

The gourmet restaurant with raw ambition

Raw food is the cool culinary trend from the US that is taking off over here. Fiona Sims says it looks good and tastes good, but does it do you good? Amanda Ursell assesses its nutritional value

The beetroot ravioli is looking good; tasting good, too, considering that it's not made with pasta. The beetroot acts as the parcel, cut into two paper-thin discs. The stuffing is a cashew herb "ricotta", and it's served with an asparagus salad and balsamic figs, finished off with a slick of pumpkin seed oil. Sounds good, doesn't it? And it is. So is the rest of the meal at Saf, London's first gourmet raw food restaurant, which opened in the East End in April.

Raw, you say? Nothing is cooked over 48C. And we're not talking beef carpaccio or tuna sashimi — we're talking raw, organic vegetables that never reach boiling point, plus a few fruits and nuts. It even has a label: "living foods", an offshoot of veganism. And before you say, oh surely that's just a hangover from hippy days, even the top Chicago chef Charlie Trotter is into it.

According to raw foodists, as they call themselves, cooking denatures the proteins in our food, rendering them harder to digest and use. It destroys 50 per cent of the protein and between 50 and 80 per cent of all vitamins and minerals; while pesticides break down into more toxic compounds when cooked, not to mention the lost oxygen and production of free

radicals. But most importantly, they will tell you, longevity-promoting enzymes are destroyed when food is heated above 48C.

I first came across raw food in 2002 at a restaurant called Roxanne's, in Larkspur, north of San Francisco. It had notched up considerable praise and attracted a wide following. The chef proprietor, Roxanne Klein, and her husband and business partner, Michael, had switched to a raw food diet five years earlier. "We thought we'd give it a go for a month. But when the time was up, our bodies just went 'wow'," she told

me. Apart from the significant boost to their energy levels and general wellbeing, they also found that they needed less sleep.

While it caught on among celebrities and fashion types, the raw food bug never really bit over here, until recently. "I think London is now ready for this," says Chad Sarno, the Saf chain's executive chef, a 31-year-old American who has travelled the world studying traditional ingredients and methods of food preparation. "The foundation of raw food will always be nutrition. It's something everyone can embrace, especially now, with obesity and diabetes at an all-time high."

There are vegan restaurants already in the capital, but nothing that looks (and tastes) like this. How big will it get? "It's a growing awareness. I want this to stand up to any top restaurant in London. When I create a dish, it's the first time it's been done. Gastronomy is the focus," says Sarno, throwing down the gauntlet.

I wonder what other chefs will make of it? They could learn a thing or two, certainly. The vegetarian offering in the vast majority of top restaurants is pathetic. Ask Sarno who his mentor is and he'll say Charlie Trotter. Not because he offers a highly inspirational raw food menu, but because of the way the rest of his dishes are constructed: the focus is on health rather than hedonism, and you don't walk out bloated, even after 20 courses (it's true, I've done it).

Committed to healthy living

As well as London, there are three Saf restaurants in Istanbul and one in Munich, which opened a few months ago. The owner, Ersin Pamuksüzer, is Turkish, and runs a company called The LifeCo, with a detox centre in Bodrum, western Turkey, with more planned



throughout the world.

Though equally committed, Sarno isn't at all preachy; he just looks like a normal bloke. "I like a drink — I'm a regular guy," he grins. He grew up in a standard American household, eat-

ing regular American food. It was only when his asthma got too much 12 years ago that he switched to eating vegan and raw. "The symptoms just stopped," he says, shrugging his shoulders.

He's not a trained chef either; he learnt his trade on the hop while working with other chefs; then in private homes (he counts the actor Woody Harrelson as a mate) and at culinary schools. "I've had my days preaching — not many people listened," he laughs.

Well, I'm listening. I left Saf still feeling perky after a nine-course tasting menu (it costs £65, or £35 for five courses), which included cucumber consommé, mushroom croquettes and courgette lasagne. I was marvelling at the lack of clothes-clinging cooking smells emanating from the open kitchen. Saf has the tiniest oven (it's not all raw food here: there are four cooked dishes on the menu). There's another kitchen in the basement — huge enough for Saf's ten chefs (no Brits among them, incidentally; the head chef here is South African, David Bailey), where most of the action takes place.

Nuts and seeds are soaked for up to ten hours before being used. "They're easier to work with, more nutritious and less calorific, too," Sarno says. He uses them to make dairy-free cheese and milk. The pine-nut parmesan, for example, is dehydrated, then ground to resemble the cheese. The dehydrator, also used to reconstitute vegetables, is an essential bit of kit for the raw food kitchen and I count seven of them.

