

Clean eating is the new California cuisine

By **Amanda Gold** | December 31, 2015 | Updated: December 31, 2015 11:51am

0



Photo: Santiago Mejia, Special To The Chronicle

Little Gem, a new restaurant in Hayes Valley, embraces clean eating. Clockwise from top left: Roasted vegetables in a tapioca crepe, roasted chicken with harissa-glazed carrots, spinach and endive salad with blueberries and tangerines, and cured salmon.

A few nights after Christmas, I peeled a mandarin, set it on a plate next to a single pitted date, and added a few freshly cracked walnuts.

Dessert. Or, as I preferred to think of it: a practice run for a sugar-, dairy- and gluten-free January.

Clean eating, a term that's not clearly definable but refers to the quest for a more nutritious diet, has long been a path that others took — the guy with the bad knee who needed to reduce inflammation, the friend whose skin ailment would flare up whenever she ate something sweet, the new mom who couldn't shed the last 10 pounds — while I played the pitying spectator. A world without warm doughnuts always seemed downright cruel, not to mention that it is my job to eat.

But food in the Bay Area looks very different than it did even a few months ago, as a more approachable, more enticing “clean” cuisine takes shape both in and outside the home. Eating mindfully is on its way to becoming the next evolution in California cuisine.

“We're lucky to live in California because we're always at the forefront of any kind of movement, and this food movement is definitely bubbling up,” says Mo Clancy, who opened Seed + Salt last year with the goal of offering restaurant-quality dishes free of the things many can no longer tolerate — or

RELATED



Recipe: Almond-Flax Tostadas With Steak and Peppers



Recipe: Mock “Tuna” Salad



Recipe: Heirloom Bean and Kale Salad



Pollan makes commonsense case ‘In Defense of Food’



Watch people living with moderate to severe **ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease** share their stories.

no longer want to — like gluten, dairy, refined sugar, trans fats and GMOs. “Because we’re so surrounded by produce and have access to the best ingredients, chefs are learning new techniques to make that food taste good.”

It’s a trend that’s gaining momentum. And like so many others before it, one that’s beginning to become more mainstream — especially as resolution makers jump-start the New Year with a healthier mind-set. But beyond the crazy cleanses, beyond even the image of a single piece of fruit and a pile of nuts, a growing number of diners are looking at a more pure, mindful diet as everyday practice.

And it’s never been easier to jump on board.



Photo: John Storey

IMAGE 1 OF 12

Avocado Toast at Nourish in S.F.

In the past year alone, several restaurants have opened with high-end, impressively good food that even a diabetic, lactose-hating celiac with a nightshade allergy could approach without preamble. But it's not only vegan restaurants. We're seeing the movement at a growing number of more mainstream restaurants, like newcomers Al's Place, Liholiho Yacht Club and the Progress, which by focusing more on proteins and vegetables are cooking cleaner by default.

The tech world has followed suit, launching delivery services and meal kits that offer Paleo or vegan fare on the fly, most notably writer and food activist Mark Bittman's Purple Carrot, which provides prepped ingredients for home cooks to produce high-quality vegan meals. And those once hard-to-find items that make cooking these meals at home possible are now just steps — or a click — away.

Perhaps nowhere is this more true than at the newly opened Little Gem in San Francisco's Hayes Valley, where founder Eric Lilavois — former COO for the Thomas Keller Restaurant Group — has partnered with John DiFazio and chef (and fellow Keller alum) Dave Cruz to launch a fast-casual restaurant for those seeking nutritious food.

Yet as Lilavois explains, this isn't so much a sign of the future as a revisit to the past.

“I like to think of Little Gem as the way people used to eat,” he says. “There are no trends here. We're not fabricating anything. It's just the most natural, healthy way of eating.”

That's true, though there's certainly finesse required in the kitchen. At Little Gem, Cruz crafts dishes like a roasted vegetable “wrap” in a tapioca crepe, pan-roasted salmon with quinoa, slivered almonds and wilted spinach, and an heirloom bean and kale salad with a bright lemon-scallion vinaigrette made with coconut vinegar ([see accompanying recipe](#)). The plates are simple yet artful, reminiscent of any you'd find at an upscale restaurant in the city.



Photo: Santiago Mejia, Special To The Chronicle

A salmon dish with quinoa, olives, almonds, wilted spinach and lemon scallion vinaigrette at Little Gem

“People wanted me to put out front the banner that it’s gluten-free, but that makes it sounds exclusive,” says Lilavois, who admits that Little Gem was born from his own realization that he had dietary restrictions and had difficulty finding something good to eat. “The fact that our food has no gluten is just the added advantage.”

Jeff Nobbs was also scratching his own itch when he founded Mealmade, a prepared-meal delivery service (a la Munchery) offering strictly Paleo cuisine. Also known as the “caveman diet,” Paleo parameters say no dairy, gluten, grains, lentils or sugar — the lowest common denominators for those eliminating “bad” foods.

Nobbs says he started eating Paleo a few years back and was frustrated that the only way to eat was to cook at home — a terribly inefficient process for someone who isn’t adept in the kitchen.

“When I went onto all of these food apps, there was literally not one dish that would work for me,” Nobbs says. “There was always something, like soybean oil or butter, that would make it hard for me to order.”

Customers ordering from Mealmade don’t have the same problem; they can get dishes like steak tacos with almond tortillas ([see accompanying recipe](#)), spaghetti squash with salmon and sundried tomatoes; or a grilled chicken Caesar with soft-boiled eggs and Paleo-friendly dressing. Most of the time, similar to Little Gem, customers won’t even know what they’re missing.

