

WHEN  
FOOD *is*  
*a* FOUR-  
LETTER  
WORD

Healthy eating—to the point of obsession—is the vice that feels like a virtue. Have some of us gone too far? *By* Sandra Hume





**OUR FRIENDS PLAN A NIGHT OUT TO EAT.** The new sustainable fish place is out, because there aren't enough vegetarian options. Maybe the new Italian spot...but there's so much stray cheese around, it might inadvertently trigger someone's dairy sensitivity. The Mexican place? Oh, the tortillas... too much white-flour temptation. Friends end up just drinking margaritas. (Except for the friend who's eschewed alcohol. She sips an unsweetened iced tea.)

Or: Neighbors plan a potluck at someone's house. One eats only organic food, one is Paleo, and one is trying out the gluten-free thing because gluten has been a trigger for her rashes. The party ends up with a menu filled with kale, nuts, and gluten-free pretzels.

In case you haven't noticed, some of us have gotten a little weird about food. In the light of the larger crisis facing our country driven by sedentary lifestyles,

processed foods, and obesity and all its complications, the shift toward health centered on specific diets—Whole30, gluten-free, vegan, Paleo, and the like—would seem a good thing. And for many, the journey toward health through food has been nothing short of revolutionary. But food-directed lifestyles have also taken a strangely front-and-center spot in our private and public routines that has the potential to become more than just a personal redirect. It can become obsessive.

Not everywhere, of course; the majority of our country continues to tilt toward poor nutrition and obesity. But this passionate pursuit of clean eating is common enough among the largely healthy, educated, outdoors-focused population of NoCo and the Front Range. Not only that, this is Fort Collins, the birthplace of the Paleo diet. (Dr. Loren Cordain, introduced to Paleolithic nutrition in the 1980s and widely credited with founding the Paleo eating movement, taught in Colorado State University's department of Health and Exercise Science for two decades.) We're highly educated food consumers, aware of allergies and intolerances and sensitivities, and wary of additives and preservatives. We have passionate discussions about GMOs. And yes, some of us want to lose weight.

"What we consume plays a big role in our energy, our mood, our ability to learn, and how we focus," says Nicole Eckert, registered dietitian with Enlightenment Nutrition Consulting in Fort Collins. "Our body knows what to do with real food—the less processed it is, the more efficient we are at breaking it down, digesting, and absorbing what we need." And paying attention to how we feel when we eat certain foods promotes optimal wellness all around.

But our healthy Colorado lifestyle can also come with a dark side. It doesn't apply to everyone, but, like porn, we know it when we see it.

## WHEN FRIENDS GET WEIRD

Not everyone's restricted diet has to rain on your parade. Here's how to handle limitations in a way that preserves goodwill.

■ **HOLD THE PITY.** Food restrictions can be challenging, but they aren't awful, and are preferable to feeling unwell.

■ **DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS.** "What can you eat?" is the place to start. People vary in degrees of flexibility and strictness.

■ **GIVE NOTICE.** If you can't or don't wish to provide options at your dinner or party, try to let guests know so they can bring a dish to share or plan accordingly.

■ **MAKE NO ASSUMPTIONS.** Even though margarine isn't butter, it often contains dairy. So do some cooking sprays. Corn flakes contain gluten. If you alter recipes to accommodate someone, let them know what you've substituted.

■ **REMEMBER THAT IT'S NOT PERSONAL.** If someone on a restricted diet asks to see packaging (even if you said you read it) or politely refuses what you're offering, don't be offended. It's not about you.

■ **DON'T PUSH FOOD ON ANYONE.** This is just good manners anyway.





**WHEN PEOPLE, IN THE QUEST FOR THAT “PERFECT” DIET,** cannot find a happy medium where they leave space for others—or themselves—they may find themselves at the next level, where their health is compromised. There’s actually a name for this condition: orthorexia nervosa.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SEQUOIA PORTER

**H**OW DID WE GET HERE? It’s not a bad story, really. From corn flakes in the late 19th century to canned wonder Spam in the 1920s to—now we’re talking—chicken nuggets and high-fructose corn syrup in the 1950s, Americans have had a long, drawn-out love affair with processed food. But we’re just not that into it anymore. In February of this year, *The Washington Post* reported that Kraft, Kellogg, and ConAgra—the brands behind blue-box mac-and-cheese, Chef Boyardee, Oscar Mayer, and Froot Loops—all faced lowered profits in 2014. When

Kraft starts selling “protein packs” of more whole-food-inspired meat, cheese, and nuts, you know stuff just got real.

Not that there isn’t good reason for eating clean and watching what you consume. More and more of us are embracing Eckert’s idea that going back to basics and understanding how food affects us not only keeps us healthy, it also enhances our quality of life. Science backs that up. Two years ago, a massive study published by the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that eating a Mediterranean diet, which is what “clean eating” is largely

based on—yes to fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and olive oil, no to excess meat and dairy—reduced risk of heart disease significantly.

