The average American eats 273 pounds of meat a year.

Though it is widely believed that a vegetarian diet is more expensive, you can find plant proteins cheaper than the equivalent protein from red meat, poultry and fish.

The cheapest cuts of beef, such as ground round, average around $3/lb (lean) and boneless chicken breasts cost ~$3.40/lb. Contrast that with dried beans and lentils at less than $1/lb and rice well below $1/lb. Even tofu, the chicken of the vegetarian world, is usually under $2/lb.

It’s when you try to dress up plants as meat that costs skyrocket. Soy hot dogs, for example, cost $5/lb while turkey hot dogs are less than half that.

Nearly half of the water used in the U.S. is for animal agriculture: from watering the crops grown to feed farmed animals, providing drinking water for more than 10 billion of these animals each year, to cleaning up the filth in factory farms, transport trucks, and slaughterhouses, reports the Environmental Defense Fund.

The Environmental Protection Agency has reported that factory farms pollute our waterways more than all other industrial sources combined. Animals raised for food produce approximately 130 times as much excrement as the entire human population.

According to a University of Chicago study, if Americans were to reduce meat consumption by just 20% it would be as if we all switched from a standard sedan — a Camry, say — to the ultra-efficient Prius.

A recent analysis from the World Watch Institute by Goodland and Anhang found that livestock and their byproducts may account for more than 32 billion tons of carbon dioxide equivalents per year, or 51% of annual worldwide greenhouse gas emissions.

So how do we make this easy in practice?

- Good sources of plant protein include nuts and seeds, chick peas, baked beans, cereals, free-range eggs, milk, cheese and yogurt, lentils, and of course, tofu.
- “Superfoods” including sweet potatoes, broccoli, citrus fruits, butternut squash, etc. (all unprocessed) are packed with vitamins and minerals.
- There are dozens of vegetarian cookbooks that make it easy to explore quick and fun vegetable dishes.

Did you know? Bates Dining offers vegetarian and vegan options at every meal?

Twenty-eight percent of the dining program’s purchases are locally grown, organic, and/or natural products, and the goal is to increase that to 35% within the next two years.