

# THE QUARRY

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Nutritionism sells like hotcakes...

*That is, hotcakes that are 99% fat free, high in omega 3's and packed with Goji berries.*

*A passionate plea*

An uncomfortable gargling, heaving, snorting, horse-like resonance composes the room as olive oil tasting exhibits itself before me. How did I get here in a room full of foodies? We are discussing the flavours that tackle our taste buds. Grassy? Fruity? Spicy? Malty? Winey? Smokey? The words themselves conjure up more and more ideas about flavour. Sitting in my chair, burning my throat with the rawness of the olive oil, I wonder where my obsession with food came from. I wonder why I'm so fixated on food and not something normal like cats or clothes. Why don't I find this scene ridiculously hilarious? Why am I so food curious?

Try to get me to listen to a lecture on physics or mathematics and I would fall asleep with boredom, but start talking about the simplest thing to do with food, like a potato and I am hooked on your every word. I am interested in food; its purpose, its politics, its playfulness, and its performance in people's lives excites me. Talking about food makes me feel like I'm about to burst with congested, bubbling information. But, I think the main reason why I love food, is because it tastes so damn good if it's done properly.

This is why I write about food, this is why I'm in this room gargling olive oil like a horse. I was brought up with a high respect for food and I honour it, in all its deliciousness, three times a day. For me it's more than biology, more than something that is chewed, digested and excreted, more than a collection of nutrients bundled up into something edible. To me Food - with a capital F - is about cooking; it's about ingredients, seasons, sharing it with friends and family and having a sensorial connection with *nature*. Food is one of few things that doesn't have an 'I' in front of it, doesn't need an app to be important, won't run out of battery, won't tag you in a hideous photo on Facebook and won't decide to Tweet about you in one-hundred and forty characters or less.

Food is simple. Well, it should be.

Am I one of few people that still think this way? For a twenty-one year old, I feel pretty *old school* when my idea of a good meal is a steaming bowl of sweetly rich French onion soup with a homemade crisp baguette straight out of the oven, lashed with butter. Being a chef, I understand that maybe due to the skills I have, food simply means more to me because I deal with it every day. But I'm seeing more and more people who experience food only through the gaze of nutrition and science. Food isn't simple anymore.

Michael Pollan is a well-respected environmental food journalist. He has godfathered the deconstruction of nutrition in his book, *In Defence of Food* and shares my concerns. He writes,

Most of what we're consuming today is not food, and how we're consuming it — in the car, in front of the TV, and increasingly alone — is not really eating. Instead of food, we're consuming edible food-like substances — no longer the products of nature but of food science. Many of them come packaged with health claims that

should be our first clue they are anything but healthy. In the so-called Western diet, food has been replaced by nutrients, and common sense by confusion. The more we worry about nutrition, the less healthy we seem to become.

People who eat by obsessing over nutrition just don't sit right for me. Take for example the staff meal. As a chef who cooks for hundreds of people a day, it should be the easiest part of the day to cook for the staff. But with eight colleagues to feed, comes eight different ideas about nutrition and although we are in a restaurant, they're not eating out; they're having lunch, so they won't resist voicing their opinion about what's been served up. Cooking a simple meal for the staff has become a rather complicated affair that is pushed and pulled by my colleague's beliefs about what it means to eat 'healthy'.

Let's say you are me for the day. You turn up to work to find a prep list of endless jobs sitting on the bench before you. It's eight in the morning and you have one hour before breakfast starts. That's one hour to:

- Make the bread
- Cook a batch of scones
- Make the eggplant component to the lamb dish
- Pre-cook a huge amount of risotto
- Cook wild mushrooms
- Make aioli
- Finish off the soup, by blending and seasoning
- Make sure breakfast prep is ready by:
  - Traying-up bacon.
  - Whisking together pancake batter.

You start to make a dent at the list when the fish delivery arrives, three heavy kilos of Barramundi fresh from the sea, which needs to be portioned into two-hundred gram pieces and put away in the fridge quickly to avoid the pong of decaying fish-scales. Meanwhile a smell of smoky, burnt charcoal reaches your nose. Your apprentice has burnt all the scones you've just put in the oven by accidently cranking it up to two-

hundred-and-fifty degrees. All that's left on the tray is black asteroid looking clusters of once buttery moist scone dough. Devo.

But this is just a walk in the park. With so much to do you avoid making the staff lunch until now. It's ten-thirty and they usually eat by eleven. So you quickly cut up some bacon from breakfast, dice up an onion and sauté the two in a pot. This is then mounted with some cream, a handful of cooked and chopped button mushrooms, perfumed with a fresh bunch of thyme and left to simmer into a delicious, quick sauce. You cook up some fresh egg pasta and serve it in a large French crockery bowl with a nicely dressed salad on the side. Yum...?

One by one the staff approaches the pass.

'Oh, pasta for lunch... I might just have the salad. Oh, but it's been dressed... Is there any chance I can just have a piece of fish with some salad leaves?'

Fish goes on the pan. Another person approaches the bench.

'Wow, that's a lot of pasta! I'll just have the sauce. I'm not eating carbs right now. Do you have any rice? Preferably brown.'

You look at her confused. Rice is a carb! Where is this chick getting her information? But you don't question it and you put some rice in the microwave.

Another waiter approaches the pass.

'PASTA! Yum! Is there onion in this? I'm allergic to onion. Maybe I could just have some toast, but can I have it with some avocado or something that's green?'

Toast goes under the salamander.

