



Orthorexia:

the new fad?

Kate Kulniece investigates the dark secrets of clean eating

Currently, I am devouring a bowl of creamy and comforting porridge. Non-organic oats, peanut butter and cacao nibs adding up to 30 grams of fat, ASDA's sweetened soya milk and chia seeds. This has been my go-to for the last

few weeks. Also, this is Gwyneth Paltrow's worst nightmare. And neither Uma Thurman nor Jessica Alba would come up to me to ask for a recipe as they are labelled as something more irritating than fussy or picky eaters. Turns out,

there is such a term as being *too healthy*.

Dine-outs amongst a group of friends have become more challenging than ever. With their eating habits, some effortlessly meet the requirements of becoming *that friend*. For instance,

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Gwyneth Paltrow has embarked upon the guidelines of macrobiotic diet to “create extraordinary health” and spends around 200\$ (160£) week on kale, quail eggs and goji berries. The *Kill Bill* star Uma Thurman claims to have lost 25 lbs strictly following the Paleo diet, which excludes all dairy and gluten. The secret of glowing skin, according to Jessica Alba, 35, is nothing but coconut water; not just any other but particularly *ZICO* “100% pure coconut water” with its “five essential electrolytes”. Around these ladies, to order and guiltlessly dig into that salt-fat-gluten-filled and undoubtedly GMO falafel wrap would be rather eccentric; euphemism for “What on earth are you doing, my dear friend?”

Food, for its misuse, has long been on the hot topic list. At one end of the scale, governments all around the world impose sugar tax to tackle obesity. The NHS has just consecrated Britain as the “fat man



of Europe” with 24.9% of the population digging themselves into an early grave. At the other, as reported by Mind, the legal mental health charity for England and Wales, one in 100 women aged between 15 and 30 skip entire meals to fit in size 0.

Somewhere in-between, we also

picked up orthorexia – a relentless and vigorous quest for healthy food in all its purity. The term derives from Greek “ortho”, meaning right and correct, and “rexia” which stands for desire. It is exactly what these words describe – a desire to be correct. While others refuse to eat certain foods in order to be thin, orthorexics, in theory, abolish eating certain food groups seeking to feel well-nourished.

In a world where fast-foods chains are rapidly on the increase, adopting a healthy lifestyle is certainly worth a pat on the shoulder. With so many chemicals flooding into the oceans and mainland, it is probably a health boost to eliminate animal products from your diet. And GMO-filled falafels would not qualify for the list of the ‘top’ five most nutrient-dense foods to incorporate in your diet. However, those suffering from orthorexia nervosa; have taken it to the extreme.

For the average restaurants, like that Chinese buffet at the end of the road which you visit far too frequently, orthorexic customers are de trop. Waiters and waitresses are constantly called over at tables and interrogated about cooking methods and the purity of ingredients. Maria, 23, who works at *Zizzi* in Pinner, sighs heavily when asked about this



TOP RIGHT: Anastasia's (@tasty_ak) scrumptious-looking smoothie bowls inspire almost 7000 followers

TOP LEFT: Gwyneth Paltrow's goop has got its own clothing, fragrance and skincare line

dangerous trend. "There has certainly been an increase in orders of gluten free meals such as pizza and pasta. If not that, quite a lot of customers will go for our salads." However, *Zizzi* is not the only restaurant chain that has had to distribute gluten free menus across their branches. Similarly, *Pizza Express*, *Wagamama*, *Crussh*, *Prêt A Manger* and other eateries have had to introduce allergen menus that, apart from gluten free, also include dairy and nut free options.

Ironically, most of the customers do not suffer from Celiac disease and therefore wouldn't race to the hospital if there happened to be a crumb of wheat bread on their salad. The American journal *Digestion* reported on a recent study which found that "86% of individuals who believed they were gluten sensitive could tolerate it", which only applies to 1% of the American population. Yet, contradictory, *Mintel*, a London-based research company, reports that shops have experienced a 63% growth in sales of gluten free products. The biggest supermarket retailers – *ASDA*, *Tesco* and *Sainsbury* – have expanded their *Free from* ranges that now include anything from Christmas pudding to quiche, strawberry and vanilla cones to fishcakes.

Nonetheless, for waiters like Maria, gluten free fanatics are the least of the worry when on shift. She says that recently there has been a wave of people, particularly women, who are "extremely fussy" about the fat percentage in their meals. Some would even go as far as requiring which spices and additives to exclude. "Low-fat and low-sodium is like a must when noting down orders," she discloses to me.

Such obsession with food can and does have a devastating effect not only on health but also socialising. Having a strict timetable of when to eat what often results in a less active social life. In an interview with *iamfedupwithfood* blog, a

campaign to raise awareness of orthorexia nervosa, Kaila Prins, a former orthorexic, discloses becoming "increasingly isolated, anxious, and depressed". "I cut out almost everything that came in a box and also became fearful of eating at restaurants, because I couldn't control what was in my meals. I began eating only at home and bringing "safe" food with me to parties and when I was out with my friends."

Who is behind all this?

Deanne Jade, eating disorder specialist at the National Centre for Eating Disorders (NCFED), believes that one in 10 women and one in 20 men in the UK are clean-eaters. Fixed on healthy eating, they follow, mostly, self-prescribed or media-influenced eating patterns. Prins says she ventured into this dark and lonely territory with Instagram and food blogs. There are over 19 million posts on

"I couldn't control what was in my meals"

Instagram with *#healthyfood*. Posts of fruity morning breakfast or low-fat dinner plates inspire others to eat healthier.

Celebrities, who have to be red-carpet-ready at 2am any day of the week, are especially vulnerable and prone to eating disorders, including orthorexia. However, the more vulnerable are those who look at celebrities as guides. Consciously or subconsciously, people like Gwyneth Paltrow are only adding fuel to this vastly growing problem. These health-advocates promote gluten-free diets and regulate their own eating habits. Seeing their skin glowing and waistlines shrinking, men and women blindly follow these rules as a starting point for a healthier and fulfilled life.

But it's very easy to cross the line.

For Prins, and every orthorexic, what started as a joyful journey towards a healthier life, ended up as a hectic and mostly self-reproaching reality that only revolves around food. She now says that "unfortunately" the only way to draw the line between eating healthy and being obsessed with healthy food "is not to obsess about it." "That means not reading the food blogs. Ignoring the scaremongering headlines. Not clicking on article that says one type of macronutrient is better than the other."

Perhaps, this was what Oscar Wilde meant by "everything in moderation, including moderation." Eating healthy, according to Kaila Prins, is not as complicated as people make it appear to be. "There's no "superfood", and no magic ratio of macronutrients. That's pretty much all you need to know: eat vegetables, eat meat, try not to spend all of your money on stuff that comes in boxes." But most importantly - "don't worry if you have a night or two or three where ice cream sounds like a fun idea."

So, go ahead and dig into that genetically modified porridge without feeling guilty. Devour that stack of fluffy pancakes soaking in litres of vanilla sauce on a Sunday brunch – on weekends the calories don't count. A juicy burger accompanied with a soggy box of French fries drowned in cheese after a wild night out is always a great idea! Food shouldn't be something to agonize over.