

At 17, Ms. Tait says, "I had fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome and colitis. I was on antidepressants, antibiotics, all kinds of medicines. I was also 50 pounds overweight. I got to the point that I was bedridden. Doctors didn't give me any hope that my condition would get better."

So she prayed. And not long afterward, she read a magazine article about raw food. She decided to try it and found that it made a remarkable difference in her health, her weight and, subsequently, her life.

Six years later, Ms. Tait takes no medications, never has to worry about her weight and feels great. She teaches classes on how to make quick and easy raw food recipes, and she plans what she calls "Rawkstar" events: raw food-based parties she hopes will appeal to people her age. Among those are a May 22 ice cream social and as-yet-unscheduled "Eta Raw Pi" parties, which have the spirit of fraternity gatherings minus the smoking, drinking and drugs.

"I want to party and have a good time," she says, "but there were no activities that seemed healthy, so I decided to create them myself."

Brooke Wagenheim had much the same inspiration when she recently opened Chef Brooke's Natural Café on Boy Scout Drive in Fort Myers, where everything's organic and there are raw food options daily.

After she went raw about 15 years ago, Ms. Wagenheim says, she lost 30 pounds in less than a month and felt energized and healthy. She confesses to having neglected herself in the recent years and recommitted to raw food about three weeks ago.

"It makes me feel vibrant," she says. "I have 100 percent more energy and I'm losing weight."



Nori Rolls



Walnut plate

Across the river in Cape Coral, Lynette Pritchard says a multitude of health issues cleared up when she went raw, resurfaced when she veered from the path and vanished again when she resumed a raw diet.

The owner of Back to Nature health food store and café, Ms. Pritchard teaches periodic classes, offers raw items on her café menu and hopes to hold raw dinners soon.

Ms. Wagenheim says it needn't be a choice between raw and cooked, but she believes people feel different when



Brooke Wagenheim

they increase the amount of raw food they eat. "You feel it in every cell of your body," she says.

Dr. Dyer counsels those looking to adopt a raw food diet to do so gradually.

"They should start increasing the amount of raw food they eat," he says. "Imagine a plate like a pie chart. Right now, the majority of people would have a diet that has a small sliver — about 10 percent — of raw food. They should focus on making that percentage greater."

Not all raw or nothing

Ginger Patterson, a Fort Myers-based registered dietitian, says there are good and bad aspects to a raw food diet.

"There are so many vegetables that do not release all of their nutrients until they're cooked, like carrots and tomatoes," she says. "And, even when heated to 106 degrees, you won't necessarily kill any salmonella that may be present. (Salmonella) can be found on organic as well as non-organic food. It does not pick and choose."

Ms. Patterson believes the raw food diet is too limiting in terms of both nutrients and lifestyle. Most people don't want to forego eating at restaurants, she says, nor do they want to take their own food with them when they're invited to friends' houses, for example. "Most people aren't up to that."

However, on the positive side, she says, "More vegetables are always healthful. You're putting more antioxidants into your body, which means there are more anti-inflammatories so you're going to have fewer aches and pains."

"I don't care how people eat as long as it's healthy," she stresses. "Everybody should seek that out for themselves. It's a personal preference."

Shakti Barnhill has achieved what she believes is a happy medium. The Fort Myers yoga instructor was 99 percent raw for a while and "felt the best I've ever felt," she says. But she's recently cut back to about 75 percent raw, adding in steamed vegetables, cooked beans and eggs.

"Life makes it too restrictive to be 100 percent raw," she says. "You cheat yourself from having fun. I'm happy with life. It's not just about what you eat. It's who you are and what you feel." ■



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