

I woke up early the following morning, excited to finally take time from focused eating to explore a bit of the city's touristy sights. After catching up on email while enjoying a Grindcore House bagel—slathered with their homemade black olive and herb cream cheese—I strolled along bustling South Street, visited the sparkly Magic Gardens, awed at the eclecticism of Atomic City Comics, and perused the narrow aisles of Repo Records. I made my way to the petite, historically beautiful Elfreth's Alley, and waited in line to snap a photo of the Liberty Bell.

While leisurely strolling down Walnut Street, soaking up the squint-inducing St. Patrick's Day sun, on my way to an early dinner, I passed a homeless woman holding a sign that read, "I'm pregnant, hungry, and alone."

I felt a rush of heat and pain come over my body that made me want to drop to my knees in front of her, and dig through my backpack in search of every penny I could find. But, as I had conditioned myself to do, my mind instead began questioning the truth of the lettering on the piece of cardboard propped in front of her. 'She doesn't look pregnant,' I thought to myself. 'How did she become homeless to begin with? Maybe she's addicted to drugs or alcohol. If she is pregnant, how will the baby survive?' These thoughts quickly pushed out the urgency I had originally felt to help her.

I kept walking.

When I turned to face the direction of my momentum, I was immediately stopped by a young man with a huge grin.

"Hi. My name is Todd. Do you care about the environment?" he queried. Had I not been distracted by the maybe-pregnant homeless woman, I would have sooner spotted the mission worker and preemptively crossed the street to avoid the awkward side-glance smile thing that I would have given, followed by a lowered head nod and a "Sorry, I've got to get to where I'm going," type of response that I'd forced upon dozens of other solicitors from streets past.

Before I knew it, he was sharing details about rain forests and environmental conservation.

"I do care!" I blurted out, to my surprise. 'Oh here we go. Now what have I started? This is going to take forever,' I thought to myself.

"That's wonderful!" said Todd.

"Um. Yeah, I've been vegan for more than five years now." I said. "And since I'm not supporting the meat and dairy industries—which I believe are responsible for so much environmental destruction on the planet, what with the methane gases produced by livestock farts, the millions of acres of land destroyed to house and feed the animals that we kill for food—their food that could of course go to feed starving people around the world instead of the animals—I feel like, by eating a plant-based diet, I'm contributing to the preventative measures necessary to help save the planet," I said.

I think we were both surprised as we stood in silence for a minute before Todd said, "Oh. Well that's cool! Are you interested in donating anyway?" Todd seemed like a nice enough kid, so I filled out the form and handed him some cash.

"Sweet. Thanks, Kristin. Here's your receipt," he said. Todd continued, "So, are you not from around here?"

I went on to tell Todd about the road trip, how I was driving, writing, and eating my way through the country, by way of vegan restaurants, cafés, and food trucks.

"Dude, that's really cool. Good on ya!" he said. "Well, it was great to meet you, Kristin. Good luck on your travels!" And with a graceful about-face, Todd just as quickly stopped his next potential donor.

I somehow felt lighter after my conversation with Todd. I don't know if it was because I finally stopped and talked with one of these activists who, up until that point, only ever made me an anxious street jumper. Maybe it was because I finally voiced my opinion on a cause that does really matter to me, and to someone who maybe had a shared interest. I'm not sure. It did, for some reason or another, cause me to turn around.

Before swinging my pack over my shoulder, and slipping my left arm through the strap, I dug into the tiny inner pocket flap and pulled out a five-dollar bill, walked back to the pregnant woman, knelt down, and dropped it into the clear plastic to-go container next to her.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you so much, ma'am," she said. For the first time, I made and held eye contact with the pregnant homeless woman. I felt the warmth and anguish come back.

"You're welcome," I said.

A left on South 12th and a right on Locust Street, and there it was: Vedge Restaurant.

The hype around this relatively new, completely vegan establishment was pretty grand, so naturally my expectations were low, since I had learned early on that buzz didn't always equate to quality, but just more so fed the chatter.

Before walking up the steps and into the first doorway, I stopped and looked down at myself. I was wearing a pair of navy Toms shoes, green capri khakis, a black t-shirt that said, "flesh is for zombies" with a picture of a cute, little exposed-brain zombie head, and a black-and-red schoolyard backpack, busting at its seams.

Classy.

I lifted an arm and took a whiff. Nope. Not good. It had been five days since my last shower, and after this sweaty, tourist-filled day, it was beginning to show.

Thanks to Chris M., one of the restaurant's pastry chefs with whom I had enjoyed a chat over lattes a few days prior, I had a reservation. As it turns out, one needs a reservation for a restaurant of this caliber, but unfortunately that meant I had to walk in as-is. No time to find a place to shower or to freshen up.

I walked up to the hostess stand and was greeted by two women wearing crisp, matching uniforms. Another woman approached, wearing a beautiful fitted pantsuit. I shrank a little, grabbing the left shoulder strap of the pack with my right hand in an effort to casually cover up the wordplay on my shirt.

"Welcome to Vedge, Kristin. Let me show you to your table." I was momentarily in awe that the woman knew my first name, before realizing that my reservation—as made by one of their staff—was likely the reason.

She escorted me past the first room containing a gorgeous, wood paneled bar that stretched the length of the entire room. Its glossy, granite surface reflected the light from the dozens of bulbs fixated within black triangular wire caging from above, the far walls lined with neat rows of bottles of wine.

