

An Interview with Brian Wendel

by Mark Huberman



In your remarkable film *Forks Over Knives* you are listed as the creator and the executive producer. How did you come to be involved in such a project?

Actually it is kind of interesting, Mark. Food and health has been a hobby of mine for a long time, but I was in the real estate business. For a long time I kind of knew intuitively about how a plant-based diet, a whole-food plant diet, can prevent and even reverse disease. I knew about some of the work of Nathan Pritikin and John McDougall, but when I read Colin Campbell's book *The China Study* it really took my awareness to a whole other level. I realized that the case about this lifestyle and health was even greater than I had ever imagined.

A lot of people who come to this way of thinking and living come through a health crisis. Was there anything like that in your life, or did you come to this because it just seemed to make sense?

No, it just made sense. I certainly had my share of people with health issues around me. For me I was doing this lifestyle since 2001 and I knew how good it made me feel. Around me people were very sick. I watched my grandmother die a very slow, painful death and I was always frustrated that word of this lifestyle wasn't getting out there. When I read Colin's book it really just cemented things for me and I felt that something needed to be done because it really was a big mystery that wasn't being told. If you can only imagine if there was a pill that could do what a whole-food, plant-based diet could do, it would be big news.

I'm sure you know that in the alternative health movement there has been no shortage of people offering everything from Noni Juice to Spirulina to Barley Green for the quick fix, but it's not that simple, is it?

That's right, it's not as simple as a pill, but it's still a simple answer.

I have read that you are not a filmmaker by trade. What is your background?

I was in the real estate business.

So how did you put the pieces together to develop a film?

After I read Colin's book I was also kind of educating myself on these other experts. I had already been into this lifestyle for so many years. It was something I felt that really needed to get out there. I was already toying with the idea of going back to school to study nutritional science. Then all of a sudden, instead of doing that I thought maybe I'll make

Interview continues on next page.



*In this issue of **Health Science**, I am pleased to share with you a recent interview I had the privilege of conducting with Brian Wendel, the creator and executive producer of the groundbreaking 2011 film, *Forks Over**

Knives — a wonderful documentary that focuses primarily on the groundbreaking research and teachings of Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn and Dr. T. Colin Campbell. Brian's great film has been viewed by millions and has been the number one documentary on Amazon for over 18 months. In my view, the film along with its companion videos, books and media exposure, has brought the enormous benefits of a plant-based diet (which we in the NHA have been advocating for over 65 years) into the mainstream like nothing else. If you haven't seen the film, do so today. Order it online, watch it on Netflix or borrow it from a friend. Like me, you will be both educated and inspired!



Brian with Dr. T. Colin Campbell

a video. I was kind of thinking of something that was an educational tool to teach school children or something like that. Then I really started thinking bigger than that. I started to think how *An Inconvenient Truth* raised the awareness of climate change so effectively so I thought if I could do something like that for nutrition that would be a pretty cool thing.

How did you convince people like Dr. Campbell and Dr. Esselstyn to place their confidence in you to become a part of your project?

I put together a very skilled team of people in the industry to help — a veteran team if you will. Then I approached them and they were very excited. When we first started the project we didn't know that we were going to build the film as much as we did about Dr. Campbell and Dr. Esselstyn. That kind of came later. We got in touch with all the experts and all of them were excited to participate. As we narrowed in and realized there was going to be a lot of Drs. Campbell and Esselstyn we talked to them further. Yes, it did take some convincing because obviously, especially in Dr. Campbell's place, we wanted to film him in so many different locations.

Well I imagine that they also value their own credibility and didn't want to be associated with something that they didn't have confidence would have integrity.

Yes, I think that's true. Before we really filmed them we had the opportunity to meet both of them in person. They saw what we were bringing to the table was something very interesting to them. We made it very clear to them that we were going to stick very close to facts. I think that they were very impressed, too, about our general knowledge of their work and the lifestyle in general. So I think they felt pretty comfortable with us.

Had you ever met them or listened to them speak prior to this project?

No, I had not. Of course, I had read both of their works but I had not seen them. It was after we decided to put the film together that we started to meet with them and I saw Dr. Campbell lecture up in Santa Rosa. Again, that was before we decided that we were going to build so much around them. As you know after you meet them you very quickly become impressed.

They are certainly very inspiring people with great integrity and character.

I couldn't agree more. One of the great things that has come out of this film is I feel like they have gotten their due credit. It took us a few years to make the film and we're happy that we're able to amplify their voice. For these experts, for them, it was decades' worth of work. So I feel like now they are getting a lot of attention, something that is long overdue.

