

# RAW THING

STILL SPENDING HOURS SLAVING OVER A HOT STOVE? IT'S NOT FEMINISM YOU NEED, IT'S A NEW EATING REGIME

BY HESTER LACEY PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUE WILSON

Most of us hate cleaning the cooker. But there is a solution to dealing with this tedious chore – and it's a bit more radical than getting out the rubber gloves and Mr Muscle. Simply get rid of the thing. This may seem drastic but a growing number of people in this country are doing just that: rejecting cooking and eating their food raw instead. Raw foodists exist on a diet that consists mainly of fresh fruits and vegetables, plus seeds, nuts and seaweeds. The principle behind this regime is that the heat involved in cooking destroys the natural plant enzymes which aid digestion. Because of this, it's claimed eating any cooked food at all (even ones that are conventionally considered 'healthy') puts a great strain on the digestive system and health in general. Raw foods on the other hand, are easy to digest, keep the system in tip-top form and is as nature has always intended. The most purist of all raw food eaters are those who stick to 'living foods'. These are not only raw but 'alive' – sprouted seeds, greens eaten minutes after harvesting, and ultra-fresh juices, vegetables and fruits. They already contain all the enzymes needed to digest them – in fact, they virtually digest themselves. But they don't come in pre-packed bags from the supermarket. In fact, when I first entered the kitchen at Elaine Bruce's Shropshire home, I didn't think they came in anything or from anywhere – I couldn't see any food to eat at all. Elaine Bruce runs courses on 'going rawganic', teaching the Living Foods Programme, and is used to this reaction. She shows me the fridge, packed with ▶



## The raw food philosophy encourages people to take responsibility for what they eat

◀ fresh, organic vegetables, the jars that line the shelves, full of sprouting shoots, the trays of emerald-green wheatgrass in various stages of readiness and explains that her cooker is used for little more than the occasional pot of potassium-rich broth (ingredients: potato peelings, carrots, celery, parsley, onions, garlic, seaweed). It's these products of Elaine's 'living kitchen' which she lives on and which she is going to teach me to live on – and like.

Before I went on Elaine's two-day living foods introductory course, I felt quite smug. Converting from an omnivorous diet over a single weekend would have been a shock I don't think I could have coped with, so I'd done some preparation and was feeling very proud of having got to a stage where I was already eating fruit for breakfast and salad for lunch. Despite a few lapses, I'd already noticed the positive effects of all this crunchy stuff. But I soon realised that what I'd achieved was the equivalent of spending a few Sunday afternoons at the local dry ski slope then blithely heading off to try out a black run in the Alps. The Living Foods Programme was devised in the States by Dr Ann Wigmore 30 years ago, and for the novice it requires not only a change of eating habits but a change of thinking as well.

There were eight of us on the course, and the first thing that Elaine showed us were the basic principles of growing your own living foods. To keep a good supply going, you have to keep a rota of seed trays at different stages of readiness (and be able to lay hands on lots of good compost). Sunflower, buckwheat and wheatgrass seeds are soaked and put in the dark for a few days to germinate, then moved into the light for a little longer until they have turned green and are ready to eat or juice; while sprouted seeds live in jars: chickpeas, lentils, adzuki and mung beans, and alfalfa, the most nutritious of all. The chickpeas can be whizzed up into hummus, while a mixture of sunflower, pumpkin and sesame seeds becomes a purée called seed sauce (the food processor becomes the second most important piece of equipment in the kitchen, after the juicer). And if seed sauce is allowed to ferment for a little while it becomes seed cheese, which can be used for various recipes. While cooking is forbidden, fermentation is fine. Red cabbage becomes sauerkraut. Wheat is soaked in pure water in large jars to make a cloudy liquid called rejuvelac, an enzyme-rich elixir to be drunk every day.

All these trays and jars take space; but you won't be needing any saucepans, so as well as losing the cooker you could pull out a few cupboards. Something else you'll save on are flavourings and spices. Fresh herbs are allowed, but no salt and pepper, no chilli or oil or soya. And this was the real rub for me. Rejuvelac was fine, it has a vague citrus taste. Wheatgrass juice, which some

vinaigrette! Cabbage delight (grated cabbage, celery, sunflower and lentil sprouts) and walnut loaf (walnuts, courgettes, celery and red pepper) were like eating cotton wool: I couldn't taste a thing. This, says Elaine, is completely normal. 'After a while you stop craving strong sweet or spicy flavours. It's a signal that your system is tired – you think you need these very strong tastes. If you curb these appetites for a few weeks, you start to taste the flavours of fresh food again.'

