

The low-weight, low-carbon diet

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Traditional eating ... simply cooked foods are good for your health as well as your taste buds. *Photo: Marina Oliphant*

Forget truffles, wagyu beef and caviar. The latest culinary status symbol is peasant food. And the fact it's apparently good for you is only adding to its appeal.

"The tomato is such a complex food," a doctor recently mused at a dinner party attended by *Financial Times* writer Simon Kuper, who was horrified. "Oddly, these people are seeking status by aping the actions of peasants," Kuper wrote after the fact. "[They] now buy raw food that is still growing in their shopping basket."

He's not wrong.



The raw deal ...unprocessed ingredients are in vogue and better for your health. Photo: Illustration by Jenny Bowman

One only has to glance at the bookshop shelves that have started to groan under the weight of tomes focusing on foods that one can easily picture a farmer lunching on hundreds of years ago (or a hippie eating whenever): ancient grains, locally grown leafy greens, stews using cheap animal bits such as gizzards and offal, and fish. (Examples include *The Whole Beast: Nose to Tail Eating* by Fergus Henderson and *European Peasant Cookery* by Elisabeth Luard, which was recently rereleased after its initial publication in 1986.)

"Prior to the last five years, it had probably only been people who shopped in health food stores [who were interested in these types of foods]," nutritionist Dr Joanna McMillan says. "Now even Helga's has done a spelt bread. It's the latest trendy thing."

This isn't the first time the fad has hit. In 1986, *The New York Times* asked: "Pure Food: The Status Symbol of the Decade; Who Buys It?"

But back then, eggs from uncaged hens and unhomogenised milk were a gustatory backlash to the domination of mass-produced supermarket fare, which became available in the 1960s and by the '70s had become its own status symbol.

The head of the dietetics department at La Trobe University and a Dietitians Association of Australia spokeswoman, Catherine Itsiopoulos, says the fad's latest incarnation is linked with the Slow Food movement and environmental concerns.

The former, she says, encourages "traditional eating habits" of simply cooked foods enhanced by long cooking times. "Also, the concept of food miles and eating food that is locally grown, fresh around you and pesticide-free [has become popular]," she says.

But is so-called peasant food really better for us? Or should we be as sceptical about it as many still are of organic food, which is hotly debated in terms of the health benefits it provides?

If we eat the way people who worked the land traditionally did - regardless of region, whether it be Yeung Chow fried rice with small bits of pork, prawn and peas in China or polenta with fresh tomato and basil in Spain - then yes, say experts.

This is because they weren't eating processed foods, much animal protein or sweets and instead ate a diet heavy in legumes, carbohydrates, fruits and leafy vegetables, Itsiopoulos says.

"You're minimising your intake of saturated animal fats, [the diet] is nutritionally rich and there is less salt and sugar [than in processed foods]," she says. "The foods also weren't stored for extended periods, [which can cause] loss of vitamin C or other nutrients."

Traditional peasant foods are also obviously good for weight loss, as most were nutrient dense but low in calories. And, McMillan notes, "there is anecdotal evidence that some people tolerate [ancient grains]" - such as quinoa, spelt and Kamut - "better than wheat".

In general, she says, the trend is positive as "it's about bringing the focus back on the quality of food, instead of thinking we can produce something in a factory that's healthier for us because it makes fat unavailable, or limits calories."

But what of those who might criticise the fad for linking it with people who are perceived to have had relatively brutal and short lives?

Rubbish, McMillan says. "Even going back to hunter-gatherer days ... [people] didn't die when they were 40 because of lack of nutrition but because they were eaten by a lion or stabbed by a spear," she says. "And the ones who didn't, actually lived very, very long lives."



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