

health

The draw of the raw

Patricia Carswell investigates the appeal of uncooked fresh fruit and vegetables and talks to two women who swear by it

So you eat pretty healthily and get your five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. Now what about taking it one step further and going raw? To most of us this will sound pretty off-putting; the very thought of plates groaning with apples and carrot sticks – well, it's enough to give you indigestion. But what if we were talking about an elegant spinach and wild mushroom quiche? Or a rich and creamy coconut ice cream? Suddenly it sounds a whole lot more appealing.

For a surprising number of people living in the Emirates, raw food doesn't just mean a side salad or piece of fruit at the end of a meal; it's their entire diet. Far from feeling deprived, they claim that their daily menu is not only rich and varied but healthy and strength-giving. Lanae Holbrook, 45, is one such

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Gaynor Bussell dietician

convert. As a senior lawyer at Nasdaq Dubai, and the mother of two young children, she has the sort of lifestyle that would leave most of us feeling exhausted, yet eats a predominantly raw (and therefore vegan) diet.

Far from finding her regime deficient, Holbrook claims that it makes her feel more vital.

"I'm not religious about it", she says. "I watch what my body needs, but in the weeks that I do 100 per cent raw, I feel great."

Alison Andrews, a 33-year-old Dubai-based writer and singer-songwriter, agrees. She and her husband, Jaye, also follow an almost exclusively raw diet.

"We are very active," she says. "On a typical day I may do a home workout lasting between 45 and 75 minutes and then follow that with a spin class at the gym later in the day. I have abundant energy and always find it very easy to exercise at a very high intensity. When I am travelling and eating more cooked foods, I definitely notice a decline in energy levels."

So what, exactly, do they eat? For Andrews, a typical breakfast would be half a watermelon or a couple of litres of freshly squeezed orange juice. Lunch might be a green smoothie made from bananas, mangoes and spinach. Dinner is usually a very large salad with a dressing made from something like red peppers blended with sun-dried tomatoes and a couple of dates. Her favourite dishes include smoothies, raw soups (made from blending vegetables with a few dates), chocolate shakes (bananas blended with raw cacao or carob) and hand rolls made from nori (seaweed) sheets filled with nut cheese.

Others go for more elaborate fare. Russell James, a UK-based raw chef (www.therawchef.com), creates complex, restaurant-style dishes, both sweet and savoury, making



The smoothie is an easy way to increase the proportion of raw fruit and vegetables in your diet. iStockphoto.com

imaginative use of nuts, vegetables and coconut to mimic more familiar ingredients. His most popular recipes include raw Thai green curry and pomegranate cheesecake with clementine gelato.

For those who like more traditional treats, there are many raw alternatives, though some are only available online. Raw chocolate is a fairly convincing substitute for the more familiar kind and comes in both bars and spreads, while raw crackers made with flaxseeds and kale – although perhaps an acquired taste – can be used to satisfy the desire for bread.

The mainstay of the raw diet is the green smoothie, which is popular among raw food aficionados be-

cause of the vitamins and minerals found in green, leafy vegetables. Holbrook persuades me to try one. Its appearance is unpromising – it looks like something that has been dredged from the bottom of a swamp – but it's more tasty than I expected and I find myself coming back for more.

Whether it's enough to sustain me on a daily basis, however, is more open to question. Both Holbrook and Andrews insist that their diets are rich in protein and carbohydrates and are keen to stress that for most foods, the nutritional content stays more intact in the raw state than when they are heated.

For anyone less knowledgeable about nutrition, it would be wise to

be cautious – a consultation with your doctor is recommended. According to Gaynor Bussell, a freelance dietitian and public-health nutritionist, to follow this kind of diet successfully it is important to be aware of the different food groups and to know about the things you might end up lacking.

"I don't think the raw bit of it makes much difference, but with a vegan diet you have to be careful with your nutrition. The biggest worry is iron, calcium and vitamin B12: lack of B12 and iron can lead to pernicious anaemia, and calcium is important to prevent thinning of the bones. They would probably need to take a supplement of B12." Bussell considers women to be in

greater danger of dietary deficiency. "They would be more at risk at vulnerable times, such as when they're pregnant, or pre-pregnancy when they need to make sure that they're well nourished. If they've got problems with heavy periods, they really would need to go to their doctors and get some supplements and advice."

Bussell's overall recommendation is to make your diet as varied as possible. This is relatively straightforward in a part of the world where the staple ingredients are available in abundance. Andrews shops regularly at the Al Aweer fruit and vegetable market and recommends the Organic Café; she also gets deliveries from Salata Farms. Holbrook also uses the Organic Foodstore in Dubai.

Of course a completely raw diet may not be for everyone, and many people will find that just introducing small amounts of uncooked food is enough to be beneficial.

"Go slow and be kind to yourself," suggests Holbrook. That sounds like good advice not just for a diet, but for life in general.

Green smoothie recipe

Ingredients

(can be varied according to taste)

2 handfuls of greens eg spinach, Swiss chard or kale
Handful of berries, eg raspberries or blueberries
1 peach or nectarine
1 banana
1-2 cups water

Method

Put all ingredients in blender and blend until smooth. Pour and enjoy.

the fitness test Leah Oatway

Instead of pumping iron, try swinging it

There are few things more motivating, I find, than exercising outside with like-minded people.