The Living Foods Programme philosophy is that eating should be less about taste than about nutrition, which is hard for a conventional eater to take on board. But Elaine, who is also a naturopath, homeopath, and trained in the use of Chinese medicine, is a convincing advert for her own arguments: far from being pale, wan and starved-looking, she is lively and bouncing with energy. Her basic suggestions for anyone who wants to take the first steps towards a better diet are to invest in a good juicer and drink lots of water – excellent advice for anyone anyway. Recent controversy over genetically-modified foods and food additives has led to a sudden surge of interest in raw food, according to Karen Knowler, co-ordinator of the FRESH Network, an advice and support system for those who are interested in raw food diets. 'There is a huge demand for information – people can't get enough,' says Karen. 'We are getting all sorts of members including nurses, doctors, teachers, software engineers, tax advisors – more and more professional people.' There are around 3,000 on the FRESH Network mailing list and not all have gone the whole hog (as it were) to 100 per cent raw eating – the spectrum ranges from vegetarians and vegans at one end to raw veggies and fruitarians at the other. 'Not everyone wants to be 100 per cent raw,' says Karen. 'You have to do what's right for you.' She herself has been eating totally raw food for two years, and is enthusiastic about the benefits: 'My hair, skin and nails have dramatically improved, my senses have been heightened and I feel very sharp mentally. I've gradually lost weight, and stabilised at my natural shape. And I don't pick up colds and bugs any more – and I've got so much energy.' Karen believes that the current popularity of organic foods and fresh juice bars are a pointer towards the future: 'People are becoming more and more conscious of what they eat and I think that will keep going and going.'

In Canada and the US, home of the Living Foods Programme, raw food regimes are already well-established. Nomi Shannon is the author of *The Raw Gourmet*, a recipe book for raw eaters published in the States but available here (see Raw Information box). 'I want to show that raw food is not just salads,' she says.



food that looks good and tastes good.' She also thinks that the ease of raw food is a benefit: 'For some things you don't even need a recipe; you can eat a red pepper just as you would an apple, or carry celery or peppers to eat instead of crisps and biscuits.' According to Nomi, eating raw food is also economical, both financially: 'It might be expensive to buy mangoes, but roast beef costs even more and you aren't spending on that'; and time-wise: 'You might be chopping for longer, but there's hardly any washing up. Making a soup takes 10 or 15 minutes, or even less. Lots of the salads and dressings take just a few minutes.' Some of the recipes are particularly suitable for exercisers, she adds: 'Vanilla Bliss contains water, tahini and frozen bananas. It's very digestible, high in calcium and protein, and absolutely delicious.'

Some conventional nutritionists are suspicious of raw food diets, believing that they may lead to nutritional deficiencies; but others are enthusiastic about the benefits. Esther Mills is a registered public health nutritionist with a BSc in Nutritional Biochemistry. 'It's true that many orthodox nutritionists presume that once a person is on a plant-based diet, they are on a one-way ticket to ill health, fatigue and deficiency syndromes,' she says. 'But research does show that eating a raw food diet can be more healthy than typical Western diets. While many people in the UK struggle to eat more than the average two portions of fresh fruit and vegetables a day, raw food eaters easily achieve the five portions that we are all

being urged to eat.' Careful planning is important, she says, but raw food eaters who combine these fresh foods with good portions of nuts, seeds and pulses can easily take in a wide spectrum of nutrients. 'As a nutritionist, I used to get tired of spelling out the suggestion that people need to up their intakes of nutritious, non-processed foods. Now I use the principles of raw food eating. This way people understand that they choose what goes into their mouths. The raw food philosophy encourages people to take responsibility for what they eat.' Elaine Bruce agrees. Her philosophy is about taking responsibility. 'We are grown-ups and we make our own choices,' she reiterates. Her ultimate aim is that all her pupils stay healthy, hale and hearty right up until they die – no mean aspiration. ■

### RAW INFORMATION

Elaine Bruce runs a variety of courses, from an introductory weekend to two weeks. Call 01584 875308 for details or check out her website at [www.livingfoods.co.uk](http://www.livingfoods.co.uk). A year's subscription to the FRESH Network costs £12.50. For regular mailings, newsletters and invitations to events and lectures, call 0870 8007070 or go to [www.fresh-network.com](http://www.fresh-network.com). Nomi Shannon's *The Raw Gourmet* (Alive Books, ISBN 0 920470 48 3) is available from the FRESH Network (see above) or Savant Distributors (tel: 0113 230 1993).