

EPISODE 1483

[INTRODUCTION]

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FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. Anybody out there vegan, or vegetarian, or just wanting to put more vegetables, and produce and plant-based food into their diet? With rampant inflation, people crying in the aisles of the grocery store, I thought, "You know what? Let's talk about how we can bring down our food budget by adding more fruit and vegetables into the diet." Things that we can grow in our backyard, would spring around the corner. Our guest has all the advice.

Toni Okamoto is the author of the new book, it's out this week, *Plant-Based on a Budget Quick & Easy*. Toni has a massive social media following. And her story to how she became vegan started at Taco Bell, eating fast food and realizing she didn't feel so good. And it has been 16 years she has mastered this diet. But she's the first to admit, it is not simple. It is not an easy transition. Be good to yourself. Progress over perfection. Toni shares ways that we can extend the life of our groceries to reduce waste.

How do I not regret my farmers market haul? Easy ways to make plant-based meals even if you're short on time and don't want to spend a lot of money. I think you'll like this interview.

Here's Toni Okamoto.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Toni Okamoto, welcome to So Money. It's an honor to have you on the show. You're the author and creator of *Plant-Based on a Budget*. Excited to have you and learn all about how to eat healthy on a diet. With inflation where it is, it seems impossible to construct a reasonably priced food budget these days. But you've got some solutions for us. Welcome.

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TO: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to chat with you today.

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FT: I would love to explore the beginnings of your journey to educating others on how to eat healthily and focus on plant-based foods. Your story is so incredibly interesting. But I think it's where a lot of us start, which is at the Taco Bell counter. You were in high school, I understand, getting a little sick. And you were just eating a lot of fast food. Fast forward to today, a much different approach to eating. But what was it like for you during the before times that I think so many of us can relate to?

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TO: I ate everything, but a lot of processed foods at the time. I lived off of Taco Bell. There was one right across the street from my high school. And before that, I did grow up with healthy eating. I grew up with my grandparents. My dad was in the Navy. He was a teenager when I was born. He just sent home his paycheck.

And my grandparents, they grew a lot of the food that we ate. I'm here in Central Valley, California, where it's abundant. And I had the experience of living with two people who had it in their blood. My grandma was a picker. She's Mexican. My grandpa was full Japanese. And he was a Japanese Central Valley gardener.

And so, we grew and ate fresh food all the time.

Then my dad came back from the Navy. And we lived the bachelor's life together. And we ate canned chili, and hot dogs, and frozen everything, Hamburger Helper. And I began to live more of a processed lifestyle.

And at that time, that's when I started going to Taco Bell at the time. There was a Taco Bell right across the street from my school. Everybody went there for lunch. And at the same time, I was a runner and I was getting sick to my stomach at every practice. And my coach said, "What are you eating?" And I thought that was a strange question because why does that matter?

I had never thought about how the food that I put into my body impacted it. And it was then that he said, "Slow down on the fast food. Cut back on the red meat." And from then, I began to thrive. And that was really the genesis of it all.

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FT: Wow! I had also a track coach in high school who – I mean, they're coaches for a reason, right? They're supposed to be inspirational. And I remember the first track meet, I threw up at the end of the race. It was a 4x8 relay, 4x4, 4x8. I threw up and he was like, "Welcome to the team." And I was like, "No. I think I want to go try out for the play next semester."

Your epiphany led you on not a path of perfection to veganism but one of progress. And I want you to talk about that too, because I think that it can be overwhelming for anyone to assume that they can overnight switch their diet especially if they've been eating meat and then not to eat meat.

And veganism is even more, I think, challenging in some ways than vegetarianism because you can't eat that dairy. And I love my cheese. Tell me about how you initially transitioned to a plant-based diet.

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TO: Well, it wasn't easy. And it wasn't intended to be perfect. I never thought today I'm a vegan in my early days. And so, the first change that I made was stopping the red meat. And my

parents, you could have – I don't even know. They thought like, "Why has God forsaken us? How did we end up with this hippy-dippy child?" And that was the hardest part.

As I mentioned, I am Mexican, and Mexican people express their affection and their love through food. And when you're saying, "I don't want that," it is not received nicely.

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FT: No.

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TO: That was the biggest challenge.

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FT: Yeah, it's considered like an affront. And I don't think it's just – we're limited to like Mexican culture. I'm Iranian. Same. Italians, Jewish. I think that food is such a centerpiece of how we connect. And if you have a different way of eating that is culturally expected, it can feel like you're disconnecting from that culture. How did you reconcile with that?