And there's the rub — raw is rather tricky to do at home. "Nonsense. None of my recipes takes more than 20 minutes to prepare," says Kate Wood, the author of three cookery books on raw food, her latest is *Raw Magic* (Rawcreation, £17.99). She's based in Brighton, the UK's raw food capital.

"I wanted to feel the best that I could"

Wood, 37, is the mother of three raw boys. Her kids (the eldest is 10) eschew McDonald's in favour of an omega 3-packed hemp burger with coriander ketchup. OK, so she's teetotal, does yoga, uses flower remedies, cycles everywhere and educates her children at home, but she claims that none of the family has been anywhere near a doctor in three years. She reckons

that she spends up to two hours a day in the kitchen. "But then I make everything from the

bread to the spread I put on it, all my crackers and puddings," she says. She switched from being a vegan to a raw food diet when she was 22: "I wanted to feel the best I could — and I do feel more alive." You have to be eating at least 50 per cent raw to feel the benefits, she advises. "It's like learning a new language; once you've got the basic grammar, it gets much easier."

You could just cheat and get someone else to prepare it for you. For £22.50 per person a day, Raw Fairies (www.rawfairies.com) will deliver to your door. Operating since December, it's the country's first raw food delivery service, albeit restricted for now to Central London.

"Raw has been slow to pick up over here partly because of our climate; it works really well on a beach in LA! But we are getting more interest in it every day," says Midi Fairgrieve, the nutritionist and co-founder of Raw Fairies, which sends out 2,000 meals a day from its West London kitchen.

I tried it for a day, starting with granola with nut milk, oat cookies mid-morning, a stir-fry for lunch, and sweet potato pasta with nut balls and a side salad of kale, avocado and sprouts. It was a cold, rainy day, but I resisted the temptation to heat it all up, and was left feeling perhaps a bit peckish — but very virtuous.

Saf Restaurant, 152 Curtain Road, London EC2, 020-7613 0007; www.safrestaurant.co.uk



In Los Angeles, raw food is nothing new. The actress Demi Moore allegedly lost 1st five years ago when she started following what is essentially an uncooked vegan regimen. If you exist on uncooked vegetables, seaweed, fruits, nuts, seeds and little else, it is not surprising that excess pounds will fall away.

Its followers also say that switching to raw food makes you feel more energised. This may be true. Losing weight can give you a high, and weeding out sweets, cakes, biscuits, fast food and takeaways will smooth out your blood sugar levels, leaving you more energised throughout the day.

However, a raw food regimen is not just another diet, it's a way of life that requires

serious commitment to reap the health benefits, and the long-term implications need to be considered carefully.

Replacing nutrients

Cutting out meat, fish, eggs, dairy foods and cereal grains would result in the loss of many nutrients. My advice is first to master a healthy and nutritionally complete vegan diet before progressing to raw food. This means making sure that you get enough protein from nuts, seeds and pulses. For bone-strengthening calcium you need plenty of sesame seeds, almonds, figs and dark green vegetables. Soy beans are also a reasonable source.

For iron you can turn to watercress, spinach, cashew nuts, peanuts, dried figs and prunes. The large amounts of fruit and vegetables eaten mean that you will easily hit your "five a day" target (one portion is about 80g of fruit or veg: an apple or pear, for example, or a couple of tablespoons of veg such as broccoli or cauliflower), so you will be fine for vitamin C and E. For vitamin D, in the UK you need to ensure that you get enough sunlight in summer to build up your body's stores for the winter.

As for micronutrients such as zinc, selenium and vitamin B12, I would take a general, vegan-approved vitamin and mineral supplement, although this is probably frowned on by raw food purists.

Young and old

Susan Price, a spokeswoman for the British Dietetic Association, says that she has concerns over a raw food way of life being suitable for children, the elderly and for pregnant and breast-feeding women. Price, a specialist in gastroenterology, says the high fibre intake could exacerbate IBS.

The Vegan Society: www.vegansociety.com, 0121-523 1730 (www.amandaursell.com)



The new Saf restaurant in East London, top, and beetroot ravioli with cashew herb ricotta



In the raw: soft cashew cheese with sun-dried tomato, olive and herbs and crisp flatbreads, above; and, left, pine nut parmesan and black crimson tomato

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