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You say you want a vegolution

Six friends, a fleet of German cars and gallons of vegetable oil are on the front lines

By [Brad Kane](#) ([Contact](#))

Wednesday, May 10, 2006

The revolution will come quietly, smelling of barbecue.

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While the rest of the world fights for dwindling supplies of petroleum and motorists scramble for unleaded a few cents cheaper than the \$3.04 per gallon down the street, the revolution will come through the hands and minds of men who find their fuel in restaurant waste.

In Naples and Bonita Springs, they're organic farmers and boat mechanics. A landscaper and a government employee. Six guys on a mission. Their solution to fuel efficiency starts in a residential ecotone just off Radio Road in Naples.

Their revolution is a 20-year-old German car built to last 40 years, converted to run on fuel costing 3 cents per gallon.

The leader used to crew oil tankers in Alaska. The solution started four years ago while he was trying to persuade a friend to stop using vegetable oil as fuel — and then realized the error of his ways.

Are they trying to change the world? Save a few bucks at the pump? Look cool in a classic Mercedes? It's a combination of a lot of things, sure, but make no mistake: These guys feel like they're on the cusp of a revolution.

Photo Gallery

A vegolution



[Enlarge photo](#)

Photo: Tristan Spinski

A vegolution.

The Naples Biofuel Organization sounds official, and accurately describes the group's efforts, but it all really boils down to one man: John Puig, who got five friends to trade in their vehicles for cars with diesel engines that run on vegetable oil.

"If we keep doing this stuff, maybe (car companies) will make more fuel efficient cars," said Puig, 34. "Maybe they will think 'We better start doing some veggie stuff.'"

The soldiers in the vegolution are John Puig, the leader and innovator. And converts Nick Batty, 32, and Dave Starman, 30, both from Bonita Springs; and Mark Kyle, 44, Brian Housewert, 27, and Russel Van Riper, 27, all of Naples.

Puig — yacht mechanic and U.S. Coast Guard captain — is an idealist and a realist at the same time. He has his vision of what the world should be and a desire to bring about those changes.

With his look and style of dress, it would be easy to confuse him as someone from the Woodstock generation. His long dark hair, bare feet, worn T-shirt and shorts — or a skirt, which he wore at an Earth Day event — cry out hippie. One day he stopped talking about changing the world and just finally set out to do it.

He's even figuring out a way to get his motorcycle to run on alcohol.

Puig's home off Radio Road is a monument to his fuel revolution — a symbiotic mix of nature and civilization. In front, Puig has piles of manure and wood chips for his landscaping and other nature experiments, including a worm garden. He's turned the place into a small jungle with tropical plants. He even has a stake where he peels and cracks open coconuts.

At the same time, it's a home mechanic's dream. The garage and workshop are cluttered with tools, parts and devices from all sorts of projects, but mostly for the biofuel cars. The stone driveway is filled many Saturdays with friends who come to work on their veggimobiles.

"These guys are all hands-on people that want to learn by doing," Puig said. "We'll do the weekend thing where we all work together."

All drivers who pay \$40 a trip to the gas station have an interest in cheaper fuel, but the Veggie Six also seek a more environmentally friendly fuel. Puig, whom they call Captain John, got them all rolling in converted cars, but each has outside-the-box thinking that makes them key parts in the revolution.

Housewert knew Captain John the least when he joined up. A laid-back dude with long, red hair, a wife and a 1-month-old son named Dexter (after a character on the Cartoon Network), Housewert has the swagger of a man who enjoys life.

He met Puig at a party. When Housewert started talking about biofuel, Puig told him about his Benz.

"I told him I had to check it out," said Housewert, information technology manager for Marco Island.

About a week later, Housewert was back with his 1982 Mercedes Benz wagon, eager to get it running on vegetable oil.

"I knew him for maybe a week, and I said 'Sure, I'll help you,'" Puig said.

Puig and Housewert are brothers now in the revolution. As Housewert was designing the group's Web site — www.naplesbiofuel.com — he whipped up a pair of logoed T-shirts. A sedan set against an agricultural background, the garment shouts the group's slogan "Vegolution!"

The method can convert any diesel-engine vehicle, but these guys prefer Mercedes Benz sedans and wagons. Six of the German cars (two owned by Captain John) have been converted, and three more are in the process.

"I like Mercedes, and I'm a Mercedes fan," Puig said. "I just like the car. ... My neighbors call this the Mercedes house."

Eight of the nine cars are early- to mid-1980s models, and each have a couple hundred thousand miles. The vehicle was engineered to last for one million miles, Puig explained, assuming the owner keeps up the maintenance schedule.

They don't have too much trouble finding classic Mercedes, and most are bought for \$2,000-\$5,000. After that, \$1,500 worth of part plus labor turn them into veggies.

In February, Kyle found a 1984 Mercedes sedan and converted it; he's now ready to start on his second conversion.

