



NURTURING

naturally

FEELING THE LOVE
OF YOUR NEXT
MEAL SIMPLY
TAKES A CHANGE
IN PERSPECTIVE.

words SUE WHITE photography GETTY IMAGES

While models are not usually known for their commitment to good food, from the moment you meet Annalise Braakensiek it's obvious she's comfortable with breaking stereotypes.

"I'm a passionate meat-free cook and have been bordering on obsessed with food, flavours and spices for as long as I can remember," she says. "I started cooking for my family at the age of seven. I was brought up on a biodynamic farm, where my mother was an incredible gardener. We had beautiful fruit and vegetables and goat's milk. I was blessed."

Annalise's desire to share the nurturing qualities of food saw her stumble into her successful micro-business, Love Lunch, which provides dozens of hungry Sydneysiders with an organic, vegetarian lunch every Tuesday. "I just cook from my heart, always with seasonal and organic ingredients, as well as love," she says. "That's the most important ingredient in cooking. Friends started saying, 'Can I pay you to make that for me?' One week there were 30 people, the next 60 and eventually I realised there was a business in it."

The demand for nurturing food may be a niche market, but Annalise is about to expand Love Lunch just to keep up with orders. "I adore cooking and it means a lot to me that people can eat well," she says. "It comes back to someone caring about how they produce it. We can nurture ourselves by eating beautiful, seasonal produce that is organic; it's being kind to the planet and ourselves."

Annalise is one of a growing number of Australian cooks who believe the value of food goes way beyond the vitamins and minerals contained in the ingredients. While each has a unique approach, seasonal, organic and wholefoods are seen by all as key ingredients in a diet that truly nurtures. Professor Kerin O'Dea is a nutrition scientist at the University of South Australia who agrees that our diets need a rethink to be more healing.

"I would like people to eat fresh food and wholefoods whenever they can," she says. "There are better ways to eat than simply becoming obsessed with low-fat foods or crash diets: we need healthy fats. I'm a protagonist of the traditional Mediterranean diet, which is mostly in plant form but includes some meat and fish as well as lots of fresh

and raw vegetables, as well as raw and unprocessed fruit."

While Professor Kerin O'Dea doesn't believe we need to eat a lot of meat and prefers recommending fish to non-vegetarians wanting additional protein, she says processed foods should be avoided wherever possible. "People buy something like fruit sticks and think they're doing the right thing for their diet," she says. "The claims on the outside of the packet show pictures of the original fruit, but those concentrated fruit bars can have 72 per cent sugar. I say eat fresh fruit and you can't go wrong."

Nutritionist, counsellor and popular cooking teacher Maria Mitzikis, known as the Food Muse, is even more wary when she steps into a supermarket. "You should really stick to the edges; to the bread, milk and fruit and vegetables," she says. "If you're standing in the centre of a supermarket looking at a wall of tins, you have to ask yourself what you're doing there."

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Maria also cooks seasonally and agrees with Professor O'Dea that wholefoods are the way to go for health and wellbeing. Clients come from across the country to her NSW cooking school to learn how to create a healing kitchen and address conditions such as diabetes, endometriosis and candida via food.

"All foods are medicinal and have healing properties; once you understand this, it becomes different, and enjoyable," she says. "It's about eating food from the ground, the trees and the ocean, and not eating anything that's been put together in a lab or synthetically. It's nothing new — peasant societies and people from small European villages ate this way before being touched by the industrial revolution. They grew their food and ate it. We've just forgotten how."

Shawn Somerset, senior lecturer in human nutrition at Griffith

University's School of Public Health, agrees there is value in growing your own food. "There's a psychological fulfilment in growing some of your own food," he says. "It's hard to find a nutritional advantage for it, but certainly the interaction between people and food is vital. We should all be cultivating food to some degree. It only needs to be one plant or a couple of pots with herbs, but that's enough to bring enrichment to our daily routine and to life."

There's no doubt that a large hurdle for many open to increasing their commitment to healthy cooking is time. But while time-poor people may balk at the thought of extra hours in the kitchen, those used to cooking from scratch say it's wrong to think eating better takes more time.

"We have the illusion cooking is time-consuming, but most people think of cooking as elaborate dishes," Maria Mitsikas adds. "I like to eat food the way it is — barely changed — so steaming or lightly sautéing is best; you're getting the food in its pure form and not inhibiting the flavours."

Annalise Braakensiek agrees. "Even if you're not a cook, it's really easy to make beautiful salads or steamed vegies," she says. "You really can't ruin tofu or fish if you steam them. Regardless of what you cook, it's incredibly important to eat seasonally. Mother Nature is doing her thing for us and it's ridiculous to ignore that."

To change old habits, Maria recommends spending a couple of hours on a weekend afternoon preparing for the week ahead. "Put together bases like sauces or dips to use as spreads for main meals," she says. "Boil up grains beforehand so you have different containers of lentils or barley to sprinkle onto salads. Once you get into the swing of it, it actually saves time."

Maria has seen enough success stories among her students to know when we do begin to nurture ourselves with food, our health and wellbeing change for the better. "Isolating properties out of fruit and vegetables and putting them into a capsule doesn't work," she says. "When people learn to cook for themselves, this is where the magic happens." 