And eating well has gotten a lot more specific. It's not just heart healthy, or low-fat, or vegetarian. Enter the world of ultra-specific diets—raw, Paleo, Whole30, GAPS, anti-inflammatory, gluten-free, vegan, pesca-vegan, or any of the multitude of cleanses, all with their lists of musts and must-nots. Some are so restrictive, such as Whole30, that according to their web site even a cheat bite during the 30-day duration renders the entire cleanse useless. Specifics aside, all of these diets gravitate towards whole, natural foods with singular ingredients, and as long as basic nutritional needs are met, the physical health benefits of such diets are virtually irrefutable.

But the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy diet is as much mental as it is physical.

The question is, where's the line between healthy eating and full-on obsession? For some, the difficulty is finding the happy medium between following a strict diet and clinging rigidly to it even when it affects others.

Take for example the requests. Staff at William Oliver's Publick House, a southeast Fort Collins eatery famous for two things—whiskey and bacon—have been asked to keep customers' stashes of gluten-free bread behind the bar. (In case you're wondering, the answer is no. They're glad you enjoy the sandwich fixins, but they're not your kitchen.)

Or consider the dinner party. If you forego an enjoyable night out to stay home and eat your own food because you just can't even, look behind you, because the line is back there, and you just crossed it.

Often this is fear run amok. "If you have a fear of heights," explains Thomas Dunn, associate professor of psychological sciences at the University of Northern Colorado, "that fear comes from a very legitimate place; we don't have wings, so you better not go that high." But just as a fear of heights can snowball into something irrational and paralyzing, so too can a fear of not eating clean enough. "The question is how much it affects your daily life," Dunn says. When a simple lunch becomes a two-hour ordeal, a birthday cupcake is out of the question, or you're alienating your friends and family, that's when you know there's a problem.

When people, in the quest for that "perfect" diet, cannot find a happy medium where they leave space for others—or themselves—they may find themselves at the next level, where their health is compromised. There's actually a name for this condition: orthorexia nervosa. The similarity to "anorexia" isn't coincidence. Like starving yourself, orthorexia is, in fact, an eating disorder, with its roots in mental health. To Dunn, the turning point of a mentally healthy diet into an unhealthy one is when fear of your diet not being clean enough gives way to straight-up worrying. "Fear is different from worry," he says. "Fear is something that everyone would agree is scary. But worries that your broccoli isn't healthy enough? Meh." People with orthorexia have worries, not fear. "People who are flexible and go with the flow have fewer worries," he says.

The key is to strive for balance and flexibility while maintaining an overall habit. When Alisa Bowman, 44, travels to Littleton this summer to visit family, as she does twice a year, she'll expect to eat meat, even though she's "mostly vegan"—she doesn't want her food choices to be the reason another living being suffered or died. But when she's staying with others who serve meat, "I figure the animal is already dead and would have died whether I was there or not, and refusing to eat what friends or family serve causes them suffering. In those cases, it seems to me that the greater kindness is to just eat what's offered and be grateful that I'm not hungry."

That's not to say that everyone who's vegan should be willing to eat meat, or that people shouldn't take their food sensitivities or allergies seriously. It's about knowing where claiming your dance space means invading someone else's.

Editor Erika Grotto discovered a dairy allergy 10 years ago, when she was 26. She has become

## 6 WARNING SIGNS

Validated diagnostic criteria for orthorexia nervosa have yet to be established. However, there are warning signs acknowledged as indicators that a more serious compulsion may be at play. BY CARA MCDONALD

1. Restriction starts small and grows. Eliminating added sugar, for example, turns into cutting out all grains, processed foods, and carbohydrates
2. It progresses fast. Control of food intake and increasing restriction snowballs quickly and becomes broader.
3. Food becomes about fear. When eating or not eating certain foods causes anxiety or worry, that stress can be as damaging as a less-than-perfect diet.
4. Foods are labeled "good" or "bad" and even "toxic," and bad foods are always off limits.
5. There's an impossible quest for perfection.
6. Loss of flexibility and even proselytizing about the virtues of your choices causes a strain on relationships.

**“OUR BODY KNOWS WHAT TO DO WITH REAL FOOD—**

the less processed it is, the more efficient we are at breaking it down, digesting, and absorbing what we need,” says Nicole Eckert, R.D.A.



a lot more understanding of other people’s food issues, because she knows how hard they can be to navigate. “When I started reading labels, I was surprised at how much dairy is hidden where you’d never expect it—chicken broth, for instance,” she says. So she has learned to ask lots of questions, both at people’s houses and in restaurants. But she’s polite about it, and she tips really, really well.

The playing field is a little different when it’s a diet dictated by choice,

not illness. When young-adult author Alexa Young focused on eight weeks of clean eating for the online eating and wellness program Whole Life Challenge, she approached it the way she’d heard a nutritionist put it: treat it like major surgery where you prioritize time and space to recover. “I avoided restaurants and pretty much put my social life on hold,” she says. “I spent the bulk of my time grocery shopping, cooking up a storm and doing dishes. I don’t know how anyone does it when they work full time, because it is

pretty much a full-time job—at least, at first, as you’re getting used to cutting out all the junk and prepping most of your food yourself.” She admits that being that drastic might sound crazy, “but is it?” she asks. “Isn’t eating clean kind of like getting clean and sober in a rehab facility, at least for some of us?”

