



Immaculate Consumption

Clean food bears the promise of edible salvation. But the rhetoric surrounding it can be hard to swallow.

by **Rebecca Flint Marx**

EVEN IN THE BAY AREA, where you can't throw an acai bowl without hitting a juice bar, the Mission Heirloom Garden Café manages to stand out from the wheatgrass pack. It's not vegan or vegetarian or raw: It's a "clean food" restaurant, where "clean" describes not only the food, which is organic, sustainable, biodynamic, and paleo-adherent, but also the methods with which it's handled. Opened in late November in Berkeley, it seems less a restaurant than a panic room fortified against unwelcome intruders from our shady modern diet: gluten, legumes, most dairy and grains, MSG, sugar, bleach, aluminum, plastic, and any method of cooking that leads to oxidation and amino acid chain breakage.

"If you help and contribute with human beings being fed and fueled in the right way, you're maximizing their potential," Yrmis Barroeta, one of Mission Heirloom's owners, tells me dreamily when I

ask what drives her culinary philosophy. "It's almost like the rest of the problems can take care of themselves."

Barroeta and her partner, Bobby Chang, got the idea to open their restaurant after they "stumbled onto paleo" a few years ago while dealing with some health issues: Chang has hepatitis B and was suffering from digestive problems, while Barroeta wanted to lose excess weight associated with a then-undiagnosed autoimmune condition. After experiencing "shocking, tangible health improvements" on the diet—Chang's viral load decreased, and Barroeta lost the extra pounds, she says—the pair of former product designers began spreading the gospel of paleo, which involves eating only what our ancient ancestors are purported to have eaten: meat, seafood, nuts, vegetation.

"We realized that when people were hearing us talking, they were like, 'Wow, now you've cursed us because we don't have a place to go and don't know what to eat,'" Barroeta recalls. "So I started compiling lists of foods for friends. I was completely overwhelmed, spending tons of time procuring food. We stopped going to restaurants and said, 'Screw it, let's just open our own place.'"

Northern California is a place where religion tends to manifest itself in the pursuit of greater physical well-being: surfing, meditation, TRX classes. So it's not particularly surprising that food gets cast either as a tool to attain enlightenment or, more commonly, as an obstacle to it. A casual glance, for example, at the immaculately spare confines of any one of Project Juice's proliferating locations makes it clear that a juice bar isn't a lowly retail space: It's a storefront church where salvation is peddled in the form of liquefied plant life.

While the idea of edible salvation or damnation isn't new—clean food has its roots in the 1960s health foods movement and got a boost in 1982 from Ralph Nader's *Eating Clean: Food Safety and the Chemical Harvest*—the incredible amount of ever-mutating information available to us is. "The science of nutrition is constantly changing," says Rebecca Katz, a San Rafael-based chef and wellness expert and the author of *The Healthy Mind Cookbook*, which will be published in February. "All you have to do is Google something, and you can

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Indeed, the desire for clean food seems like the natural culmination of the how-pure-can-you-be trajectory of the food movement of the last decade, over the course of which organic begat sustainable begat the conscientious omnivore begat farm-to-table begat locavorism begat small-batch artisanal begat the kale salad's bloodless coup of the Bay Area (and the rest of the country) begat gluten panic.

It's no longer enough to eat locally, sustainably, organically, and so on: Pack that kale salad in Tupperware, and you might as well picnic in Chernobyl. Barroeta herself says that "scientists, doctors, biohackers, and bloggers are constantly feeding us information" about how to run Mission Heirloom; one of her sources is Unblind My Mind, a nonprofit organization founded by a biochemist who claims to have cured her daughter's autism through diet.

As someone who eats her weight in organic, local kale on a weekly basis and cleans her apartment with a spray bottle filled with a water-vinegar blend, I'm more open to the idea of clean food than most. But amid all this talk about amino acids and bleach, I wonder: At what point does healthy skepticism become paranoia, or just another way of telling everyone else they're doing it all wrong?

"The Health Code is one of the most toxic things I've ever seen," Barroeta sniffs. "The horrible plastic you're required to wrap chicken in leaches chemicals into meat." She's working with Berkeley's health department to use wooden cutting boards instead of "super-toxic" plastic, but they have to be solid wood because, as Barroeta explains, "the food-grade glue that usually comes in wooden boards has high levels of formaldehyde." Towels from a conventional laundry service are likewise problematic—"when you open them, you get showered in bleach"—which is in part why the restaurant is focusing instead on high-heat sanitation.

Much of Mission Heirloom's food will be prepared in a special oven that cooks food at 100 percent humidity. Frying, sautéing, grilling, and caramelizing are all verboten, as they reportedly release excess glutamate within proteins, which Barroeta has claimed is the equivalent of dumping MSG all over the food. But boiling water seems to be OK. "We're going to have amazing poached eggs," Barroeta says. "Though I'm personally allergic to eggs."

While I share Mission Heirloom's concerns about the chemicals leaching into my food, its condemnation of cooking methods that don't mimic the climate of a jungle in Borneo leaves me, well, cold: At what point do we cross the line from reasonable doubt into a fetishistic obsession with purity that feels weirdly reminiscent of the eugenics movement?

I feel more of an affinity with Mo Clancy, the former fashion designer and entrepreneur behind Seed + Salt, a clean-food restaurant in the Marina that also opened in November. Like Mission Heirloom, it eschews gluten, MSG, dairy, and cane sugar; like Barroeta, Clancy was inspired to open her restaurant after health issues led her to give up gluten and dairy and she found herself dissatisfied with San Francisco's healthy-restaurant options. Although Clancy is also concerned about environmental toxins, she prefers to focus on flavor and appearance, which is why she hired a professional chef to create a menu big on robust, umami-rich dishes. "It's super-important because food is an experience," she says. "It's not just chewing and swallowing; what does it stand for?"

As I listen to Clancy, I realize that that's the unspoken question that dogs many discussions about food (in certain circles, at least), one that has a way of negating its simple enjoyment. Maybe that's why, despite agreeing with much of what clean food represents, I find myself weary of the rhetoric surrounding it. Food can't just be food anymore: It has to be either life-affirming or threatening, clean or dirty. That said, what's useful about the message that Barroeta and the clean-food crowd are spouting is the awareness that it fosters: Even if you don't share the belief that enclosing chicken in Glad wrap renders it inedible, you may still pause to consider what, exactly, you're putting in your body. And if you can do it without donning a tinfoil hat in the process, then all the better. ■