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Hip-hop artists spread word on vegetarian, vegan diets in black community

By [Leslie Fulbright](#)

Seattle Times Eastside bureau

There are some hip-hop artists who don't drink Tanqueray and Alizé and want no part of the late-night trips to the BK.

Take the socially conscious rap duo Dead Prez, whose song "Be Healthy" includes the lyrics: "I don't eat meat, no dairy, no sweets — only ripe vegetables, fresh fruit and whole wheat."

In recent years, hip-hop artists have started publicly denouncing the unhealthy diets some of their counterparts have long embraced. They are pushing the benefits of holistic health in the black community, where high blood pressure and cholesterol are common problems.

Singer Erykah Badu, an active promoter of the vegan lifestyle, has been known to stop by Seattle's Hillside Quickies Vegan Sandwich Shop, where the Howell family serves up Tempehstrami Subs and Macaroni and Yease to the tune of hip-hop, dance hall and reggae.

"We get a lot of artists that come through here," said Ayinde Howell, a 25-year-old vegan and local rapper/poet, "the ones who take care of their bodies."

The low-key vegan/soul-food cafe in the University District has hosted the likes of The Roots, Saul Williams, Black Anger, Blackalicious and the Lifesavas. Howell opened the business five years ago, inspired by his mother, who has prepared wholesale vegan foods for years. Howell began working for his mother as a teenager, delivering vegan products to stores from Olympia to Everett.



enlarge JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES
The Jamaican Spice Tofu Sub, with tomatoes, fried tofu slices, grilled onions and vegan mayonnaise sauce, is among the menu items at Hillside Quickies Vegan Sandwich Shop.

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Hillside Quickies Vegan Sandwich Shop

Address: 4106 Brooklyn Ave. N.E., Seattle

Phone: 206-632-3037

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday

Menu sample: Tofustrami Sub (thin-sliced Tofustrami, potato salad, tomatoes, grilled onions, sweet and

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Sister Afi, 29, came to help a couple years ago at Quickies, where she now handles all of the vegan desserts, including cookies, cakes, pies, bars and vegan soy cream.

"There has always been cooking going on in our family," Ayinde Howell said, "so we may as well make money."

Seattle has strong vegan and hip-hop communities, and Howell is part of both. They don't often intersect.

"Hip-hop is largely black people and black people are not largely vegans," Howell said.

"With hip-hop, there is a little bit of machismo, so 'Save the Animals' is not the most popular slogan.

"But now that the big artists are coming out, they are having some influence."

At the forefront is rap mogul and entrepreneur Russell Simmons, a strict vegan who is active in People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Simmons has, among other things, signed on to PETA's anti-fur ad in Women's Wear Daily, recorded a radio public service announcement promoting vegetarianism and participated in the PETA Celebrity Cookbook.

The late Notorious B.I.G., who famously indulged in "T-bone steak, cheese, eggs and Welch's grape" in his classic single, "Big Poppa" — and evidenced by his hefty frame — is probably rolling in his grave.

But the benefits of going veggie are taking root. A recently released DVD, "Holistic Wellness for the Hip-Hop Generation," speaks to young people about diet and health. Created by filmmaker Supa Nova Slom, the 110-minute documentary features appearances by artists Badu, rapper Common and Stic.man from Dead Prez.

Meanwhile, vegetarianism is gaining popularity not only in hip-hop but in black communities across the nation. An informal survey of African-American vegetarians on the Web site www.blackvegetarians.org reveals that the top three reasons given for eliminating meat are health (34 percent), ethical reasons (14 percent) and spiritual or religious reasons (12 percent).

Such conversions are changing the look of soul-food restaurants that are now trying to accommodate nonmeat eaters.

At the popular Kingfish Cafe on Capitol Hill, vegetarians can order macaroni and cheese or choose from a variety of side dishes, including greens, yams, salad and garlic potatoes. At Quickies, vegan choices like the Crazy Jamaican Burger and Mexican Lasagna rule the menu.

Similar vegetarian soul-food restaurants are popping up across the country, and Simmons reportedly has plans to open a vegan soul food restaurant in New York.

Vegans like Common, Outkast's Andre 3000 and Badu are spotlighting what could become a movement for young people. Common, who also did an ad for PETA, has said he doesn't want to take away animal lives.

spicy cole slaw and vegan mayo), \$6.99

The Flaming BBQ Burger (smoked tofu, simmered in natural barbecue sauce, potato salad with raw onions and yellow mustard), \$6.60

The Tofu Thingee

(thin-sliced smoked tofu, tomatoes, lettuce, green and red cabbage, carrots, grilled onions, vegan mayo on very thin bread), \$6.99



[enlarge](#) JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Ayinde Howell, 25, has been a lifelong vegan and owns the U District vegan sandwich shop Hillside Quickies.



[enlarge](#) JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Vegan sandwiches can be made to order or can be purchased pre-made, like these, at Hillside Quickies in Seattle's University District.

"It's not where my heart is," he told Ebony magazine. "To the hip-hop community I say, 'If you eat better, you live better and feel better.' "

Howell, of Hillside Quickies, says bad diets are an epidemic in the black community and are at least partly to blame for diseases including cancer, arthritis, asthma, obesity and diabetes. Nearly 75 percent of African Americans are lactose intolerant and a third suffer from hypertension.



[enlarge](#) JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Afi Howell, 29, shown serving up a bowl of pasta salad at Hillside Quickies, handles the vegan sandwich shop's desserts, including cookies, cakes, pies, bars and vegan soy cream.

Howell hopes hip-hop artists can deliver that message to their listeners.

"Russell Simmons is doing a lot of different things on many fronts," he said.

"If he can help people see they need to eat healthy, and do it with hip-hop, more power to him."

As the youngest of three, Howell says his parents' "hippie stuff" started with him. He was born and raised a Rastafarian in Tacoma, but still has roots and relatives in the South.



Hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons is a strict vegan.

Though his parents are heavily involved in the religion, which promotes living naturally and not eating animals, Howell says it's not easy telling his Southern relatives that he doesn't want any chicken or ribs.

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