**G**OOGLER *ORTHOOREXIA NERVOSA* and you’ll come up with no fewer than a dozen news stories all written very recently about the disorder, even though it hasn’t yet found its way into the Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Why is everyone talking about it now? CSU’s Dunn thinks we’re all noticing it more. “It seems like everyone knows somebody who probably has features of this condition. It just may not be a full-on case or may not cross the line to affecting their ability to socialize.” (Yet.)

Once a habit gets to this point, it’s no longer about what you’re eating. “It has very little to do with food,” says Eckman. “It’s an emotional coping mechanism that has to do with control, and with fear.”

Full-blown orthorexia appears to be motivated by health, but it’s not that simple. Other underlying motivations can include feeling safe, compulsion for complete control, escape from fears, wanting to be thin, improving self-esteem, searching for spirituality through food, and using food to create an identity.

Like any health-related issue, the claim of orthorexia has its detractors. Some feel it’s a diagnostic fad driven by media hype; Eckman says she’s only seen one or two full-blown cases of orthorexia personally. Some agenda-driven websites have a conspiracy-theory approach, denouncing the condition as the creation of “big food companies.” When Dunn spoke about the condition on a National Public Radio affiliate, “I did not expect a call-

in show. But people did call in, and a lot of them were hostile. ‘How dare you describe healthy eating as a disorder?’ But there are people who are malnourished because of this. They’re having serious complications because they can’t possibly eat healthy enough.”

Muddying the foodie waters are, of course, legitimate allergies like Grotto’s. Take gluten and wheat. With pure celiac disease on one end of the spectrum and being “off gluten for a bit” at the other, that leaves plenty of room for misinformation and false assumptions. No matter where a consumer falls on the spectrum, navigating those waters takes effort, and it’s often not fun for anyone. A *New Yorker* cartoon from spring 2014 portrays a post-workout thirtysomething woman lunching outside with a friend: “I’ve only been gluten-free for a week, but I’m already really annoying.”

Which leads us back to dietary restrictions being as much a social issue as a nutritive one. Restaurants, for their part, have answered the call. The Laboratory’s Lara Sireno has been serving in Fort Collins restaurants long enough to see the tilapia trend come around twice. In 1995, she says, customers would occasionally ask where the fish was sourced. Today, everyone does. And she’s happy to share whatever information she’s asked for. “I was lucky enough to be trained by people who thought more knowledge was better,” she says, adding that customers today are already knowledgeable about what they’re eating, creating an entirely new dynamic. “Today people use their diets to make their lifestyle healthy. If restaurants didn’t adjust to that, we wouldn’t win.”

The menu from one of the newest bars in Old Town, Cache, includes several items labeled P for Paleo, such as bacon-wrapped onion rings—which are, literally, rings of onion wrapped in bacon, no breading—and meat

# THE SOCIALLY STICKY DIET CONTINUUM

Just particular or total party pooper? See how you stack up.

BY CARA MCDONALD



Your brother didn’t realize you’ve been pesca-vegan for the last 2 years.

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For the family potluck, you bring a dish you prefer, but enjoy sampling a (very) little of this and that from the others.

3

Much as you used to love them, you just can’t bring yourself to eat a bagel and a latte on the go—white flour? Dairy? Gone forever; you substitute a spelt muffin and herbal tea.

5

You just cancelled a promising date because you’re on a cleanse, and who wants to hang out when you can’t drink or eat?

7

You’re gluten free by choice (not celiac), and won’t use a knife that’s touched someone’s slice of bread. And let them know it.

9

Spending hours in the kitchen to prep your daily regimen is what you do—and there’s no wiggle room for the birthday dinner your friends want to take you out for. Anyway, watching them make unhealthy choices makes “you” cringe. How can they poison themselves?

10

**“WHEN I STARTED  
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Erika Grotto says. So she has learned to ask lots of questions, both at people’s houses and in restaurants.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SEQUOIA PORTER

“wraps” where the innards are wrapped in a pounded-out flatiron steak. “It’s one of our most popular dishes,” says Bryan Smith, who created the menu with co-owner Mandi Clawson. “We took our lifestyle and put it on the menu.” Sensitive to the gluten-free crowd, the restaurant classifies its rice-flour-breaded avocado fries as “gluten-friendly” but not “gluten-free,” since the fries could be cross-contaminated in the kitchen.

To Smith, Clawson, and the clientele to whom they’re catering, health matters. Even with bar food. “It may be bar fare, but we want you to be able to eat it and go out swimming. And not sink to the bottom,” he adds, grinning.

A healthier bar snack is a great thing. But so is liberation from rigid rules.

When food nourishes our body but plays havoc with our soul and our social landscape, could it be time to seek out that old-fashioned notion—moderation? Some proponents of diets such as Paleo embrace an 80/20 (or even 60/40) guide—follow the drill 80 percent of the time, with 20 percent discretionary food choices that leave room for the occasional piece of cheese, scoop of hummus, slice of birthday cake, or skim milk latte.

A little wiggle room that could allow us to choose food, not fixation.

SANDRA HUME, a writer in Fort Collins, is pretty weird herself about artificial sweeteners.