

GASTRONOMICA, FEBRUARY, 2002

The Raw Deal

On a warm May evening in the basement of a midtown Manhattan building, members of a raw foods support group are hotly debating watermelon rinds. “I like to eat them,” asserts one forty-ish woman wearing a peasant blouse and Birkenstocks. “I’ve heard that all the nutrients are in the rind.”

Paul Nison, raw-foods chef, author of the self-published *The Raw Life: Becoming Natural in an Unnatural World*, and moderator of these weekly meetings, isn’t buying into the rind argument, nutrients or not. Tonight, he’s using his bully pulpit to speak out against the outer shell of melon. “You should only eat things that would be appetizing to you as they’re found in nature. I don’t think you’d want to eat a rind if you just saw it lying there in the middle of a field,” he says.

The group argues rindage for another ten minutes until the discussion eventually meanders to its natural conclusion: watermelon seeds, tasty and edible or icky and intended to be spat out? Once again, the crowd is divided, and of course the rind-lady is also a pro-seeder. “They taste good,” she insists. (Later, it’s revealed that she likes to chow on all variety of fruit pits.) After a few more minutes, the conversation winds down.

A lull. Then: “I ate a cucumber today,” says a middle-aged guy with a gray ponytail.

Next to him, another guy intones. “And I ate a yam today.”

“Yams are really good,” Paul affirms.

Welcome to the wonderful, ever-growing world of raw foods. In an unroasted nutshell, raw foodism describes a usually vegan (read: no animal products) diet in which food is not heated above 116 degrees—that means no bread, no tofu, no steamed broccoli, although dehydrated fruits, tahini and nuts are acceptable. The crux of the raw rationale is that heating food kills its enzymes and vitamins, a process which renders otherwise healthy victuals “dead.” Extinguishing fire from your culinary life does sound extreme, but a balanced raw diet can actually be healthy, says Suzanne Havala, a registered dietitian and the national adviser for the Vegetarian Resource Group. “When you think about it, what is the natural diet for primates?” she asks. “Probably raw foods.”

Paul and the support group, however, seem as driven by philosophy as health. The guiding force in all culinary decisions for these guys is the idea of natural hygiene, which posits that you should only eat food as it would be found appealing in nature. That’s why, says Paul, you wouldn’t want to eat rinds, or eat apple pits or raw onions because they taste bad. I think raw onions taste pretty good, but I am told, they don’t. I am wrong. Apparently, however, the invention of blenders, dehydrators and the like are all permissible divergences from that purity path. After all, you don’t see many wild gorillas sipping Berry Bonanza smoothies.

Quirky as it is, within the complicated hierarchy of the raw diet, natural hygiene is as mainstream as Britney Spears. It is the subculture's fringe groups that really raise the eyebrows. Like the Fruitarians, who eat only fruit (some will only eat fruit once it's fallen from the tree); And Instinctos who chomp on raw meat, and the noble Breatharians—or no-foodists—who pretty much try to not eat anything.

Raw foodists love to point out that the uncooked diet is the original human diet. We just went off track for a few eons, that's all. In the early 19th century, various doctors, scientists and naturalists touted the raw way, but only in the last two decades or so has the movement gained momentum. In the last five years, raw has gone wired and gained even more supporters. Well, relatively speaking. Raw foodists comprise an infinitesimal fraction of the 1 to 2 percent of Americans who are vegetarians. There are maybe 15 raw restaurants total around the country. Not surprisingly, the movement is biggest in California, the land of crystals, meditation and the home-turf of the movement's punkish, puckish poster-boy, celebrity chef Juliano (just Juliano), author of *The UnCook Book*.

But as testament to its tenacity, raw foodism has even managed to take root in New York City, arguably one of the most artificial locales on earth. In a place in which fields of organic produce are but a fantasy, and where denizens slavishly follow the latest food-trend like religion, the idea of only eating uncooked fruits, veggies and nuts is to most people, well, nuts. In Manhattan, it's hard enough making friends at the office, so imagine how difficult it is to find folks who share your meal-time idiosyncrasies and who understand the social alienation such a lifestyle can wreak. Hence the Gotham raw foodists rely both on

these support groups and on monthly potlucks to keep them connected. In that, they are following age-old rituals using food as a cement to bind the community. But whereas with your communities of witch covens or punk rockers or Hell's Angels all have some common life experience or obsession that keeps them bonded—be it spells, Sid Vicious or a love of leather and grease—for raw foodists the community is the food.

