

Jay Z and Beyoncé Want to Put You in a Vegan State of Mind

By Courtney Rubin

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As revolutions go, the one Beyoncé and Jay Z are planning — to make the world go vegan — got off to a start somewhat more subdued than Queen Bey's sheer Met Gala gown.

Beginning Dec. 3, 2013, the pair took to social media (he to his Life & Times blog, then she to Instagram) to announce they would start a 22-day vegan challenge. It was the day before Jay Z's 44th birthday, and also just after the couple had become partners in a vegan food company founded by Marco Borges, their trainer and "life coach" (his description).

This February, roughly a year later, 22 Days Nutrition, as their company is called, debuted a vegan meal delivery service (about \$600 for the full 22 days), which Mr. Borges said grew out of demand for help when the pair shared the challenge on social media. (22 Days is so named because psychology holds that it takes 21 days to make a habit, so by 22 you're on your way.)

The meals are just one soy-, dairy- and gluten-free morsel of their plans to turn us all vegan — or at least, to make us "lean toward it," as Mr. Borges said, which is what the couple now do. ("First it's important that you know I am not a vegan," Beyoncé wrote in an email.) 22 Days already sells protein bars and powders. The partners are currently testing which fruits and vegetables — besides the kale Mr. Borges makes the couple — can be turned into "chiplike substances" for packaged snacks. It's Mr. Borges and the couple's chef doing the experimenting. "I don't really cook, but I'm a really good taste tester," Beyoncé said.

The company is also talking juices and — for those of us without a chef who can pop over to Nobu to brush up on his Japanese sauce-making for the vegetables (as Beyoncé and Jay Z’s chef did) — grab-and-go meals in supermarkets and in stand-alone stores or stores-within-stores. This revolution, it seems, will be spiralized and served over quinoa, with meals available worldwide, in theory as easy to buy as a Coke.

“We know that people want to be healthy, but for some reason, convenience trumps health,” said Mr. Borges, a vegan for more than 10 years, though he is reluctant to put a date on it because he feels that then people dismiss him as too hard-core to be relatable. “We have this human nature of making everything competition-based,” he said. (The company’s plans, by the way, also include rebranding the word “vegan”; its partners prefer “plant-based” because with vegan, “you picture someone who lives in Colorado that doesn’t wear deodorant. There’s a negative stereotype,” Mr. Borges said.)



Marco Borges, who trains Beyoncé and Jay Z, at Blossom, a vegan restaurant in Manhattan. Yana Paskova for The New York Times

Beyoncé and Jay Z obviously have a few things going on already, so why this foray into the often-lampooned world of the celebrity lifestyle guru and veganism? In an email, Beyoncé wrote “at first it’s the little things I noticed: I had more energy” — though, sadly, not enough to deal with a reporter asking about it on the phone, as had been promised for more than a month. Beyoncé, a representative explained, has not answered any direct questions for more than a year. Just back from vacation in Hawaii, she politely responded by email, sounding rather less fiery than the company’s South American fiesta lentils. “The benefits of a plant-based diet need to be known,” Beyoncé wrote. “We should spend more time loving ourselves, which means taking better care of ourselves with good nutrition and making healthier food choices.” Scarlet beet brown rice with kabocha, anyone?

Not everything Beyoncé and Jay Z have touched turns to gold. Beyoncé’s fashion line, House of Dereon, for example, has a defunct website, and Jay Z recently took to Twitter to defend Tidal, his streaming music service. To help take the food brand both big and international, the company recently brought on Anne McKeivitt, who has advised companies like Walmart and Mercedes. Ms. McKeivitt, a vegan herself for some 30 years, emailed Mr. Borges, intrigued that two not-quite-vegan celebrities were so involved in the company. “When I became vegan, people at home thought that had something to do with ‘Star Trek,’ ” recalled Ms. McKeivitt, who grew up in the north of Scotland.

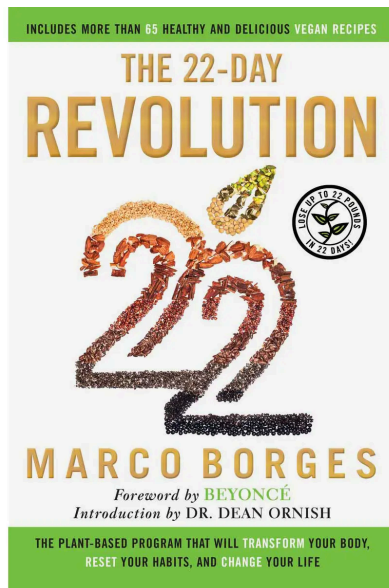
Mr. Borges, formerly the owner of a chain of gyms in Miami, has worked with the couple for 10 years, since his client Pharrell Williams introduced him to Jay Z. In 2013, Mr. Borges challenged Beyoncé and Jay Z to a week of plant-based breakfasts, and handed over some recipes to their chef. Jay Z started with oatmeal with seeds and berries; Beyoncé with an avocado, tomato and cucumber salad. Jay Z, Mr. Borges said, decided that was easy, so they added in a few all-veggie lunches. (“Jay’s like, ‘O.K., let’s talk to Brandon,’ ” Mr. Borges said, referring to their chef.) In December, they finally decided they were ready for the 22 Day vegan challenge. Though they struggled to adjust, every day “gets easier,” Beyoncé said. The pair quickly felt, it could be said, flawless.