Who came up with the great name *Forks Over Knives*?

Interestingly enough it was getting toward the end of the film and we had just a few working titles that we knew didn't work and we were actually getting desperate. So I sent an email out to quite a few of my friends asking for help. I sent the email and said, "I'm really looking for a title, can you help me out?" One of my friends is a veterinarian and she sent back one title to me that seemed interesting. It was *Fork Over Scalpel*. I kept thinking about it and I thought *Fork Over Knife* and it all became plural, *Forks Over Knives*. The interesting thing is when I first started telling people that this was going to be the name of the film people generally didn't like it but I think it's the association with the icon. After I thought about it I was already thinking that this was something that could really be iconic. As you know our logo features a fist with a fork in it that people have gotten to know us by.

When did you start developing it?

It was January of 2009 when we first began production technically. The first couple of months we were just reading everything we could get our hands on. We started shooting in the summer of 2009.

When was it completed?

The theatrical release was in May of 2011, but we were screening it around the country in fall and winter of 2010.

In looking at your website, I noticed that you were very fortunate to have remarkably positive reviews from Dr. Sanjay Gupta, Dr. Oz and even the late Roger Ebert. That had to be a boost.

Yes, it was great and it definitely gave the film a boost. People who are very well known in the mainstream were coming out in favor of it. We actually were on Dr. Oz and we got about two-thirds of a recorded episode. We were very fortunate. Even since the launch of the film we have had quite a few celebrities also come out and talk publicly about the film, too.

Has it won any awards as a film?

As a film we have not won any awards. However, to me I feel like we're almost a People's Choice Award winner in a lot of ways because we've been the number one documentary on Amazon.

How popular has the film been?

It's number one as we speak and that's been for nearly a year and a half since the film's been out.

I saw the film on Netflix. How successful has it been with that online vehicle?

The thing with Netflix you never know how many people actually view the film but we estimate that it's definitely into the millions. There have been 500 thousand people who have rented the film on Netflix and some people say that you can multiply that number by at least four or five to get the number of views on Netflix.

I notice on the website that it says even to this day you can host a screening or host a house party. What does that mean?

Well, to host a screening, and we actually get quite a bit of these because a lot of people want to host a screening in their community, people license the film and they invite people to a theater or to a community center and they watch the film. Hosting a house party is just a guide that we have put together in conjunction with our friends of the Engine 2 Diet. It basically gives people, when they invite people to their houses, a guide — what to talk about, different discussion points, and so on and so forth — while they watch the film, what to do and all that.

Did you ever dream that it would ever become such a brand and it would become so successful?

As a film I did think that it was going to be successful — I didn't get into it thinking that it was going to fail. I was very confident about that even when other people were downers. Building a film around two men in their 70s didn't bring a lot of optimists. However, I always thought we were going to do well in theaters. I was a real believer because I really think the topic is relevant. I also think it is interesting. Sometimes something can be entertaining just by the fact it is interesting. I never really foresaw the fact that we were going to have books and follow-up videos



Brian with Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn

and things like that and that they were going to be as successful as they were.

Speaking of the books, I see that there is a companion book and cookbook. How are they doing?

They have done very well. The companion book was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 60 weeks and the cookbook is currently a *New York Times* bestseller and has been on the list for 33 weeks. They have done very well.

Where did the recipes come from?

The first book is a collection of recipes. There are multiple chefs in the vegan community that made recipes for the book. Of course, they conformed to the whole-food, plant-based lifestyle so they are low-fat, oil-free recipes. The second book is done by an absolutely wonderful chef who I met down your way in Columbus, Ohio, years ago. His name is Del Sroufe. We have a couple of other people like Julieanna Hever, Judy Micklewright, and Darshana Thacker, who also contributed recipes to the book. We have desserts by one of the top-selling vegan authors ever which is Isa Moskowitz. She did the desserts for the book. The main author is Del Sroufe.

I also see that among the videos that you sell is something called *The Extended Interviews*. What's that about?

In the film we only had an hour and a half, and yet I'm pretty sure we filmed over 180 hours of stuff. A lot of that included incredible interviews with our experts that were obviously longer than what you saw in the film. A lot of the material is really, really excellent. We thought the extended interviews would be a great platform to get that information that we couldn't get into the feature.

Interview continues on next page.