At first, I kind of continued to eat what was given to me and I made the choices. I remember, I just become vegan, and my aunt went to Walmart and got MorningStar patties and made these Mexican meatballs called albondigas. And they're spiced and they're delicious. But she made them with MorningStar, which has eggs and dairy in it, and I just ate them. I thought, "What a kind thing that she has done for me. She went out of her comfort zone. And what am I going to do? Tell her, "No, thanks?" You make your choices.

And after that, I told her the brands that are vegan. And she loves me, and wants to support me and accommodate me. It was a learning point for both of us. And I think the biggest thing is not expecting people to accommodate me all the time or to change everything that they're doing. I often bring people food to share and introduce them to what I like to eat. And I try to make

things that are culturally relevant so that they're familiar, and the texture is similar and it's not a completely foreign meal.

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FT: Yeah. And that's I think why all your followers love your creations so much. Because sometimes we think of vegan food, we think, "Oh, my gosh! Exotic ingredients. Expensive ingredients. Hard to put together meals." And you completely dispelled that myth for your followers.

I would love to have you, because you've been doing this for so long, and you are the expert, to talk a little bit about the evolution of the vegan diet in our culture. Because I think when I first heard about veganism probably in my 20s, it felt like it was very limited to a certain class, a certain breed of people. People who had resources. Who had time? Who were professional dieters, to be honest? It was like a fad. Like, "Well, one day, I'm going to do this. And now I'm a vegan." And then I remember Bill Clinton became a vegan because his doctor had said, "You need to get healthy." And so, this was sort of his shortcut.

Fast forward to today, where do you think the culture has led us in terms of the perception of veganism? And what is the work that still needs to be done to dispel any still lingering myths about this way of eating?

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TO: I'm going to try to go from the beginning. I have been a vegan for 16 years now. And when I started, it was a different experience. The options available when I ate out were not that great. I was used to eating the fries, and the side salad and some toast. But that was it on all of the menus. And now I can go anywhere and they know how to pronounce vegan. And it's not vegan. It's vegan. They know what that means. They don't think that it includes chicken broth or shrimp.

It has gotten easier for me to eat –

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FT: You can't grow shrimp in your backyard. I mean, what is the – okay.

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TO: It kind of reminds me of my big fat Greek wedding when he was like – I'm a vegetarian. She was like, "That's okay. I'll make you some lamb." It's just like that.

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FT: It's a bunt.

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TO: Yeah, exactly. I think that it's so much easier now. But the thing that I would like people to focus on is the foods that we have been eating for centuries. It's the cheapest and healthiest. And so, although there are a lot of great options. And you can even go to Burger King and get an Impossible Whopper. Those get expensive.

And so, I try to bring people back to, again, the foods that we've been thriving on forever. And those are beans, and lentils, and quinoa, and rice, and produce. They're delicious, and expensive and nourishing. You can find them at places like Walmart or Dollar Tree. And they will make you feel good.

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FT: Your book, again, is called *Plant-Based on a Budget Quick & Easy*. Great time to be coming out with a book about how to eat simply and with the stuff you can grow in your backyard. Because the grocery store is expensive. News flash to anybody who hasn't been to a supermarket recently, it is a site. And now, everyone, I was at Whole Foods the other day. I feel like everybody is expressing their angst out loud in the aisles. It's like a chorus of angry shoppers. Like, "Yogurt is 8.99!"

And even now, the person checking you out – I had this, totally honest, happened to me. She looks at – I don't know what I was buying. I think it was eggs. Because everyone knows eggs are expensive. And she out louds and – And she works there. She's like, "7.99?" I was like this is how bad it is. When the person who works at the grocery store is beside herself as far as where the prices have gone and is talking out loud about it. And I was like like, "I don't know what to do, lady. I got to eat my eggs." But that doesn't really jive with the vegan diet. Maybe there is a moment now to consider this diet if saving money is important to you. Shouldn't be the only reason to become a vegan. But it's kind of like, "Hey, why not?"

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TO: And the cool thing about it is that in every budget cookbook, vegan or not vegan, eating less meat is a tip. It can be meatless Mondays. It can be one meal a day that's vegetarian. But eating less meat is going to save you money. That's just how it goes.

And I think about beans. I live off of beans. Beans are, even with inflation, probably 30 cents more per pound than what they used to be. And you're talking about \$1.50. And they triple in size once they're cooked. It's amazing. And you can do so many things with them. They're very versatile. And that is so much cheaper than if you were to go buy a pound of beef.

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FT: I don't know. Beans can be kind of hard on your stomach. I'm just saying. I'm just saying. I can't put beans in the chili. My husband won't allow it. What's your advice for couples, families, that want to do this? And they've got picky kid eaters. I mean, can we even assume – should we just exclude the kids from this and just give ourselves less of a headache?