“You don’t need to sacrifice taste to eat this way,” says Nobbs.

Paleo and its close cousin diet the Whole 30 are two extreme measures that people are taking to feel better and cleanse their bodies. But with so many restaurants and services offering whole, nutritious foods, is it necessary to go to such lengths?



Photo: John Storey

“Everything should be eaten in moderation, but really it’s whatever gets people motivated,” says Brighton Miller, who opened Nourish, a plant-based cafe in the Inner Richmond in early 2015. “Sometimes people have to start there because elimination causes you to become mindful about what you’re eating.”

Still, she says, drastic diets are not realistic in the long term. Miller advises “eating the rainbow daily” and offers dishes at Nourish that follow suit: colorful salads tossed with hemp vinaigrettes, avocado toast made with gluten-free or conventional bread, acai bowls without added sugar.

“For the average person, if they eat real, simple food they’re going to be fine,” seconds Seed + Salt’s Clancy.

But just saying “plant-based” or “gluten-free” isn’t enough anymore. Gluten-free doesn’t always mean it’s good for you — “you wouldn’t eat a pound of gluten-free doughnuts and say that’s healthy just because they’re made with rice flour,” jokes Miller — and plant-based could mean a lot of things, like fried potatoes, which are fine in small amounts but not the stuff of a nutritious diet.

“It’s not one size fits all,” explains Katie Ferraro, assistant clinical professor in the School of Nursing at UCSF and a registered dietitian, who says she’s seen a definite uptick in those looking for a cleaner eating regimen. “It’s up to the individual to figure out what they need to eliminate, and a lot of people are unnecessarily cutting out the wrong things.”

Most people who don’t have a specific dairy allergy, for example, don’t need to completely eliminate cheese (unless they’re eating pounds a week of triple creme). If you don’t suffer from celiac disease, there are plenty of whole grains that are fine to eat. “You don’t want to be throwing out the baby with the bathwater,” Ferraro says.

Still, she concurs that going extreme is sometimes the best way to begin: “It represents a psychological break for a period where you used to eat poorly (the holidays), to a period when you want to eat better (the new year). If it makes you more conscious, that can be good.”

All say the result will be positive at the end: It's nearly impossible not to feel better after a cleansing diet.

Of course, “nobody wants to sacrifice one of the greatest pleasures of life just to feel good,” Clancy says. “It's up to the food providers to make dishes that really taste great for the customers.”



Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

A burger of beets, walnuts and lentils at Seed + Salt in S.F.

According to Ferraro, it's also up to the customers to provide for themselves in their own kitchens. “It's always going to be better when you prepare it at home,” she says.

Extreme or otherwise, we now have better tools than ever before. Healthier ingredients used to be relegated to dusty back shelves at hippie organic grocers. Now, items like kelp granules — a naturally salty alternative that can make **mock tuna salad** (seen on menus at Nourish and

Seed + Salt and **totally doable at home**) taste like seafood salad without the animal product or the mercury — can be found in the aisles at Whole Foods.

Same goes for ingredients like almond flour, which a decade ago could only be made by processing it at home. Now it can go into those **“Paleo” tortillas for tacos or tostadas**.

And with such easily accessible produce and sustainable proteins, all that’s required is some advanced prep at home to make “clean eating” possible. Make extra beans and dressing for Little Gem’s kale and heirloom bean salad, for example, to enhance other dishes throughout the week. Or get a bunch of fruit for snacking, so when you’re dreaming of warm doughnuts, you can reach for a mandarin instead.

At least that’s my plan.

Regardless, this new evolution in California cuisine means that when I tire of the kitchen — or when I’m done with a month of drastic clean eating and ready to wade back in more mindfully — there’s a safety net of Bay Area chefs and producers to help me along.

Recipe: Almond-Flax Tostadas

Recipe: Mock "Tuna" Salad

Recipe: Heirloom Bean and Kale Salad

*Amanda Gold is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: agold@sfchronicle.com;
Twitter: @AmandaGold; Instagram: @agold_sfchron.*

Tips for clean eating

Start Small: Seed + Salt’s Mo Clancy recommends starting with one meal a day, even if it’s breakfast or lunch, as those are often easier foods to prepare. “A slow shift is totally doable because your body will tell you what it needs,” she says.

Pack a lunch: Bring your lunch to work instead of going out to a restaurant.

Switch out your snacks: Up to three pieces of fruit per day is fine for most adults, so switch out your snacks and dessert to fruit, says Katie Ferraro, a registered dietitian. Avoid the vending machine, and sub one piece of fruit for dessert at night.

Find a support group: There's no way I could do a month of clean without some serious cheerleading and ideas for when I'm in a rut. My solution? I've created a shared Google doc where I'm writing down my daily food diary, and a few friends who are doing this alongside me are writing down theirs as well. It's a way to be held accountable, plus we see what the others are eating so we can use those ideas in our own kitchens. Everybody wins.

Eat how your body feels good: Not everyone needs to cut out sugar, says Clancy, so just be aware of what does and doesn't feel good to you. Of course, if you are keeping sugar in the diet, try to make it coconut sugar or other unrefined sugars.

Use the Internet: Others have gone before you, so use their resources. Check out Pinterest, Instagram or food blogs, searching for keywords like "Paleo" or "Whole 30-approved" to get you started with recipes and ideas.



Amanda Gold

Food Reporter