DISCOVERING LONDON

Raw passion

Samantha Whitaker crunches along with a detoxifying diet

"It's like lawn in a bowl!" exclaims Miranda in an episode of *Sex and the City*, as the girls sample their amuse bouche at Raw, a restaurant where everything on the menu is vegan, non dairy and nothing is cooked over 48°C. From downtown New York, pan to Saf in Shoreditch, East London, where Alex, ROSL events coordinator, and I sat down to a raw meal.

The clean, chic interior is the ideal environment in which to open your mind to such an unusual menu. From beetroot ravioli to wild mushroom risotto, the menu proffers well-known dishes recreated with raw food substitutes. There is an appealing degree of familiarity.

We kicked off with a non-alcoholic elixir – a mind-blowing concoction of apple, lemon, ginger and chilli sweetened with agave, which cleansed our insides with every sip. Alcohol is offered in the form of organic wines and botanical cocktails. For example, a basil-infused organic gin and jasmine green tea vodka.

We tried the beetroot ravioli – cashew herb ricotta wrapped with a thin slice of beetroot – and a cashew cheese served with flaxseed crackers. Most nuts and seeds can be cultured to make cheese and provide an important source of protein for vegan raw foodists.

A raw foodist will eat raw 75 to100% of the time, depending on what feels right for them. This means a diet of fruit, vegetables, sprouts, nuts, seeds and grains, where everything remains uncooked, unheated and unprocessed. Coffee is definitely off the menu, but herbal teas, fruit juices and purified (not tap) water are fine.

For our main, we shared an Asian salad with smoked tofu and wakame seaweed dressed with a vinaigrette containing over 30 ingredients. We also tried the signature dish, the Saf bowl, which comprised more tofu, sweetened with a teriyaki glaze, rice and seed cake, pok choi, lotus root, and kimpura kimchee – a spicy pickled cabbage dish. This plethora of interesting flavours and textures was surprisingly filling, but not enough to say no to dessert – a tartlet of fruit with walnut maple cream on a brazil nut and date crust, and a refreshing lychee granita.



ON A ROLL: Raw food is thought to aid health and digestion

As we polished off an edible pansy, we decided that perhaps going raw wouldn't be so bad. Our waitress, who is herself a raw foodist, told us more about it.

Raw foodists believe that cooking food above 48°C destroys its natural enzymes. This means we have to use our own limited supply of enzymes, and a lot more energy, during digestion. Eating raw food, which comes complete with its own digesting enzymes, allows the body to use its own enzymes to build, cleanse and heal. Many raw food eaters say they experience a clearer complexion, increased energy levels and often weight loss. Also, raw foodists believe that acid-forming foods – such as meat, dairy, bread and preservatives – affect our body's natural ph level. To counteract the acidity, alkaline minerals are robbed from our bones and tissue, which can lead to a host of ailments including arthritis, osteoporosis, depression and headaches. There is a wealth of information available on the internet on the benefits of eating raw, but there are also counter-arguments and, ultimately, there are no definitive answers.

Inspired by our waitress, Alex and I decided to give it a try: for five days we would eat nothing but raw food. For the first two days the novelty made it bearable. We breakfasted on fruit and soaked oats and enjoyed preparing enormous salads together at work for lunch. Snacks were easy, with so many different nuts and dried fruits to try, as well as raw snack bars. Evening meals were harder. Salads and cold soups were not as appealing or satisfying as they had been at lunch. We scanned the internet for weird and wonderful raw recipes: flapjacks with nuts, dates and honey whizzed up in a blender, cold gazpacho and walnut cheese. We also tried tahini (ground sesame paste) and halva (sesame seed and honey confectionary). By midweek, we were more than a little obsessed, and were both feeling the effects of the detox. We missed the feeling of being properly full and found ourselves growing bored with salad and nuts.

We also noticed how unsociable it can be. It was difficult to eat out and a nuisance at a dinner party. Perhaps five days isn't enough to really judge the benefits of raw foodism, but it was enough for us, although the week had opened our eyes to a number of foods that we hadn't appreciated before.

However, raw meals can be delicious, and there is no better place than Saf to give them a try. The staff are efficient, friendly, and incredibly well-informed. They explain the menu, recommending personal favourites and popular dishes, and, as each dish is served, they point out each ingredient so you always know exactly what you are eating. What is more, you can even dine raw al fresco in Saf's Mediterranean-style courtyard and really feel at one with nature.

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