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TO: Sure. Sure. If you have picky eaters, there are things that you can do. And I feel like the biggest thing is the mindset shift. It doesn't have to be all or nothing. And it doesn't have to be something that takes you far out of your comfort zone. There are lots of simple swaps. One that my family enjoys – and I have the biggest meat loving family possible. It is unreal how much

they love their meat. My dad's favorite thing is smoking meat. He's always in the back smoking his meat.

And so, one recipe that I love are tacos made with the same taco seasoning that's in the packet but using lentils instead. It's a similar texture, a similar flavor that their palette will just enjoy. And then I use the same toppings. I do a little bit of cilantro, and diced onion and diced tomato. You can put it on an avocado if that's within your budget. And it tricks the mind into thinking you're eating beef tacos because it tastes the same. It feels the same in your mouth. But it's a lot cheaper and a lot healthier for you.

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FT: Lentils. Yeah, I do sometimes these tricks where I read a recipe. This is already a vegan recipe to start with. It's guacamole. But you can hide some green peas in there if you really want to get nutritious. I've read about that. Because there's a lot of interesting hacks for kids. As long as it's the same color and texture, they probably won't know the difference.

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TO: Yes. And there are some things that you can do that you can make fun. On my website, plantbasedonabudget.com, I have spinach pancakes. There's no taste of the spinach. But you can make them for St. Patrick's Day. And it's fun to have green pancakes. And, really, the only difference is that they're green and they are packed with nutrients but the taste is literally the same.

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FT: Oh, my gosh. All right. I am going to be going through your recipes for sure. You also talk about how to extend the life of groceries to reduce waste. There's that famous meme online. I'm sure you've seen it. I've shared it, which is like you go to the grocery store. You have all this ambition. You buy all this stuff at the farmers market to basically just throw it away three days later.

You have such a different vision of yourself when you're in the greens section of the grocery store. So, ambitious. I'm going to be so healthy. I'm going to make all this – I'm going to make spinach pancakes. And then you get home and you forget. And it goes away and expires so quickly. How can people get more mileage out of the produce that is going to comprise so much of their vegan diet?

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TO: First of all, you've got to have a meal plan. I will say it over and over and over again. Because if you buy without a plan, it's going to go bad. And when you're planning, you can purchase in bulk buying only what you need. And I used to think bulk meant large volumes. But now I think it means small volumes because I've always had a tiny kitchen and not a lot of money. So, I buy only what I need. A cup of rice. A cup of beans. And so, those are some things that I do.

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FT: That's smart. But to hear you go through that exercise, that's a little bit more time, right? Part of why we buy in bulk is because then we don't have to go to the store four times that month or three times that week. And so, again, an opportunity to dispel, again, this probably a myth about eating healthy. And veganism is one way.

But even other sorts of like "healthy eating diets", the backlash is that, well, when will I have time to cook? When will I have time to meal plan? When do I have time to go back to the store for that next cup of rice? What do you say to folks who pose this this sort of negativity?

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TO: There are a lot of ways to work around this. I did that. What I just mentioned, I lived that way because that was within my means. I got hate every two weeks. I didn't have a lot of money to buy things in large volumes. But now I do. And I have a lot less time. And that's why I wrote *Plant-Based on a Budget Quick & Easy* because now I'm looking for ways to do things very fast and spend the least amount of time in the kitchen.

And some ways to prevent food waste are purchasing frozen produce. I live off of frozen produce. It's not going to go bad. It's washed already. It's pre-chopped. You can buy blends, like fajita mix or roasted corn with different spices in it. And it makes meal time so much faster. I do that.

I have learned a lot of ways to extend my produce. And I share those tips in the book. But some of them are storing cilantro. My husband used to joke before I started storing it properly that our home was the place where cilantro came to die. We would instantly put it in the refrigerator and it would wilt. And I just kind of tossed it in there. But now I treat it like a bouquet. I put it in a glass of water. I cut the ends off of it before I do that. And I put a little bag on top of it and it extends the life from one day to over a week.

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FT: Wow! I think a mistake I always made. By the way, cilantro and I do not get along. I think you're like – it's polar opposites, right? People either love it or they hate it. To me, it tastes like soap. But I love basil. And recently, I had basil in the fridge and it was starting to kind of get moisture and like get soggy. I immediately put it out of the fridge and then it died. Like, the next morning, it was dead.

And so, I think what I'm learning about produce – and my sister-in-law actually schooled me on this. She's like, "You refrigerate too much of your produce." When you go to the grocery store and you pick your produce, is it in a 30 degrees refrigerator? No. It's out. And it's in room temperature for the most part getting sprinkles on of water.