She, for one, saw “a noticeable glow to my skin without having to deprive myself of carbs,” she said. “I even slept better.”

Making cumin-and-turmeric-flecked Baba’s Kidney Beans a go-to meal wasn’t originally Beyoncé or Jay Z’s idea. It was Mr. Borges who founded the company, and three years in he asked them to join.

“I thought, ‘Well maybe this is a long shot,’ but the first words out of Jay’s mouth were, ‘I thought you were going to keep this to yourself,’ and he just kind of started laughing,” said Mr. Borges, who is lean, wiry and seems perpetually on the verge of jumping onto a sofa to demonstrate his passion for all things plant-based. During one conversation, he talked for 23 minutes without stopping. (His enthusiasm is clearly infectious: Jay Z wrote the foreword to Mr. Borges’s 2010 book, “Power Moves”; Beyoncé wrote the one for his just-released “22-Day Revolution,” which contains a recipe for walnut tacos she loves. “It’s hard to believe they’re actually good for you and they taste great,” she wrote in an email. Of Mr. Borges, she said, he “does not talk about something; he lives it.”)

Mr. Borges is often listed as the company’s C.E.O., and he handles the day-to-day affairs, but he said technically none of them have titles and they share equally. “Some days I do the heavy lifting, and some days they do,” he said. “What does that mean? It means we want to put out a press release. I don’t do that. They do that themselves.” In a world where access to the couple is tightly controlled — where it can take more than a month, countless emails and layers of people to get an answer to a question — this partnership works simply because Mr. Borges is “with them all the time,” he said. “It wouldn’t work if it were an email every other week.”



Mr. Borges's new book.

Meetings are frequently spontaneous, often around the breakfast table. Mr. Borges described opening his MacBook once to show Jay Z something unrelated to the company, but his malfunctioning Safari browser coughed up some cached copy with an “old school” design that Mr. Borges had been working on, and that Jay Z decided was “sick.”

“Right there we went into an impromptu brainstorming session, like a creative smash session for 45 minutes on how the package of the snacks should look,” Mr. Borges said. “Then B walks into the room and is like, ‘What are you guys talking about?’” (Asked if she had any pet projects within the company, Beyoncé said, “I love the creativity, but the fun part is getting to try all the delicious meals.”)

There are no pictures of the couple on the home page of 22 Days’ website (and a quotation from Beyoncé, a recent addition, flashes up only briefly). But their imprint is there, Mr. Borges is quick to reassure. While tasting the three flavors (natural, chocolate and vanilla) of a soon-to-be-released pea protein powder, Beyoncé asked for strawberry. When the couple’s friends (guinea pigs for the meals) began saying they needed snacks, Mr. Borges initially refused, saying people who want to lose weight shouldn’t have them. Perhaps somewhat improbably, Beyoncé — worth a reported \$450 million — offered the reality check.

“She looked at me and she’s like, ‘Marco, come on, we have to be realistic,’ ” Mr. Borges recalled. “ People like to snack, and if they’re going to snack, let’s give them a good option.’ ”

Bey also wants more fresh salads, a project that is currently the biggest challenge, absurd as that may sound for a plant-based company. (The issue is keeping them from looking like mush before they reach their destination.) Beyoncé and Jay Z chose the black dishes (the white instantly looks dirty, they decided) and debated package design (“Jay’s a super-clean minimalist, a less-is-more guy,” Mr. Borges said) and label wording (it needed to include the word “delicious”). Thus far, Mr. Borges said, there have been no major disagreements. “We’re very much in sync,” he said. “I guess friends are like that.”

Beyoncé, Mr. Borges said, wanted the meals to taste so good that people would be “like, get out of here” upon learning they’re vegan. In a two-day test, though, a reviewer from The Kitchn described the banana nut muffins and white beans and greens salad as “work to get through” but was rewarded on Day 2 with “an insane surge of energy.”

The reviewer also noted she missed fresh vegetables. Score one for Beyoncé.

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