But while it is simple enough to do cardio work out of doors in the UAE (though not always pleasant during the heat of summer) when it comes to weight sessions things get a little trickier.

I've long expressed my aversion to weightlifting areas in gyms – which has always made my desire for well-honed biceps a tad difficult to achieve – so when I saw a group of men and women swinging what looked like a cannonball with a handle in Dubai's Safa Park several months ago, I vowed to find out more.

Last week I finally took my place at an early morning Kettlebell Club session, under the instruction of Rudi Botha, a qualified kettlebell trainer and former professional rugby player from South Africa, whose ability to trim, tone and strengthen Dubai residents has won him local acclaim.

Botha, not without considerable muscle mass himself, discovered kettlebells while training for rugby and mixed martial arts and has never looked back.

The beauty of the cast-iron weight, he explained, is that the exercises performed with them focus on gaining functional strength to complement movements made in daily life as well as during sporting activities.

Controlling and lifting a kettlebell provides whole-body conditioning and toning.

"Anyone can do it," he said. "There are obviously different levels, from beginners through to advanced. The ballistic movements challenge your stability and put emphasis on core strength."

To be honest, it didn't look too difficult from a distance – for one



From left, Rudi Botha, Rowena Delf, Lussa Thompson, Leah Oatway and Paul Sherry share the pain in Botha's kettlebell class at Safa Park in Dubai. Pawan Singh / The National

thing, there was no running around and no sign of burpees – and the kettlebells laid on the grass in front of us on Wednesday morning weighed either 5kg or 7.5kg, which seemed manageable enough.

But this was no class for wimps. After a quick and straightforward warm-up, we were straight into the basic lifts and movements that would later build in intensity through several different circuits.

The first movement involved swinging the 7.5kg kettlebell from between the legs to eye level, keeping the stomach in and the pelvis tilted to protect the lower back.

When performed properly, the

movement strengthens the core and prevents stress on the lower back by strengthening the bottom, hamstrings and calves. It also stretches the hip flexors.

It sounds easy but after a couple of minutes of kettlebell swings, the news that we'd next be doing the same movement using alternating hands, brought with it the realisation that, despite the cheery dispositions of my classmates, this was going to be far from easy.

After alternating hands we then moved into what I found the most difficult movement of the hour-long class. Keeping one arm straight up in the air, kettlebell handle in our

grip, we had to squat. It sounds simple, and it looked it when Botha demonstrated, but the art of keeping the arm straight up and bending the knees proved all was not as it appeared.

Later Botha explained that my difficulty in getting this right could be down to weak back muscles, poor flexibility and poor strength in the glutes – all of which should improve if I kept at it.

After we finished this movement we tried the "kettlebell snatch", a movement similar to a clean-and-press. You begin with the kettlebell between your feet, as with the swing. You bend at the waist to

squat down and pick it up, using your legs and hips to thrust it up over your head, punching your fist up to the sky and standing straight.

The weight then flips over your wrist, before you swing it back on a 45-degree angle down towards the ground again.

After a set of these on both arms, we did another set of circuits that involved lunging with the kettlebell held straight up in the air with one arm, punching it up into the air as we lunged, and then stretching in a windmill-type movement that worked the obliques as well as the shoulders and flexibility.

Movements like this, due to the displacement of the weight of the kettlebell, call on stabiliser muscles to work on any weak areas.

We did this on both sides, Botha correcting technique to ensure the right muscles were taking the effort and the lower back was protected.

By the end of the hour, I had worked up a sweat and I'd had fun. The mixed-sex group was friendly and despite the effort needed in the exercise, we all encouraged each other to keep going when it got tough.

Later that day and certainly by the following morning my gluts and shoulders were not shy in letting me know that they had worked hard, though – to my relief – I had none of the lower-back aching I had expected.

The 5kg and 7.5kg weights are just the starting point. Weights can reach 45kg.

"A lot of professional athletes, celebrities and even the armed forces, are using kettlebells now in their training regimes," Botha explained later. "It complements everything. It works the shoulders, arms, the obliques, hips, thighs, gluts and it will help improve back strength and posture."

the facts

Where and when

Sunday and Tuesday evenings at 7pm, and Friday's at 8.30am at Al Barsha Park; and Monday and Wednesday mornings at 8.15am at Safa Park, Gate 2.

Why this class?

Total body conditioning under a blue or starry night sky, with none of the mirror gazing or grunting typical at many gyms, but all of the results.

Muscles used

Kettlebell training is a whole-body workout that engages the core, arms and shoulders, legs, glutes and postural muscles.

Who can do it?

Male or female, young or old, if you have the commitment (and no serious injuries) then Botha has the skills needed to see you make real change.

Cost

Dh80 per session or Dh800 for 12 sessions.

Contact

E-mail info@AmericanFitness.me, visit www.americanfitness.me or join the Facebook group "The Kettlebell Club" for more information.