Why is it my conditioning to like immediately put everything in the fridge? Probably because I'm a neat freak and I don't want it sitting on the counter. But is that actually wrong? I should leave most of the stuff out? Because something with being in a cold environment can mess up its chemistry?

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TO: I put basil in an airtight container with a paper towel to absorb the moisture. And that does extend the life. But if you have the space and you can grow a basil plant on your windowsill or in your backyard, that's the best. Because you can buy a plant for three bucks in the section of the basil at the grocery store. And it lives on for so long and saves you so much money over time.

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FT: All right. One of the things we haven't talked about yet, which is a financial benefit of going vegan, is the health benefits. As we age, one of the big wild cards as we age is sort of like what our health care costs are going to be. And what, at least for you, has been some immediate health benefits or what your audience has told you have been the health benefits? They say food is medicine. Would love to hear some of that. And maybe that's another reason to consider eating more plant-based foods.

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TO: The number one thing I hear from my audience – And this is TMI. But it makes it a lot easier on digestion. A lot of people are concerned about having a protein deficiency when taking on a plant-based diet. But there are very few people who have protein deficiencies. But a lot of people in this country have a fiber deficiency. And they are used to thinking it is okay and normal to sit on the toilet for a really long time. But once you start getting your body used to eating a lot of fiber, it should be an easier process. That's something that I hear about all the time. People are like, "Am I supposed to go to the bathroom this much?" And so, that's something I experienced and a lot of people who are part of my audience experiences.

Some other things that people experience are clearer skin because you're eating less processed foods and often drinking more water. And taking in more water, your skin clears up.

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FT: Yeah, I mean, I think that's so important to address, the sort of the correlations with our health. And health is wealth as we say often on this show. Something you mentioned earlier,

which I think is important to revisit. Because I've actually heard this from others who are vegan. They caution against what they call like sort of the fast vegan diet.

As more companies are recognizing the demand for this kind of eating, the fast food companies, the restaurants, they're developing their own menus around this. But of course, it's not like the same as making it at home. And in fact, it can backfire.

If you are somebody who is short on time and has to like grab lunch outside work or is entertaining clients a lot for work, what are some ways to practice veganism outside of your home that is healthy, that is also truly vegan?

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TO: When I used to work outside of the home – I now work from home. But I used to have an hour and a half commute each way. And having a plan again is going to take you far. If I knew I didn't have anything waiting for me either at lunch at work or at home after my one-and-a-half-hour commute, I was going to make decisions that were not beneficial to my health or my wallet. Planning what I was going to eat. Being the person in charge of the luncheon is also I know an extra burden but definitely is the most helpful.

Calling ahead at restaurants. Making sure that there's something for you to eat there. If there's a potluck, making something that's really delicious that other people will enjoy and making a double batch. Because, likely, they're going to want to eat all of it. That has been my problem, is that I bring just enough for me. But everyone is like, "Oh, that looks delicious. It's so colorful." And then I don't have very much. Double batch that.

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FT: And one thing I learned from Oprah, not that she's vegan, but she had a great tip. When you go out to eat, although you may not see something on the menu, ask if they can prepare something for you that's not on the menu but you see the ingredients on there. I do this for my kids all the time because I know – maybe I should just be less of a helicopter mom in the restaurants. But if I see that like, for example, they do have spaghetti and meatballs, I'll say,

"Can you please just do spaghetti with no sauce?" Or I'll say, "I see that they have like chicken Milanese. But can we just do a simple chicken breast for my kids? They're not going to eat all the sauce and add-ons." And they will because the ingredients are back there. You just have to let them know what you want. And they want you to be happy.

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TO: Exactly. Exactly.

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FT: Toni Okamoto, thank you so much. *Plant-Based on a Budget*, I'm ordering it now. Quick and easy. I am so glad that you are doing what you're doing. It's no doubt you have a tremendous fan base. No doubt this book is going to be wildly successful. And I really appreciate your advice of progress over perfection. Because I think with any transition in how we eat, it can be overwhelming. We can easily give up. But we got to be kinder to ourselves and think about how we can add more into our lives instead of take things away and deprive. Thank you.

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TO: Thank you so, so much. And I can't wait for your book.

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FT: Oh, my gosh. I'll be in touch.

[OUTRO]

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FT: Thanks so much to Toni for joining us. Her book again is called *Plant-Based on a Budget Quick & Easy*. I have links to her book and Instagram in our show notes. And just a reminder if you want a signed copy of *Glow in the F*ucking Dark* by Tara Schuster, I got two copies at her

book event last week. Make sure to listen to her episode on So Money. That was episode 1475. Leave a review in the Apple Podcast app. I will pick two listeners to receive signed copies of *Glow in the F*ucking Dark* by Tara Schuster.

Thanks so much for tuning in, and I hope your day is so money.

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