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A party in a restaurant a decade ago, I found myself accosted by a well-known socialite. 'You're drinking white wine?' she asked, scandalised. 'But it has no health benefits whatsoever! You should have red wine — it's full of antioxidants.'

The idea that you could drink wine for pleasure rather than for its nutritional value was clearly something that hadn't occurred to her. At the time, I found her attitude hilarious. Now it's ubiquitous. An increasing number of diet-obsessed women are evaluating everything they eat based on the 'goodness' that a specific food contains. It's been labelled 'nutritionism' — instead of simply eating foods because we like them, we construct meals based around the nutrients that we hope to get out of them.

Mary McCartney, photographer daughter of Paul, and author of a new vegetarian cookery book, recently described her usual breakfast:

'I make myself a disgustingly healthy smoothie every morning. I see it as an insurance policy — if I've had something virtuous for breakfast, it doesn't matter so much if things go a bit haywire later on. I blend one spoonful of Amazing Grass Green Superfood Powder, one scoop of whey protein, one cup of rice milk, one spoonful of Omega 3-6-9 Oil and a handful of flax seeds with a banana.'

It's less an alternative to a slice of toast and Marmite, and more a chemistry experiment.

So when did eating well become so complicated and so joyless?

As Michael Pollan, author of the bestselling *In Defence Of Food*, has pointed out, humanity has been feeding itself successfully for millennia, but now that the scientists have got involved, our relationship with what we eat has altered. We now wait to be told what we should eat rather than decide what we'd like to eat.

BUT, ironically, if you're cutting out whole food groups in your quest for vitality and longevity — for example, by becoming a raw food-munching vegan — then you might actually be making yourself miserable by missing out on essential mood-boosting, serotonin-rich foodstuff.

Nutrition therapist Ian Marber even warns that obsessing about whether food is healthy or unhealthy may actually be one of the reasons you are getting fatter.

He says: 'The trouble with dividing up foods into "good" and "bad" is that people think if something's good for you, they can eat as much of it as they like. But all food is fattening if you eat enough of it.'

Victoria Willis, nutritionist and founder of NutriGimmix, a health and wellness centre, adds: 'There's a belief that if something is good for you, then it's even better to eat lots of it. Yes, olive oil is good for you, but that doesn't mean we should be dipping bread into bowls of it!'

Nutritional confusion has, she says, separated the health-conscious into two camps.

'One lot think that as long as they're drinking their wheatgrass shot, they can consume anything they like,' she says. 'And the others are so convinced that spirulina or whatever is the be-all and end-all that they miss out on huge food groups. I had one client who was a raw-food vegan and she was deficient in all sorts of nutrients.'

Instead, Willis encourages clients to eat whatever they want for at least one meal a week. 'So I have one client who eats a bowl of Maltesees and Oreo's every Friday,' she says. 'Others might have a cheeseburger or an ice cream sundae once a week.'

'Our clients come to us to lose weight, but it's pointless planning an eating regime if you won't enjoy it. It's totally unrealistic. Food should be something you enjoy.'

Whether or not she enjoys her food is not

Flax seeds. Bean sprouts. Rice milk. It may be what the nutrition Nazis WANT you to eat, but experts are warning the results can be life-wrecking...

Is RAW FOOD MAKING YOU FAT? NUTRITIONIST SAYS NO!

something that worries my size 8 friend Emma, 35, a highly successful and intelligent businesswoman. 'Well, it makes everything taste of coconut. It only tastes good when you use it for frying bananas — but it's really fattening!'

Emma lives with her boyfriend who she says resignedly 'likes spaghetti bolognese'. But having educated her on the dangers of too much red meat, she insists on making it with turkey mince.

She is equally strict about alcohol. 'I keep a drink diary,' she says. 'Every day I write down how many drinks I've had and multiply it by two to get

peas, with steamed broccoli or some kale, flash-fried in coconut oil. 'Coconut oil is the new big thing — it's stable at high temperatures so it doesn't mutate when cooked like some oils can.'

Yes, but does it taste nice? 'Well, it makes everything taste of coconut. It only tastes good when you use it for frying bananas — but it's really fattening!'

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the units. I see every drink as a weakness, so stick to alcohol-free beer and never drink wine when I'm thirsty in case I have too much.