*From left to right:
John Orfanopoulos
(editor), John Corry
(producer), Brian
Wendel (creator and
executive producer),
Dr. T. Colin
Campbell, Allison
Boon (co-producer),
Lee Fulkerson
(writer and
director).*



And speaking of how this has sprouted and grown, the Farms 2 Forks Weekends is an event that has also become very popular. What is the tie-in to the film and how did that come about?

The Farms 2 Forks Weekend is actually a collaboration between us and the Engine 2 Diet. We really think a lot alike. Rip Esselstyn, who is the main person at the Engine 2 Diet, is Dr. Esselstyn’s son and we just got together and said, “Hey, let’s go around the country and teach people how to do the diet.” It’s now in its second year. We had four wonderful events last year that were all sold out and we’re having five events this year. The first two are already filled up and that’s kind of how it was. It was a great way for people to come and interact with some of the experts in the film and some other people who are very knowledgeable in this lifestyle and do it in an environment that’s comfortable and nice for them.

My wife and I attended the one in the Chicago area last June and really enjoyed the great team of Jeff Novick, Doug Lisle and, of course, the Esselstyns. They are very inspiring events. We are very blessed to have them.

In addition to the film, you have a website, you are on Facebook, and you offer free recipes. Who maintains all of this media? Is that you?

Besides myself, we have a couple of team members out here in southern California. We like to keep putting in-

formation out so we put out recipes, testimonials and sometimes we have expert blog posts. It’s just kind of a fun way to interact with our audience and to continue the education because we know it’s an ongoing process. We’re very happy with the way that’s gone.

What is the Forks Over Knives diet?

It’s really not a diet that we own. Really, it’s the diet of what I call the human being if you will and that’s really a whole-food, plant-based diet. It’s a diet that’s really based on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, tubers and legumes. That really is the diet. It’s basically living on whole-plant foods. Of course, it excludes animal foods, meat, eggs, dairy, and also your highly processed foods and oil.

Dr. Esselstyn and Rip describe themselves as “plant-based” and “plant strong.” Dr. Alan Goldhamer promotes a diet that is “vegan SOS free” (no salt, oil or sugar). Are you all of those?

We’re not vegan SOS. However, we really try to keep a very consistent message. There are little tiny differences between the leaders of this movement but they are all basically the same. I would say the diet itself is very closely aligned to Dr. John McDougall and Dr. Esselstyn. But again they are all very similar.

I’ve been in this movement for a very long time, and the thing that I find so impressive that has arisen out of Forks



*From left to right:
Allison Boon
(co-producer),
Ann Esselstyn,
Dr. Caldwell
Esselstyn, Lee
Fulkerson (writer
and director), John
Orfanopoulos
(editor), Brian
Wendel (creator and
executive producer).*

Over Knives is that Dr. Campbell, the Esselstyns and the others featured in the film have finally taken the concepts of vegetarianism and veganism, which for so long simply meant “non meat” and respect for animals, and shifted the focus squarely on health. As a lifelong vegan, I am certainly a champion for preventing cruelty to animals and trying to make a more humane and sustainable world but I think the health component has been missing for a very long time.

I think that is well stated, and what is really wonderful about all of this is it turns out what is really good for our health is also very good for the environment and is also a lot less cruel to the animals. Our work really focuses on health but we do cover the other issues a little bit and we did in the film because the global issues are important. But you are right. It shows how Dr. Campbell and Dr. Esselstyn have really zoned in and showed how plants really are the way to go.

I think they have given enormous credibility to this movement and your movie has given enormous credibility to them — which is great.

It’s a win win all the way around.

So let me ask you the question that everyone always asks about these things. Do you practice what your film preaches?

Absolutely. I have been on a plant-based diet since February 2001.

Is there a Mrs. Wendel out there?

I have a pretty serious girlfriend, but there’s not a Mrs. Wendel at this time.

Any sequels to Forks Over Knives in the works?

There are a couple of concepts that we are thinking about but there is nothing imminent. We are coming out with two more books. We just did a deal with Simon and Schuster for the next two and they are going to be authored by Dr. Matt Lederman and Dr. Alona Pulde. We are really excited about that. The books have been such a great way to follow up with the film and I think these books are going to continue that way of getting the word out there.

Brian, it’s been a pleasure talking to you. I believe that your film has really created a revolution in our way of thinking. It certainly rallied folks to a plant-based diet that we in the NHA have been advocating for 65 years as an organization and 150 years as a movement and you have lent wonderful credibility to that movement.

That’s great. Thank you so much. It means a lot. Keep up the great work that you guys are doing, too.