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What's Not Cooking?

Some health-conscious consumers like it raw

by Suzanne Podhaizer (11/01/06).

When Diana Kennedy, the grande dame of Mexican cooking, makes enchiladas, she blends meat, various chile peppers, spices and queso fresco cheese. The filling is wrapped in fried corn tortillas and smothered in a complex sauce. But when Linda Wooliever of Worcester, Vermont, makes enchiladas, she blends minced veggies, spices and olive oil. The filling is wrapped in a dehydrated corn and orange juice "tortilla" and topped with fresh salsa. No cooking necessary; no meat or cheese allowed. If this recipe sounds a little out of the ordinary, it's not surprising — Wooliever is a "raw fooder," and her enchiladas follow the precepts of the living food, or raw food, diet.

In a culture where making dinner for friends means quizzing each one about dietary restrictions, do we really need another food fad? To critics, the raw phenomenon seems like a silly trend that makes it more difficult for people to get three squares a day, and nutritionists quibble with much of its scientific basis. For people like Wooliever, who teaches raw food classes and workshops at her home in Worcester, living food is a lifestyle — one that's made such a difference in the quality of her life that she says she could never return to a diet of cooked food.

Wooliever, 36, began experimenting with raw foods in 2001, shortly after giving birth to her daughter in Maryland. She had been suffering from a systemic overgrowth of a yeast called *Candida*, which can lead to infection, oral thrush, extreme fatigue and a general feeling of malaise. To top it off, Wooliever was hypoglycemic. After adopting a living diet, she found that both conditions disappeared. She lost 30 pounds in six months without feeling hungry or deprived.

The dramatic weight loss was an unexpected benefit. Wooliever had tried many other diets — Jenny Craig, South Beach, The Zone, Eat Right for Your Blood Type, etc. — and "couldn't wait to be off of those diets. Where other things weren't working," she says, "the raw food diet worked like a charm."

But, after moving to Vermont, Wooliever started cheating. She wanted to try all the foods the state had to offer, including local meats and even the occasional creamer. "The cooked food I was eating is considered beautiful by most people," Wooliever says, "organic, local food from scratch." But within six months, she began to get perimenopausal



LINDA WOOLIEVER
PHOTO COURTESY OF PAT HAZOURI

symptoms — “anxiety, hot flashes, arthritic pain and abdominal pain.”

by Suzanne Podhaizer (11/08/06).

A visit to the doctor resulted in prescriptions for antidepressants and birth control pills, but they didn't help. When Wooliever gravitated back to raw food, “the symptoms went away almost immediately,” she says. In order to learn how to share her success with others, she took classes with raw-food guru Alissa Cohen of Kittery, Maine, and is now certified to pass on Cohen's teachings.

So what exactly *is* a living diet? Definitions vary. Some living fooders will eat raw fish or meat and unpasteurized dairy products, but Cohen's version is vegan. In her book *Living on Live Food*, Cohen writes, “Raw and living food consists of uncooked fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and *sprouted* grains.” Condiments and flavorings such as apple cider vinegar, raw honey, Bragg liquid aminos, spices and unrefined sea salt are also approved.

Although a living-food diet consists mainly of low-calorie items — with the exception of nuts, olive oil and avocados — practitioners generally deny that the weight loss and improvements in health are due simply to consuming fewer calories and increasing fiber, vitamins and antioxidants. They believe that the enzyme content of the food they eat results in the “glow” of good health, and makes the difference between live food and “dead” food so pronounced.

Enzymes are crucial to digestion. Salivary amylase begins breaking down starches as soon as you start to chew. Other enzymes come into play once food reaches the stomach, and even more are found in the small intestine, where the bulk of digestion occurs. But the body manufactures these enzymes, so why do we need more of them? Raw fooders recommend consuming foods that haven't been heated above 112 degrees Fahrenheit — the temperature at which enzymes are deactivated — in order to help the body digest foods more easily. Not doing so, they say, is harmful and ultimately deadly.

Although nutritionists generally believe in the value of raw foods and think that most Americans should eat more of them, many disagree with the enzyme hypothesis. Robert S. Tyzbit, professor of nutrition and food sciences at the University of Vermont, says that cooking — like sprouting and fermenting, which are accepted by raw fooders — is actually a way to “pre-digest” food and make it easier for the body to break it down. Although enzymes are important, “the digestive process for humans is fine the way it is,” he says. “You can take protease enzymes and ingest them, and it will help break proteins down, but without those [extra] enzymes, they will still get completely broken down.” Tyzbit points out, “The human body needs a balance of all foods to get all nutrients in the quantity needed . . . The minute you start eliminating foods, you're putting yourself in jeopardy. The more foods you eliminate, the greater the jeopardy becomes.”

Cooked food is consumed by every civilization in the world, including the Inuit, who also enjoy raw seal meat, and the people of Okinawa, who are said to be the world's healthiest. This makes skeptics doubt the validity of the raw-fooders' claims. If this is really the best way to eat, and raw food has always been available, why hasn't anybody figured it out before?

But Wooliever says, “I don't think anybody realizes how great you can feel until you try it for yourself.”

As with any other regimen, she suggests focusing on the raw diet's positive aspects and not worrying about what you can't have. Indeed, many of the recipes in Cohen's book sound delicious, such as the pesto-stuffed mushrooms, avocado chutney, marinara sauce and a spicy pumpkin pie with an almond-date crust.

But how exactly does one “cook” without heat? Wooliever uses a few essential pieces of equipment for most of her food preparation: a blender, a dehydrator and a juicer. While the blender and juicer are fairly crucial and used in many raw recipes, the dehydrator allows her to take her raw food to the next step. “Breads,” “wraps,” and “crackers” can be made in the dehydrator, along with “tortillas” — for her enchiladas, of course.

Wooliever would like to help create a raw-food community in Vermont, and hopes that her classes and services will help others enjoy the same benefits she does. And, unlike some raw fooders who are preachy and intolerant of those who don't make the same choices, Wooliever is passionate but open-minded. “My goal is to help people learn how easy it is . . . to incorporate more of this food,” she says. “I feel that some people will benefit from more protein and some will benefit from more fruit, and we all benefit from more fresh, green smoothies! I'm not necessarily looking to convert people to 100 percent raw, but am excited to show people how to incorporate this into their lifestyle.”

Adding raw food to any kind of diet is widely considered to be a good move health-wise; it will increase fiber and boost intake of vitamins and antioxidants. Plus, the healthy veggies will almost certainly replace something that is higher in calories and lower in nutrients — even if you take the raw-food science with a few grains of unrefined sea salt.

To learn more about Linda Wooliever's classes, monthly potlucks, catering and about raw food challenges, contact her at linda@vt-fiddle.com or visit www.rawvermont.com.

Other informative websites:

www.aliveandraw.com
www.thegardendiet.com
www.alissacohen.com
www.beyondveg.com

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