The oldest of the group, Kyle likes the practicality of using a cheap fuel that's also environmentally friendly. He recently bought an Izuzu truck and intends to make it the first of a veggie fleet for his landscaping business, called Native Property Management.

"I want to have the whole landscape business run on biofuel," he said.

While Puig's home is set up to be a biofuel mechanic's paradise, it's also a place to hang. When the group rallies there on weekends, wives, girlfriends, children, babies and dogs are part of the scene. With plenty of patio furniture and a fire pit, working on conversions and socializing are one in the same.

"Let's rally some pizza," Puig said on a recent Saturday, a day more about friends than cars.

Long, unkempt hair. Tattoos. Greasy hands and good times. All are de rigueur at these rallies.

Starman didn't know much about cars when he got his 1985 Mercedes more than two months ago. After he paid for the parts, Puig did the conversion in exchange for Starman doing some gardening around Captain John's house.

Starman is the environmental rock star of the group. He co-owns an organic permaculture farm in Costa Rica and works for an environmental consulting company that helps gas stations clean up spills. He sees driving a veggie as a way of beating the system.

Like Puig, Starman's car is adorned with all sorts of stickers announcing its biofuel power — like "Yeah, it's a veggie" a spin-off of Dodge's "Yeah, it's a hemi." Twisted into the Mercedes hood ornament is a

rubber cartoon rabbit.

"I get a lot of waves, thumbs up," Starman said. "People ask me questions at stop lights all the time."

One of the stickers on Puig's car reads: "Fueled by 100 percent vegetable oil." He's approached most often by people thinking he's a vegetarian.

Any of the six are happy to explain the workings of the car. Whenever someone questions their stories, there's one fail-safe way to turn doubters into believers — the smell test.

"Everybody wants to smell it," Housewert said. People have a variety of opinions about what the exhaust smells like. Barbecue is the most popular answer.

Veggiemobiles run on straight vegetable oil without any additives. They buy the stuff from restaurants looking to dispose of used oil from deep-fat fryers. One restaurant can provide enough fuel for about a week, and a fast food restaurant has enough oil for an entire fleet, Puig said.

The filtering process costs about 3 cents a gallon. In cars that get 20-24 miles per gallon, the conversion pays for itself after 18,000 miles.

"I love going on the oil recon missions," Starman said.

Whenever Puig approaches a new restaurant about donating their used oil, he gets one of two reactions: Either they say yes immediately or ask how much he charges to haul it away. When Puig says he'll haul it away for free, the restaurants are more than happy to oblige.

"If it can get some extra use, why not do it," said Ellen Kretschmer, co-owner of Kretch's Restaurant on Marco Island, where Housewert gets his fuel. "Initially, it was a little different, but it has worked out."

Kretch's has given away its vegetable oil before. One of the restaurant's salesmen drove a biofuel car, but he moved away long before Housewert came calling. By that time, the restaurant had stocked up more than 50 containers of the would-be fuel.

"I called up John and said 'Dude, we've hit the jackpot,'" Housewert said. "When you drive a veggie, it is all about finding oil."

Preparing used oil for fuel takes a couple of weeks. Containers are heated up in the Florida sun and then the oil is filtered through a sieve. To fill up, Puig has a pump made out of a garbage can and an electric motor. An extra container of oil is brought along on longer trips.

The car still runs on diesel, so drivers can stop at gas stations for fuel. "I didn't want it to be a one-fuel car," said Puig, who replaces the ashtrays in the cars with biofuel gauges.

The Web site shows do-it-yourselfers how to do the conversion. The process takes a first-timer about 30 hours, Puig said.

Puig said he first heard about vegetable oil as fuel four years ago when he was visiting a friend in Vermont. After learning a diesel engine doesn't know the difference as long as the oil is heated to at least 150 degrees, Puig got started.

His father was a NASCAR driver and he owned a mechanic's shop at their home in New Jersey, so Puig already knew about automobiles and engines. After some trial and error, and a little bit of ingenuity, his veggiemobile was born.

And so was the vegolution.

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Poll

Naples home sales figures showed March numbers improved over February. What's your 2006 outlook for the Naples housing market?

- It's the start of another great run.
- We've suffered the worst; it's slowly up from here.
- No big changes for the rest of the year.
- The market is headed slowly down.
- Crash and burn.

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Note: This is not a scientific poll. The results reflect only the opinions of those who chose to participate.

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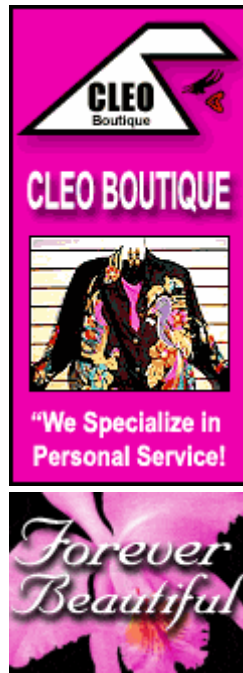


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