'Holy crap that looks like a lot of calories! Cream, bacon, pasta wow that's like carbs, fat and fat. I'll just have salad I think, or is that fish you're cooking? Can I have a piece as well?'

Fish goes on the pan. Twenty minutes later what you're left with is half a bowl of pasta and no salad.

Now to me, what I'm serving them is fresh and real. It is food. Yes, it's made with cream and bacon, but I'm not asking them to eat it in truckloads. A small amount

with the salad and a glass of water is to me, a varied meal that is flavoursome and filling. And as I stand there myself heaping the so-called ‘unhealthy’ meal into my hungry mouth, I can’t help but feel like there’s something wrong with me. Am I the weirdo for taking actual pleasure in my food?

No, I don’t think it would be healthy if it was eaten every day, but every so often it won’t do you any harm. In fact I think it could do some good, compared to all the ‘99% fat free’ phony meals I see arranged in the frozen food section of supermarkets these days. The food I have served is fresh and all made from scratch. But already the meal is marked unworthy and unhealthy - a negative assumption I can’t help but find frustrating, especially when it tastes so good. It’s the middle of the day people; you’ll work it off!

People today are set in their ways when it comes to nutrition. But, if we were to combine all views of nutrition into one big ‘theory of eating’, we would find a lot of contradictions: Fermented foods aid in digestion; Fermented foods are essentially rotten. Pasteurized milk is better and safer; raw milk should be drunk as the bacteria are naturally occurring. Multi-vitamins are great for health; vitamin supplements do nothing and simply pass through the body. Sugar is bad; Honey is nature’s most perfect food. Fruit should be part of the diet; Fruit has more sugar in it than a lot of sweets. Grain fed beef is top grade meat; cows eat grass so grain fed is bad for you. These examples represent the politics of food and how complex it has become.

Food always has a story to tell and these stories reveal a lot about what it means to be human. It’s like religion; everyone has their own beliefs. And while I’d like to think I’m open to all types of beliefs when it comes to eating, the truth is I’m not. Because not all ways of eating were made equal, in fact some are not even close to getting it right. Enter my biggest concern - Nutritionism. Michael Pollan argues, ‘The age of Nutritionism has come...which implies the need for a priesthood. For to enter a world where your dietary salvation depends on unseen nutrients, you need plenty of expert help.’ I think we’d have to call it a first world problem, because we seem to be the only ones thinking way too much into it and getting fat and sick. It’s an ideology that is fixated on everything that goes into our mouths.

It has even fuelled its own eating disorder Orthorexia! This, in short, is an unhealthy obsession with eating healthy food. I’ve seen this eating disorder work its

way into the eating habits of a lot of peoples' lifestyles. Food has become less simple and more pre-occupied with science. Michael Pollan questions the fundamental nature of Nutritionism when he says;

This brings us to another unexamined assumption of Nutritionism: that the point of eating is to maintain and promote bodily health... (this) is not shared by all cultures and, further, the experience of these other cultures suggests that, paradoxically, regarding food as being about things other than bodily health – like pleasure, say, or sociality or identity—makes people no less healthy; indeed, there's some reason to believe it may make them more healthy... So there is at least a question as to whether the ideology of Nutritionism is actually any good for you.

As a chef I'm use to cooking with raw whole-foods. That is the banana-skin on (none of this puree crap that's been loaded with preservatives), the carcass of an animal, bread made from scratch with flour, yeast and water. So to say to me that products that have a nutritionist agenda and are fortified with vitamins and minerals are still food, I would be quick to say NO. On the basis that fortified 'foods' are products that have been added to with something like a vitamin or antioxidant so as to make the product more ideal and convenient to the consumer. As Michael Pollan suggests, all that crap in the middle of your supermarket aisle is marketed accumulations of trending ideas of Nutritionism and corn. But corn is a whole other topic.

So, no your bread is not supposed to be abundant in Omega 3's, and unfortunately no, your LCM bar is not a natural source of fibre. These things have been added. And what we seem to forget is that food company's main priority is not to make us healthy and happy, it's to make money. When the food corporations know that people are trending towards vitamin D, they will put it in their cheese. If they've heard of some miracle antioxidant, they will drop it in their cereal. Nothing is by chance. Super foods like quinoa, goji berries, freekah, acai, blue green algae, flaxseeds, cranberries, and prunes; are examples of these trends. All these foods are missing the point to eating. For to eat, is to eat Food... not Algae.

Aristotle once pointed out that although ordinary citizens lack the cobbler's expertise in how to make good shoes, they still know when the shoe pinches. While Aristotle was referring to the politics of popular government, there is still something important to take from this. For while we dwell in this world as our feet dwell in our

shoes, no one knows the world of my body better than my body. But have we lost touch with this embodied tacit knowledge when it comes to nutrition?

To bring you back to the room of olive oil gurglers, I'd like to suggest this idea that we use our bodies more. As I taste the olive oil and gargle it like a horse, I'm doing something with my body. I'm understanding flavour with my mouth and I'm registering its quality. I feel it is our whole bodies that tell us what needs to change, not Nutritionism. If it doesn't sit right with our body then we know we need to change what we are eating. Instead of going on a diet, it could just be becoming less involved with the middle of your supermarket or eating more often with friends and family.

I am what I'd like to call a *Classical* foodie. I eat food that had a face, I eat vegetables that knew the sun, and I eat bread made by hands not machines. As I write this I hope you can hear my plea for food to be real, for food to be natural and not for all the wrong reasons, and for food to be a social activity of pleasure and celebration.