And it shows. At the monthly raw-foods potluck dinner in that same midtown basement, food chit-chat dominates. Raw-foodists talk in their own argot of acronyms (like S.A.D., short for Standard American Diet, which the rest of us saps eat) and they love to speak in percentages. Where at an AA meeting you might introduce yourself by first name and alcoholic status, here everyone immediately discusses their raw ratio. "I'm about 90 percent," says Ed, a middle-aged guy in with a gray speckled beard. "Oh I'm at 60/40," Linda, a cheerful redhead tells me. When Karen, a New Jersey soccer mom tells me that her two children, Gabriela and Marco, are nearly 100 percent raw, she sounds like any other suburban mom bragging about her kids' accomplishments.

Talk also revolves around recipes and food conspiracy-theories, of which some of the latter are positively X-Files worthy. Like the widely held belief that diseases as we know them are hoaxes. "There is no AIDS, there is no cancer. There's just one disease and it's called toxemia and it's caused by eating dead food," says Paul, who's been raw since he became sick with colitis, or Toxemia as he now diagnoses it, in 1991. "Eating a live-foods diet will cure almost any disease. I know it cured me."

A young woman named Audrey takes the food-as-pollutant notion a step further. She thinks all food is just kinda bad for you. "Raw foods is not a

guarantee of health. The problem is how much we eat. That's why I want to be no-foodist," she says. "I want to eat as little as possible. I'd like to just eat nuts." What about water? I ask. "No. I'm not too crazy about water."

As you might guess, Audrey is rail-thin. In fact, the folks in attendance while incredibly diverse (you've got your hippies, your suburbanites, your hipsters) share one trait: They're all some variation of skinny: from pleasantly slim to get-thee-to-an-eating-disorders-clinic emaciated. And looking at the pot-luck-pickings, it's no wonder why. One table is smattered with a few paper plates of strawberries, bananas, melon, a half-dozen mangoes—and some untouched red globe grapes with an ominous toothpick sign over them warning "not organic." (Yep, my contribution.) Another table sports Tupperware containers full of cold pea soup, salad, carrot sticks and tomatoes. This for 50 people. There are some really tasty morsels. Chef Paul made Nori rolls (crushed almonds, hazelnuts, red pepper, carrots, celery, tahini and soy sauce wrapped in dried seaweed) and Ed whipped up some yummy brownies made of crushed dried fruit and nuts. These delicacies disappear within the first half hour.

The most buzz-producing dish of the potluck was the durian, which arrived late in the evening. The durian fruit grows in Malaysia and Thailand and resembles a sword-encrusted pineapple. Once cracked open, however, it is more redolent of rotten egg. Novice durian tasters are advised to hold their noses while eating the fatty white flesh, which, if you can get beyond the gag reflex, tastes sweet. When Paul, wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with Durian King in a Burger King logo, sliced into the flesh, everyone lunged for the table, their plastic desert plates outstretched. "It's like he's carving the Thanksgiving turkey," one guy said,

and I swear I detected a little turkey-lust in his eye.

I don't know that I've ever even seen a group of restaurant-obsessed Manhattan foodies wax as ecstatic about a meal as the raw-folks were over their beloved durian. It all seemed strangely over-the-top. But then again, the raw foods lifestyle, while based on everything from health to environment, is deeply rooted in deprivation—both of food and of a social life. No one comes out and tells you this; they'll say that it is all about doing what's healthy. But everyone is quick to point out how the rest of the world, we the eaters of the S.A.D., don't understand raw-foodists and that it is our penchant for hamburgers and seared ahi that forces them to barricade themselves in private worlds of dehydrated apples and lettuce with lemon juice. Dating in the raw is notoriously difficult. For every Angela, a big-haired personal trainer who says her love life is just dandy—"I can date a guy who eats a Twinkie as long as he thinks about it," she says—there are three Eds. Ed says he just can't stomach dating we dead-food ladies. "You just smell like spoiled cheese," he says, quickly reassuring me that I don't wreak of rancid. Still, not the best way to score dates.

So it's not surprising that "Solitude of the journey," is a big theme among this lot. "I don't go out much," says Misty, a dreadlocked thirtysomething who's been raw for a year. "I can accept other people but they can't accept me." For one night a month, though, raw-foodists like Misty and Ed get to indulge both in the stinky pleasures of communal durian tastings and the poignant pleasures of not being the only weirdo in the room.