



RAW AND WARM

In the winter months, crisp, crunchy salads and refreshing juices aren't exactly go-to meals, but any time of year eating raw foods can keep you healthy and warm.

WORDS / JANAI VELEZ

The cold weather brings on cravings for hot comfort food, so adding raw dishes to your meal plan can sound a little unappealing. However, with a few tricks and spices, raw meals can be warming and satisfying during winter and keep your immune system strong. Plus, you'll give your mouth a workout with all the crunching and chewing.

Raw food generally includes fruits and vegetables, sprouted grains and beans, nuts and seeds that haven't been heated more than about 48°C. This keeps the nutrients and enzymes in the food intact. Nutrients help fight and prevent disease and enzymes aid with digestion.

Even without steaming, grilling, frying or boiling, there's still plenty of scope for creativity in the kitchen. The raw foodists' methods of choice are dehydrating, sprouting, blending and pickling.

RAW OR COOKED?

Simone Austin, Melbourne-based accredited practising dietitian and spokesperson for the Dietitians Association of Australia, suggests having a mix of raw and cooked foods. Cooking can damage nutrients and enzymes in foods, but it can also make nutrients more available to the body.

"The antioxidant content in tomatoes might be generally higher when they're not cooked, but at the same time, an antioxidant they have called lycopene is more absorbed [by the body] if the tomatoes are cooked. Lycopene is linked with benefits for the prostate and the reduction of prostate cancer," says Austin.

Another example is boiling carrots or Brussels sprouts. The vitamin C in them leaches out into the water and you can retain more of the vitamin if you eat them raw.

Owner of Raw & Peace, Ames Starr, has learnt from experience that a raw vegan diet isn't for her. "I know there are plenty of people that can survive on this diet. But you really need to keep in check with yourself because not everybody does. I did for a while," she says. Starr was a raw vegan for years but isn't any more.

"Not because I don't think it's awesome, or because I don't want to, but because I now understand [through some very difficult lessons] that it's not what my body needs at this point in time. We are such complex creatures. I really believe that there is no one answer or magical diet or superfood that suits everyone. Understanding what works for you and your unique chemistry, in your unique situation and life phase, is key."

Although Starr doesn't advocate a fully raw vegan diet any more, she still encourages people to eat healthy, raw versions of not-so-healthy treats and sells these at Sunday markets in Brisbane. Her gourmet raw treats are sweets like Wagon Wheels, chocolate bars, cakes and ice-creams. Her savoury options include raw cheeseburgers, veggie pizza and cheese and spinach tarts, which have all been dehydrated.

"Our pizza bases are made out of buckwheat and flaxseed and then dehydrated for about four hours," she says. She also runs cooking classes, makes custom cakes and supplies cafes with her wares.

Along with the health benefits, an added

bonus of raw food is it can help you to avoid overeating. Fresh, crunchy food equals more time chowing it down. "Raw foods take more chewing, so they give more to that satiety value and make you take a bit longer to eat," says Austin. Eating raw also means it feels like you've had more food. A whole plate of raw spinach wilts down to only a small handful when cooked.

A fully raw diet does limit the foods you can eat. Potatoes (which are hard to digest by the body when raw), grains and beans (unless they are sprouted) and foods and drinks that have been heated at a high temperature (such as pasteurised milk) can't be consumed.

Meat and fish can be eaten raw, but as cooking destroys bacteria, the produce needs to be very fresh and food hygiene is of the utmost importance to ensure there are no harmful bacteria in the food. Across the world, many countries have their traditional raw meat and fish dishes. Carpaccio is an Italian appetiser of raw thinly sliced meat; French steak tartare is made from finely minced beef, served raw; from Latin America, ceviche is a dish of raw fish marinated in citrus juice; and Japanese sashimi is made from thinly sliced raw fish.

THROUGH THE SEASONS

The summer sun brings an abundance of colourful fruits and vegetables and lots of light, fresh meals to show them off. Come winter, something a little more hearty and hot is called for. By adding plenty of warming foods and spices to dishes, such as chilli, ginger, cayenne pepper, cinnamon, turmeric and garlic, you can create heat without cooking. Spices have extra value, especially during winter. Not only do they add flavour and warm you from the inside, but they also have anti-inflammatory properties and are rich in antioxidants that help relieve flu symptoms and boost your immune system.

“
By adding lots of warming foods and spices to dishes, such as chilli, ginger, cayenne pepper, cinnamon, turmeric and garlic, you can create heat without cooking.
”

To make raw foods more palatable and comforting during winter, try leaving food out of the fridge to come to room temperature before eating; and gently heating crockery and cutlery in the oven so you can wrap your hands around a warm bowl and spoon. Raw food can be heated slightly, so if you're craving carbohydrates, use

a dehydrator to make your own raw breads and crackers as well as fruit leathers and snack bars. Dehydrators are used to remove the moisture from foods or warm them.

Ames Starr's raw food substitute for a steaming hot bowl of soup? A warm bowl of raw soup. In a blender, combine ingredients for a couple of minutes until the mixture is warm to touch. "I love blending carrot, sweet potato, and warming spices like garlic and ginger, with a bit of coconut and water," she says, "served slightly warmed with a blob of nut cheese and fresh herbs. So delicious."

And for dessert? "A favourite is to warm winter fruits in the dehydrator with some cinnamon and serve with a raw nut crumble and some coconut cream. I'm getting hungry now."

Raw curries are also a winter staple. Starr recommends combining spices with fresh coconut, vegetables and sprouted lentils. Sprouting involves germinating seeds until they sprout tiny stems and leaves. Many different kinds of seeds can be sprouted and eaten as they are or added to dishes such as salads and soups. Lentils, quinoa and buckwheat, to name a few, can all be sprouted.

Starr's personal favourite is mung beans. "Put them in a jar of water with some gauze over the top so there's airflow and so no bugs can get in there. Soak them for about half a day and then rinse and drain them. Keep them out on the bench for a couple of days, depending on the weather [rinsing them once or twice a day]. In summer they sprout a lot quicker," she says.

As well as jars full of sprouts, there are plenty of raw delights to look forward to come summer. "Mangoes," says Starr. "I've made a few raw cheesecakes with mangoes, but you kind of ruin them by putting them in a cheesecake. I just want to taste the mango and nothing but the mango."

At its core, raw food is about enjoying produce just as nature intended.

Janai Velez is a writer and researcher at Australian Homespun magazine. She loves writing stories of creative living and well-being.



Use a dehydrator to make raw crackers and fruit snacks.

Photography: Getty Images