

# Is 'raw' right for you?

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By Jennifer Sheehan and Of The Morning Call

When food is still alive, you feel alive.

"Cooked foods are grayer," says Wendy Landiak, the owner of Shankara Vegan Restaurant in south Bethlehem. "The more vibrant the food is the better it is for you."

Landiak believes in harnessing the power of raw food: whole fruits, vegetables (organic, of course) prepared without heat.

Most raw-food followers eat raw, unprocessed vegetables and fruits as at least 75 percent of their diet. The higher the proportion of raw food, the better your health will be, they believe. Some devotees will eat raw meat and dairy but the majority, like Landiak, are vegans who don't eat food that comes from animals.

Taking away heat and meat means that preparation is key.

"Some people just eat raw food," Landiak says. "I'm still a chef and I still layer flavors."

Landiak starts with fresh organic fruits and vegetables as the foundation of her dishes, and uses imaginative techniques to prepare her dishes.

Take her Zucchini Alfredo for instance. She takes a large zucchini, chops off the ends so she has two flat surfaces and put the squash through a "spirooli," a type of slicer that creates cascades of spiral cuts.

The zucchini, with its mild, neutral flavor and firm texture, mimics the pasta that would be in the traditional dish. (It's actually much prettier, too, with flecks of green seen through the swirls.)

As for the Alfredo sauce, which is usually made from heating heavy cream, cheese and butter, Landiak takes raw cashews, soaked overnight to maximize their health benefits, and puts them into her Vitamix, a high-end, super-charged blender (which runs about \$375 and up.)

The Vitamix is an important tool in a raw-food arsenal.

"It is expensive but it will last you your entire life and it will do everything you need," Landiak says. "It's a great thing to have."

Back to the Alfredo, she then adds whole lemons (skin, seeds and all), spring water, garlic

and a liquid amino condiment that provides the flavor of soy sauce with the benefits of protein. (one-half teaspoon contains 310 mg of protein.)

All that is blended to a smooth, creamy consistency. The sauce is poured over the zucchini swirls. Landiak adds a bit of fresh basil and parsley to brighten the dish.

The creamy sauce blankets the zucchini in the same way an Alfredo sauce coats pasta. The sauce doesn't have a cheesy flavor but the addition of nutritional yeast can lend a little cheese taste.

Landiak whipped up the dish in about five minutes. It's incredibly fresh tasting and bright, perfect for a sticky summer day. (And you don't feel like you need a nap after you eat it.)

So is a raw food diet healthy? Yes and no, experts say.

Kimberly Procaccino, Sodexo nutritionist at Lehigh Valley Health Network, says if you're thinking of giving this diet a try you should first discuss it with a nutrition professional.

Raw food consumption does have some benefits. Most of what you would eat on a raw food diet would be high in vitamins, Procaccino says.

"It's true that cooking zaps vitamins B and C," Procaccino says. "The perks are the foods typically on a raw food diet are nutrient dense."

Many of the staples of this diet are also high in fiber, Procaccino says. Fiber aids in healthy digestion, maintaining a good weight and lowering your risk of diabetes and heart disease.

The diet can also help with weight loss because the foods are lower in fat and calories.

A raw food diet does have downsides, Procaccino points out.

For one, cooking helps eliminate any bacteria that may be on produce. Even foods grown on organic farms can come into contact with farm animals and waste, Procaccino says. Thorough washing of produce is an important step in reducing food-borne illnesses.

Procaccino also says that cooking can help boost nutrients like beta-carotene and lycopene.

A raw food diet is generally low in protein, iron, calcium and vitamin B12, she says.

"It's very important to recognize this drawback so you can supplement accordingly," Procaccino says.

Raw food followers contend they do get the protein and nutrients their diets need. They say they feel healthier, weigh less and have fewer health problems thanks to depending on raw food for their diets.

Landiak, who has a degree in nutritional science from Pepperdine University, has been holding raw food classes at her restaurant this month.

Leading the charge (and the classes) is chef and author Brian Rossiter of Philadelphia. His website <http://www.fruit-powered.com> contains information about raw foods and their benefits. He's also the author of books extolling the virtues of raw foods, including "Alive!: A Guide to Raw Food Transition."

His site has recipes, tips and information to find out more about how to eat raw.

At his classes at Shankara, Rossiter is demonstrating everything from smoothies to appetizers to main courses and party dishes. The recipes have just a few ingredients and take no time to prepare.

"I have no training as a chef," Rossiter says. "If a guy like me can put together these meals, it just shows that anyone can do this. A raw food diet really makes you feel wonderful."

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#### RAW FOOD DO'S AND DON'TS

- The basics:** Uncooked, unprocessed, organic foods including fruits, veggies, nuts, seeds and sprouted grains

- How "uncooked" can it be?** It just can't go above 118 degrees.

- Equipment you may need:** Blenders, food processors and dehydrators

- Some benefits:** A raw food diet is a good fit for vegetarians or vegans, and most raw foods are naturally gluten-free.

- A few drawbacks:** Eating out can be tricky and prep work can be extensive. (Lots of chopping, washing, peeling, etc.)

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