



**GUT BUG, A LOT OF THE FOOD INTOLERANCES WILL DISAPPEAR"**

**RESPONSIBILITY. THEY'RE GETTING CAUGHT OUT AND EXPOSED AS A RESULT"**

**A**re you a vegan, flexitarian or do you fodmap? Tried raw, pegan (a combination of paleo and vegan) or 5:2? Almost every day, there's a new fad diet, with buzzwords to match.

Pushed by everyone from celebrity chefs to wellness experts and bloggers, these new diet tribes promise everything from weight loss and clear skin, to cures for chronic illness and cancer.

Add to that the conflicting studies coming from the world of health science, and how do you know if what you are eating is making a difference or is even good for you at all?

We're more obsessed with food than ever before, but is it, well, healthy?

Sarah Wilson, the journalist and television host turned *I Quit Sugar* crusader, says the combination of new voices in social media and emerging new science is leaving people confused about who to believe.

"We're seeing quite a lot of confusion overall relating to what we eat," Wilson says. "There are wellness bloggers everywhere, with varying degrees of experience and commitment. At the same time, science is happening thick and fast, and basically pulling apart what we've thought was true for years. Egg yolks used to be bad for you, and now that thinking has been debunked, and we're discovering that they're good for you."

Brisbane nutritionist Jessica Cox agrees. "There is this real dichotomy that exists between people with really poor eating habits, who are obese or malnourished, and then this extreme, compulsive healthy eating we're seeing," Cox says.

"There's not much meeting in the middle. You can see that the old-school (government-approved) healthy eating guidelines are trying to get your average person to eat well, but it's problematic because grains and cereals are promoted as

# DEBUNKING DIETS

Confused over what's healthy? With so many conflicting messages, it's hard not to be. In the first of a two-part special, *Queensland Taste* looks into our fad diet fanaticism and if it is really making us sick

SHARNEE RAWSON



the main intake, so the new wellness movement is going, 'Oh no, that's bad'.

"The right notions are there for the average person, but the other wellness diets are worlds apart."

She says it's the people who get caught in the middle who suffer, with factoids on social media and popularisation of niche foods clouding their judgment.

"People want to eat healthy, but feel extreme pressure that they're not doing it the right way, that if they're not having a

teaspoon of every superfood on the market, they're doing it wrong."

Superfoods, such as quinoa, kale and green powders, come with a premium price tag that is outside the reach of most family budgets.

Focus on balancing macro-nutrients (fats, carbohydrates and protein) instead, Cox says.

"Macro-nutrients are foods that your body needs in larger quantities to function properly. I look for complex carbohydrates, something with fibre in there, protein and fat. We can function without carbs, but for a lot of

people, carbs will make them feel more balanced and energised."

Years ago, diets were about losing weight. Now, certain dietary plans have been anecdotally linked to curing everything from cancer to autism.

Google the term "paleo" and you'll find thousands of online testimonials from people who have ditched wheat and claim, suddenly, their bloating, skin conditions, headaches and tiredness have disappeared.

Noosa integrative general practitioner Vivienne Taylor, who blends traditional and conventional medicine, says elimination diets may just be masking underlying health issues.

"Everything starts with the gut – quite often people will have parasites, and certain foods feed the nasties, which produces symptoms. So people go off that food and feel better, but it's not intolerance.

"If you fix the gut bug, a lot of the food intolerances will disappear."

Taylor doesn't write off anecdotal stories, but does stress that individual advice is important for managing health issues.