'I'm sure there's a psychological thing going on,' she admits of her strict eating regime. 'It really fulfils a need to take care of myself. It gives my life meaning. Every mouthful of kale I eat I actually feel is doing me good.'

'If I had children, I'm sure I wouldn't bother — I'd be too busy to worry so much about myself, although obviously I'd want them to eat healthily.'

Nutrition expert Ian Marber fears Emma may be falling into a common trap. 'Her diet is "perfect" in that there are no nasties, but it doesn't feel like a happy diet. It suggests anxiety and not being at peace with healthy food. You're losing the joy

and pleasure of eating. It suggests a certain level of fear and negativity.'

Lisa Sture, 52, lives in Devon and runs an online raw-food retailer. She began eating only raw food seven years ago in an attempt to cure her growing physical stiffness. 'I was 45 and I felt like I was 80,' she says. 'A few weeks after I changed my diet, I felt completely different.'

'I lost a lot of weight at first, and friends were saying I didn't look well, but that was before I started exercising. They couldn't believe I could survive on just fruit, veg, nuts and seeds.'

A typical day for Lisa would start with a couple of pints of 'green juice' — a mix of celery, cucumber, apple, ginger and kale or spinach. 'It's extreme nutrition. It makes you feel so alive,' she says. 'Lunch is usually a

box of chopped carrots, homemade raw hummus, avocado, soaked almonds and another smoothie.

'In the evening, I might have a chia pudding, made from a South American seed that's very high in Omega 3. I drink herbal teas and water.'

Lisa also eats large amounts of chlorella, a kind of algae, and hemp powder, which, she says, are some of the richest sources of protein on the planet. Most people aren't getting enough omega 3 — so I eat algae for it. I don't like the taste of spirulina much — it's got a taint to it — but if I mix it in with the homemade chocolate I create, that disappears.'

Naturally, her lifestyle has involved certain sacrifices. When she goes out, she takes a jar of almonds in water (to make them easier to digest) or a pot of chocolate she's made up herself from raw cacao, mixed with any superfoods she feels she's missing.

'Maybe extract of mace, which is a root from South America that works as a hormone balancer, or bee pollen which is high in protein and micro-nutrients. Standard chocolate is full of unhealthy fats and processed sugars. It's very hard to get good food in our society. It's all geared around sugar.'

O MARBER, this regime sounds not worth the effort, but Lisa denies her diet is restrictive or complicated. 'Having to cook something would be more hassle than putting a few sprouts under the tap,' she says. 'Your friends think you're bonkers at first but none of them think I'm crazy now.'

Actress Lysette Anthony, 47, became a victim of nutritionism while living in L.A., its spiritual home.

'I was fantastically neurotic about what I ate,' she says. 'I used to go to a juice bar every morning and pay a ridiculous amount to drink ground-up blades of grass.'

'Then I had to sit very still for five minutes so I wouldn't be sick. I loathed it. I also ate egg-white omelettes to avoid the cholesterol in the yolk, which is an incredibly boring way to eat. It made my life a misery.'

Now she's back in the UK and starring in Lady Windermere's Fan in Manchester, she finds she needs to eat four meals a day to cope with the demands of the role.

She breakfasts on toast, has avocado sandwiches for lunch, protein and vegetables for dinner. 'You can't eat carbs before you put on a corset!' — then whatever she likes once the curtain comes down.

'I've gone back to the good old adage of having a little of what you fancy,' she says, 'and I'm fighting fit as a result.'

But she hasn't quite shaken off her belief in nutritionism.

'I still force myself to eat lots of red cabbage because it's anti-inflammatory,' she admits.

By contrast, Marber says: 'I never look at food and think "Oh, that's a good source of fibre or Vitamin C." I eat it if I want to and I don't add up the calories.'

He believes that by focusing on the nutrients in food rather than on the food itself, we have lost touch with our instinct for what we should be eating. 'People have forgotten food is a source of nourishment and pleasure. It's supposed to be delicious.'

Would he eat a cream cake?

'Of course — just not after every meal. It's all about balance. We in the West are lucky to have this choice. Many have little food or fewer choices. It seems a little ungrateful not to enjoy a more relaxed diet.'

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