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The Cult of Clean Eating

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These are the top food trends that the British media predicted for 2016: seaweed, parsnip puddings and sprouted seeds. And yet what was the most popular recipe on BBC Good Food, the country's biggest cooking site? Lemon drizzle cake. When it comes to the food that we eat, the gulf between fantasy and fact has never been wider.

A third of British children are overweight, yet from the pictures tagged as "kids' food" on the photo-sharing platform Instagram you would think they lived on pumpkin muffins and raw breakfast cereal.

Food trends have always been the preserve of those wealthy enough to enjoy the luxury of choice. If social media had been around in the 18th century, the exotic pineapple would have been trending heavily even as the majority of Britons subsisted on bread and gruel. Yet rarely have these fads been so hard to ignore: right now, we are a society obsessed with our stomachs . . . or, at least, our eyes, given that these seem to do much of the consuming.

The average British adult spends five hours a week watching, reading about, browsing and posting about food – and just four cooking it. A record 14.8 million of us tuned in to the final of *The Great British Bake Off* yet the most commonly eaten meal in the UK is a sandwich. That conjures a depressing image of each one of us sitting in front of a screen, scrolling through endless pictures of kale smoothies and activated quinoa as we tuck in to a floppy BLT.¹

A nation in which it was once considered vulgar to comment on one's food has turned into one where it is a bit weird not to. However, social media cannot be wholly to blame for the demonising of simple nourishment in the 21st century. Once upon a time, "bad food" meant adulterated food – cheese dyed using lead, bread bleached with chalk – or perhaps cruel food, such as battery-farmed eggs. Occasionally someone who seemed to take too much pleasure in their meals might feel the weight of the country's Protestant past, but wholesome food was generally seen as good rather than sinful.

Although clean eating is often described merely as a movement that champions minimally processed, "natural" foods, one of the few things that unites its various congregations is the need to eliminate what they deem to be unclean alternatives. Gluten is a popular target for

¹ Bacon, Lettuce, and Tomato Sandwich

dismissal, because it can be “hard to digest”; legumes are sometimes blamed for “bloating”. Cane sugar is definitely out, but consumption of dates and honey is actively encouraged, often served with a generous spoonful of coconut oil or nut butter (but not peanut butter, because that “gives you cancer”).

The backlash was not long in coming. “Dirty” food, which revels in its own naughtiness, is the inevitable flip side of the clean-eating coin, a world where adherents compete to outdo each other in crimes against cookery. Online audiences encourage such extremes; they like their food either very, very good or horrid. In short, a simple spaghetti Bolognese is never going to get as much attention on Twitter as an “Italian-style” beefburger, dripping with Bolognese sauce, drenched in Parmesan, and served between two slabs of deep-fried pasta.

An Oxford University study published last year in the journal *Brain and Cognition* explored the possibility that “exposure to images of desirable foods can trigger inhibitory cognitive processes such as self-restraint”. The researchers concluded that our brain has to make a great effort to resist temptation when looking at “food porn”, in order to “maintain a reasonably healthy weight”.

Technology will decide – work is already under way on virtual-reality headsets that allow diners to eat one food while looking at an image of another. This is a significant development, as evidence suggests that changing the appearance of food can affect our perception of its taste and flavour. It is possible to imagine, in the not-too-distant future, chowing down on a plate of steamed fish while gazing lasciviously at a bacon cheeseburger. Or we could just learn the old-fashioned art of moderation. Is there a hashtag for that?