEVIN: And you should have Ethan Brown on your show as well, the founder of Beyond Meat. He's a great guy, and they're doing great work on the plant protein side.

JASMIN: Yeah, we've had Josh on, and that was one of my favorite interviews in Our Hen House history. He is one of my heroes. This -- I'll call it for-profit activism, I love this so much. This to me is what's going to do it. It's what's gonna seal it for this type of social change. And I'm not sure if that's exactly, if it's worded that way in your business plans, but that's how I see it as an animal rights activist and it's all working synergistically. So, I can't thank you enough for creating such a high-quality product and for being so damn successful at it. And I'm just, I'm in awe of all you guys do. And I hope that you'll continue to keep us up to speed on your happenings. And I love it that you see yourself as the next Chipotle. I do too. I have no doubt that will come to be. So, thank you so much for joining us today on

Our Hen House and for sharing your story with us. And I do want to give a special shout-out to our mutual friend Ari Solomon who, as you mentioned right before we pressed record, is just such a hero to animals and we both love him equally. And we're so lucky that he's part of the Our Hen House team, and I know you guys are fond of him as well.

KEVIN: Yes, he's one of our favorite people.

T.K.: And thank you for the kind words. Before we end, we want to thank you and Mariann and your audience as well because of all the work you do and the support. Everybody, we're all part of the same movement and so we want to thank you for everything you do.

JASMIN: Mm. Well, thank you. It's a mutual admiration society. So, we will definitely stay on top of Veggie Grill. And we'll keep on top of all of your successes. So, thank you again, guys, for joining us today on Our Hen House.

KEVIN: Thank you so much for having us.

JASMIN: That was T.K. Pillan and Kevin Boylan from Veggie Grill.