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Keep it raw: How not to cook

No frying, boiling, roasting or toasting – this is food in its purest form. If you think preparing it must be simple, think again.

BY SANJIDA O'CONNELL | THURSDAY 11 JUNE 2009

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A raw-food vegan meal sounds quite a scary prospect: one imagines a plate of grated carrots and mung bean shoots with a chaser of wheatgrass that you'd be bored of chewing before you could clear your plate. It sounds like the sort of meal that's followed by a visit to the chip shop. Saf, though, is not marketed as a raw food vegan restaurant – rather it sells "pure botanical cuisine". The wines are fine and the cocktails are decadent. The "botanical" menu for the Shoreditch-based restaurant is created by executive chef, Chad Sarno, who takes three attempts to make me a cup of coffee. The first is cold, the second is weak and the third is perfect. Perhaps it's no surprise: Sarno was once such a neurotic raw foodist he refused to touch anything as hot as a cup of tea. Today, he is going to teach me his culinary arts.

Sarno, who is from Maine, was an asthmatic child who had attacks every month. When he cut out dairy products he started to feel better. To begin with, Sarno used raw foods as a cleanser. Raw foodies believe that heating foods above 48C kills the enzymes in fruit and vegetables. Apparently we are all born with a set amount of digestive enzymes and when they run low, we run into trouble. "An apple," says Sarno, "has enough enzymes to digest itself. The body doesn't have to break it down, the apple does it for you."

I'm sceptical. In 2007, Harvard-based primatologist Professor Richard Wrangham published a paper on why we have such big brains. He figured that we simply couldn't eat enough calories to sustain our large brains (which use a quarter of our daily calories) just by eating raw foods. He calculated that our hominid ancestors would have had to eat roughly 6kg of raw plant matter

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a day. Wrangham also looked at a German raw food commune: most of the women were so malnourished their periods had stopped. Wrangham hypothesised that we learnt to cook and boosted our brain power by toasting tubers in the embers of fires to release nourishment and neutralise toxins (imagine having to eat raw potato).

Sarno ignores the conundrum of toxic veg that require cooking and tells me he became more dedicated to his diet, eating only vegan raw food for six years. Five days a week he'd have kale salad. During this time, he didn't suffer from any allergies, had no asthma attacks, and didn't even catch a cold. "I wanted to figure out how to reach more people and convince them about raw food but I realised that salads definitely wasn't the way," says Sarno. "What we are drawn to is the emotional addiction of food – fat, sugar and salt." So Sarno worked on creating a raw food menu that was loaded with fat, sugar and salt – but the healthy varieties. The fat comes from avocados, coconut butter, olive oil, the sugar from maple or agave syrup, the salt from tamari, a wheat-free soy sauce, or oak-smoked sea salt.

We start with breakfast. Sarno whips up an almond milk by soaking almonds overnight and then blending them with water, cinnamon, vanilla essence, agave syrup (from the agave cactus) and mesquite powder, which comes from Peru and makes the drink taste like Ovaltine. After straining the milk, he makes it into a raspberry smoothie that has, bizarrely, a grind of black pepper, and adds it to a granola. The granola is made with nuts and seeds that were soaked then blended. It seems raw food recipes require an industrial-strength blender, not to mention a hefty dose of forward planning. "But once you get into the flow, it becomes second nature," says Sarno.

The chef's philosophy is that everything needs to have a fat, an acid and a salt in it to make it taste good. "With raw foods you have to make the base product – instead of using a base like potato or pasta," he says.

As well as a spice grinder, a mandolin, a food processor, a micro zester and a juicer, to be a true raw fooder, you also need a dehydrator. This heats the food up to 48C without harming any enzymes. We make samosas, which are hugely complicated and require extensive use of the dehydrator. We start with "pastry", which can be modified to make crackers or even a pizza base. The key ingredient is flax – the seeds are ground and then mixed with water to create what looks like wallpaper paste. As it's for samosa skin, courgettes, apples and pine nuts are blended together and added to the flax to form a very thin batter (the pectin in the apple helps to make it flexible). Next you need a sheet of rubbery stuff called Teflex. Sarno pours the batter over the sheet and sticks it in the dehydrator. After two hours, you turn it over and after another hour, it's ready. It's now a thin, golden, pliable pastry, which he cuts into long strips.

