

## Raw power

*Nigel Bowen* investigates the hip new diet most of mankind gave up 40,000 years ago.

Three years ago, Ricardo Riskalla had chronic stomach pain, no energy and a white blood cell count that was off the chart. Doctors were unable to determine either the cause of or a cure for his health issues. Desperately searching the internet for a remedy, Riskalla came across sites touting a diet of uncooked vegan food as a cure for gastrointestinal problems. With nothing to lose, he gave it a try. Within weeks he was transformed. Nowadays he positively gleams with rude good health and manages to hold down two jobs while maintaining a punishing regimen of intense physical exercise.

A splinter group within vegetarianism, the raw food movement forsakes all food that has been cooked or processed. It allows no meat, fish, bread, dairy or even soy products. And any fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds or grains that are eaten must be grown organically.

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What’s the pay-off for all this self-sacrifice? According to the testimonials, a robust immune system, trim body, great skin, clear mind and the prevention or amelioration of every ailment the flesh is prone to.

Raw foodists point out that no other species heats up its prey before chowing down and, until we learned how to control fire, neither did we. It lays the blame for the health problems plaguing the West – obesity, cancer,

cardiovascular disease, depression – squarely at the feet of a diet which, since WWII, has contained ever more processed food.

Raw foodists argue that the “life force” in food is either destroyed or greatly reduced by the cooking process. They believe the biochemical structure and nutrient make-up of the food is altered, vitamins, minerals, amino acids and enzymes are depleted and toxic by-products are created.

There is little scientific evidence to back up these claims and the attitude of the medical establishment is sceptical. Dr Rosemary Stanton, an author on food and nutrition, says, “Raw food theories are more a religious belief system than evidence-based science. If you switch from eating saturated fat, salt and sugar to fresh plant foods, there is evidence it will reduce cardiovascular disease and some types of cancer. But you can’t extrapolate that to advocate people eat *only* raw food.

“Cooking partially destroys some vitamins but it also makes other protective anti-cancer agents such as lycopene available,” Stanton says. “It’s possible to construct a reasonably balanced raw food diet but you’d need a vitamin B12 supplement and it would be a challenge getting enough iron, calcium, protein, zinc and iodine.”

A lack of scientific backing hasn’t stopped a raw food subculture growing in the US and Germany, where it’s possible to dine in raw-food restaurants and attend retreat centres.

The infrastructure in Australia is less developed. The Hippocrates Health Centre on Queensland’s Gold Coast offers week-

long stays (costing \$1,100) where guests are fed raw food and taught how to prepare it. Riskalla, who is hoping to open Australia’s first raw-food restaurant this year, spends his weekends running seminars around NSW.

“I teach people how to make healthy equivalents to the types of food they’re used to,” Riskalla says. “Maintaining the diet is the hard part.” †



**Sexual surf:** It’s alleged that hardbodied Demi got toned on raw food.

### MOORE IN THE RAW

Cynics credited the spectacular bod Demi Moore unveiled in *Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle* to the surgeon’s knife but raw foodists boast the 42-year-old mother of three was able to out spunk Diaz et al by following their diet. Other celebrities rumoured to have gone raw include Woody Harrelson, k.d. lang and Alicia Silverstone.