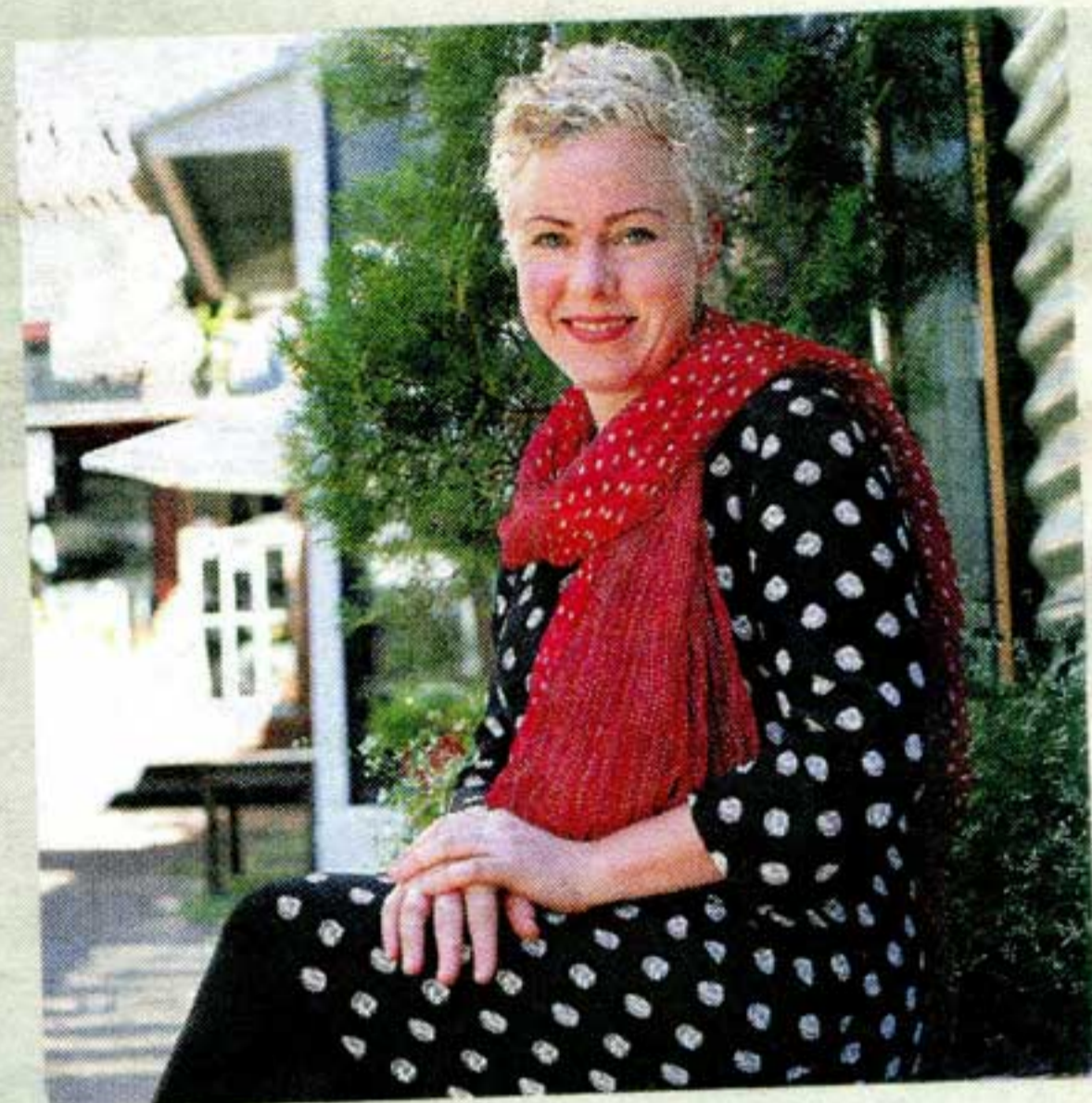
"It's good that people are taking notice of what they're putting in their mouths, but there are certain people who should never adopt food fad diets, especially pregnant ladies, breast-feeding women and epileptics," she says. "We look at a person as a whole person, and try to find out the causes (of their issues), so patients can manage themselves."

Ananda Mahony, a senior lecturer in nutritional medicine at Endeavour College of Natural Health, says parts of the online health cohort and dishonest and misleading claims by the likes of Brisbane social media guru and cookbook author Belle Gibson, who claimed food helped her cure a made-up case of terminal brain cancer, were a blow to nutritionists in general.

"We should not be making claims to cure cancer on any level, and for her story to turn out to be fraudulent was so disappointing.



**SAMANTHA GOWING**  
CLINICAL NUTRITIONIST AND SPA CHEF



**ANANDA MAHONY**  
SENIOR LECTURER,  
ENDEAVOUR COLLEGE OF NATURAL HEALTH

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diseases is irresponsible, as is the media's habit of cherrypicking elements of diets for sensational headlines.

"Ninety per cent of nutritional science isn't gold-standard science, and there are varying degrees of hypothesis. You can't put kids in a room and feed them M&Ms, nor can you isolate one food group."

Orthorexia is becoming a growing concern among health experts from the information overload about diets. The condition is yet to be formally recognised, but has been published in science journals as a fear of food, or an unhealthy obsession with eating extremely restrictive diets.

"I see it in some of my students," Mahony says. "Is your interest in eating only healthy foods having positive or negative consequences on your health? Aspects of mental health come into what we do, and have a huge amount of influence."

It's an issue that Jessica Cox says is only on the rise. "The people promoting these programs need to be more accountable about how they can affect the public. I see the end

result – people coming in with confusion, stress and anxiety."

Samantha Gowing, a spa chef and clinical nutritionist, has spent the past 15 years teaching wellness and healthy eating habits, including the paleo diet, but says the all-or-nothing message is starting to cause damage.

"Pete (Evans) has come out and said, 'Paleo my way or the highway'. He went too far, he got too much airplay and it all started with an activated almond. The righteous approach to eating is abhorrent. By adopting one particular pathway so religiously, you isolate yourself from your community and your family. It's not about using your intuition and a shared table. Eating should be a naturally occurring, happy thing."

At the same time, she's devastated at the level of "vitriol" being thrown at the wellness industry as a result.

"We practitioners and 'well-preneurs' are not all evangelistic, fish-waving fanatics peddling hope from the top of an organic soapbox," she says. "The rise of the

unqualified food and wellness blogger has had a lot to do with it. It's the elevation of a quick fix, going, 'Look, there's a size-8 model, if I have green smoothies, I'll be just like her'. There's a lot of competitive energy, a lot of setting people up for failure, but certain diets don't work for everybody, and it's really important to acknowledge that."

One of Gowing's biggest concerns isn't what we eat, but how it impacts us on a deeper level.

"Food is community, growth and celebrity – it's our culture. What's the culture and heritage behind elimination diets? It's not a culture, it's a trend."

"It's a complete disconnect with our culture and community, and our gut feelings. When you feel a bit down, you think, I need some brown rice and soup, or maybe bread and butter. That's comfort, that's our culture."

**So what fad diet should you look into, and which should you flick? Our five experts will examine five of the most popular diets around in next week's edition of Queensland Taste, out Tuesday, May 26.**

