

The joys of a naked lunch

Maybe we didn't have to invent fire, after all. At least, that would seem to be the case for all the raw foodists out there, whose numbers are on the rise. What's a raw foodist, you ask? Definitions vary, but it's generally a person who eats little or no cooked food. "Cooked" as in food heated above 115 degrees Fahrenheit. (For some raw-food purists, even that's too high.) Oh—and it all has to be organic. Oh—and most raw foodists are also vegans, which means no animal products.

Cringing at the thought? It is scary. Let's see: that means no bread, milk, butter, cheese, eggs, meat, mashed potatoes, gravy, pasta, rice, soup, alcohol, tea, coffee. (Eeek! No coffee?) Well, you get the picture—and there doesn't seem to be much in it. What's left? Fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds. Heck, we might as well go back to the days before fire was invented. And why would we want to do that?

Well, it's like this. Energy! Vitality! Life force! People who eat mostly raw food, or "living" food as some call it, swear that they feel better and have more energy. The food, enthusiasts say, provides essential nutrients, such as enzymes, that cooking

kills. "You just feel better," says Natasha Kyssa, a raw-food coach and specialist. "You feel more vibrant, more energetic, more clear-headed. I can really feel the difference after I eat something cooked. My body just sort of shuts down while it processes cooked food. Raw foods are alive with nutrients. They're much easier to digest."

You might well ask where they get certain essential elements, such as calcium (almonds, coconut milk) and protein (nuts, seeds, and grains), but the reality is, these people know their stuff.

Chas Dietrich is so dedicated to the movement that he has opened up a retreat in the Lanark Highlands to educate people about the benefits of eating raw food. He first came to it himself almost ten years ago when he starting having health problems that the medical community couldn't diagnose. He estimates his diet is about eighty per cent raw: he eats bean soup, for example, but he's "very gentle" with heat. "Enzymes are the electricity in the food. They're the spike of life," he says. "If I start eating more cooked food, my energy level drops."

Ruth Stehr and her partner, both dedicated 100 per cent raw foodists for the past five years, recently re-lit some fire

under their food. "We were sitting down one day discussing life, the universe, and the like," Stehr explains, "and Rob said, 'Ruth, I don't want to be cold this winter. We should think about cooking.'" Turns out, Ruth was on the same wavelength, and she agreed. "You are kind of catching me at an oddball time," Stehr says as she stands at her kitchen counter preparing a raw-food feast for her guest. Chop, chip, chop, the knife methodically hits the cutting board. The food processor whirrs, and Stehr removes shredded carrots and lovingly rolls them into a deep green, speckled seaweed wrap accompanied by some slightly warm cooked organic brown rice. "I'm taking a break from eating 100 per cent raw food. I'm really not a perfect example. I like to call myself 'rationally raw Ruth,'" she says.

You might be surprised at the variety of raw food that's available. Mango pie that tastes as if it were cooked but isn't, truffles—a tad too much on the carob-y side for my liking—nut loaf, and tasty flax crackers made with one of a raw foodist's staples, the food dehydrator. And, of course, there are all those sprouts, salads, coleslaws, fruit, and cold vegetable soups. Stehr tried her hand at running a

raw-food catering business but found it too much work for too little money and returned to her job at Rainbow Natural Foods on Richmond Road. "People who are really into this are often not that well off," she says.

To some, the raw-food movement is simply a passing fad—a bandwagon to jump onto because it seems cool. Hollywood stars, such as Demi Moore and Woody Harrelson, are known to have a preference for raw food and have helped raise the profile of the movement. There's a proliferation of raw-food magazines, books, and web sites out there, dishing out recipes and information. Although Toronto boasts at least three raw-food restaurants, Ottawa hasn't made it into that league yet. Local vegetarian eateries, such as the Green Door on Main Street and The Table on Wellington Street, carry the requisite salads. So raw foodists can eat out. But Stehr says that being a raw-food purist can definitely put a damper on your social life—another reason why she decided to start eating a bit of cooked food.

So it would seem that the processing industry needn't worry about rolling up its shingle just yet, but it is true that when the demand appears (witness The Loblaw's organic-food line), so, too, will the product. Meanwhile, notes Ottawa dietician Elizabeth Mansfield, the less processed food we eat, the better. "My only hesitation with the raw-food movement is the food-safety aspect," says Mansfield, who cautions against drinking unpasteurized milk and being careful with sprouts, which can get contaminated with salmonella and *E. coli*. "Don't forget, if people are not eating well and then switch to a raw-food diet and eat better than they did before, that's a radical change. Of course, they'll feel better." If raw foodists have a passion for trying to get people to eat better, she adds, that's definitely a good thing.

My take on the three raw-food meals I've tasted so far? They were, uh, interesting. Definitely distinctive. And I

really liked the three chefs. I have total respect for anyone who sticks to the regime. But I'm afraid I won't be giving up coffee any time soon. On the other hand, the chefs interviewed for this story were pencil-thin. And they did look at least ten years younger than their actual age. Pass me some more of those damn carrot sticks! —Erin Scullion

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