The filling is made by food-processing parsnips and adding them to chopped carrots and courgettes, with a blended mix of pine nuts, lemon juice, olive oil and garam masala. Sarno shows me how to make a samosa. You start off with a bit of mix in the corner and lift the samosa skin over it to make a fat triangle. Then he does a funny folding thing, a sort of raw food origami, and there is a perfect samosa. Which will go back into the

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dehydrator for a short while and is served with mango chutney made with fresh mango and rehydrated dried mango.

As Sarno makes vegan raw food cheese (out of soaked ground cashews fermented with probiotics, drained, pressed and then pushed into a terrine with a layer of raw pesto and sprinkled with crushed pink peppercorns) I ask him how long it takes to cook for himself. "This is luxury, high-end food that I might do for a dinner party," he says, turning out the cheese and laying slices on a plate, garnishing it with micro-rocket, heirloom tomato slices and glazing it with a white balsamic syrup, "But you could spend a couple of hours at the weekend cranking out snacks, cheeses, crackers, sauces and marinades and then you'd have them for the week." I think that I have just spent two hours myself cranking out food – bread, fruit compote, coleslaw, veggie shepherd's pie – for the week ahead. "It's more work," continues Sarno, "but the way I look at it, you either pay now or pay later in terms of your health."

As well as some unusual ingredients – not everyone cooks with tamari and agave syrup – there are some really weird ones, such as lucuma. It's a dried exotic fruit powder from Peru. Sarno uses it to make cookies. He mixes it with mesquite meal and adds chocolate nibs, agave syrup, vanilla, sea salt and cocoa powder. "Raw food is like playing with playdough," he says with relish, rolling the dough into a sausage and then slicing it. The cookies are soft and fudgy with an instant chocolate kick.

Sarno presents his food beautifully, even painting sauces onto plates with a paint brush. The flavours are incredibly intense – as he says, you have to over exaggerate the herbs and spices in raw food – and the meal is very rich. His tiny raw food pizzette (piled high with cashew cheese, olives, tomatoes, pea shoots and marinated mushrooms), cream cheese stuffed rellenos peppers and a raw pad thai are supremely filling. Sarno's motto is by Moliere, who wrote, "One should eat to live and not live to eat"; but I wonder whether raw food diets require one to live to chop, zest, blend and dehydrate. Given I have a life to live, it looks like I'll have to win the lottery, hire Sarno as a personal chef and only eat pies and pasta when he isn't looking.

www.safrestaurant.co.uk

Cabbage avocado salad with hemp and coriander

Serves 4

6 cups finely-shredded cabbage (mix of purple and green)
Quarter of a cup red and yellow peppers, diced
One-and-a-half avocados, diced
3 tablespoons hemp oil (or flax oil)
One-and-a-half tablespoons lemon juice
2 tablespoons red onion or leek, diced
Quarter of a cup hulled hemp seeds
3 tablespoons loose coriander leaves
Half a teaspoon of sea salt

Toss all ingredients together, squeezing as you mix to "wilt" the cabbage and cream the avocado. Serve immediately. As a variation, add chopped fresh herbs or your choice of diced vegetables. This dish works equally well with kale, chard or spinach.

Raw Pad Thai



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Serves 4

For the sauce:

- Half a cup almond butter
- 1 tablespoon chopped ginger
- One-and-a-half tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons date paste (made by soaking dates in water and blending)
- 2 cloves garlic
- One-and-a-half tablespoons salt or shoyu
- 1 diced Serrano pepper
- Third of a cup of water
- 1 head of broccoli cut into florets
- Half a cup of bean sprouts
- Third of a cup of chopped coriander

Blend ingredients for the sauce until smooth. Pour over the vegetables and add the coriander. Eat as it is or dehydrate for an hour. Garnish with enoki mushrooms and chopped almonds.

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