We walked into the next room, and turned right. The pantsuit-ed woman gestured toward a tall table for two. "Will this do?" she asked.

"Oh yes, this is great. Thanks!" I said.

I squeezed my shoulder blades together and shimmied the pack off, set it under the table next to the dark wood paneled molding that lined the floor, and lifted myself into the tall chair.

With a slow exhale, I quietly settled in, snug against the wall, hoping no one would notice my stinky pits as they passed by. The narrow, dimly lit room—home to stunning deep auburn wood fixtures and accents, and dotted with cozy seating throughout—kept my eyes dancing from one end to the other. In front of me, the far room opened to a larger, almost living room-like space with bigger tables, a crackling fireplace, and tall, stained glass windows. To my right lay an exposed kitchen prep area with gleaming countertops and matching bowls, plates, and select cutlery.

"Welcome to Vedge. Here are our menus. Please let me know if you have any questions," the smartly dressed server said.

"Thank you so much," I replied.

I started with the "Pomegranate Sangria," a blend of pomegranate juice and liquor with cubed pieces of apples and oranges, and a single cinnamon stick. For the next hour, I indulged in Vedge's tantalizingly smoky sweet potato pate; a sampler platter—brought out and presented by the head chef and co-owner himself—featuring paper-thin sliced mushrooms with red onion and capers, a playful line of avocado, tofu, rosemary sauce, finely diced white onions, and chopped root vegetables; and a pair of the most deliciously seasoned, sweet, melt-in-your-mouth carrots accompanied by a white bean dip that hinted of a pickled zest.

Next, a small triangular plate piled with the most stunning shaved brussels sprouts—their tangy tenderness warranting a single raised brow followed by feverish fork pointing and head nodding—dominated my palate and camera phone.

And set in a light orange sauce, hugged by a bed of lentils and spiced green onions, was Vedge's succulent house-made seitan.

"This powerful combination of veggies left an impression like no other. I'm in love and lost for words. I want more yet somehow feel satisfied at the same time. I'm mesmerized by the quality of taste, the consistency of every dish, and the care that has clearly gone into prepping and plating the meals. Stunning. Delicious. Innovative. Perfect," I wrote on my phone's Notes app—in preparation for the forthcoming blog post that would feature this meal and my time spent in Philly.

"I'll take these plates out of your way," the attentive server said as she swooped by, holding one armful of plates already. She leaned in and asked, "Would you like anything for dessert?"

With a tight-lipped grin, I asked, "Hmmm, what would you recommend?"

"Right now, my personal favorite is the lemon cheesecake round complemented by a blood orange sauce," she said.

"Sold!" I replied.

My fork slid prongs-first through the side of the cheesecake like a warm knife in nondairy butter, pausing momentarily to request more pressure to cut through the graham cracker crust that lined the base. If it were possible to fall in love with food, this would be my moment. My eyes flirted with the creamy dollop of cake that lingered seductively along the curved edges of the fork. Like a trained commercial actress, I raised the sweet cake to my lips, moved the fork slowly into my mouth, then pressed my lips together. I took a deep breath in, closed my eyes, and let out an “mmmmm” as I carefully withdrew the fork. The lemon cheesecake swirled, tempted the roof of my mouth and inside of my cheeks, and titillated every taste bud on my tongue.

When I regained consciousness, I had nearly polished off the entire piece of cheesecake. I re-opened the Notes app and added a few words: “Wow, wow, wow!”

Drunk with a food coma, I staggered out to the Philadelphia streets, now swarming with green-clad, tipsy St. Patrick’s Day revelers.

The two-mile walk back to the van felt longer that night as the sun began to set. In the final handful of blocks, the streetlights turned on in unison with a buzz, and my eyelids involuntarily blinked every few feet as I passed beneath the yellowy-orange triangular streams of florescent light that soaked the sidewalk.

I rounded the corner at South 5th and Gerrit Street, where Gerty waited patiently. Before approaching the van, I looked down the street to the left, and then to the right. And I glanced behind me to be sure no one was watching. After unlocking the set of side doors, I pressed the square black button in and pulled the larger of the two conjoined doors open, toward me.

The narrow plastic step at the van’s base squeaked under the pressure as I used it to step up, heaving my upper body and backpack into the van. I quickly pulled the door shut and immediately pushed the lock horizontally into place, the orange strip within the door panel disappearing to indicate “locked.”

I slid the backpack off my right shoulder, then the other, gently onto the floor. My life was in that pack. Everything that kept me in touch with the world. My phone, my computer, and the keys to this van. I sat heavily onto the edge of the bed, and then fell back onto the mattress.

I swung my arms up above my head and reached for the built-in wooden coat rack. I liked to think I could do pull-ups on it, but never tried for fear it would crack over my face. Sometimes it served as a nice upper body stretcher.

Oof. I smell.

I picked up my phone and selected the ‘settings’ option, then ‘wallpaper and brightness,’ and moved the indicator node to the left to dim the screen. I opened my email and scanned the new messages.

“RE: shower in Philly,” the notification from my Couch Surfing account read. A reply had come in from Kim, a friendly couch surfer who had offered up her bathroom for an hour so that I could take a shower.

Thank goodness.

One at a time—heel to toe—I kicked off my Toms, set my phone on silent, and rolled, heavy as a sack of sand, onto my left side, pulling my favorite heavy brown comforter atop of me. Too tired to change out of my stinky clothes, I tucked my legs and body into a fetal curl, and fell asleep to the comfort of a full belly, a warm heart, and the promise of a shower the next day.