

'Every little bit counts,' says this raw foodist



FRONT BURNER Lindsey Nair

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Amy Tuggle of Roanoke usually drinks her breakfast.

But we're not talking a grande iced coffee from Starbucks, a Slim-Fast shake or even a Carnation Instant Breakfast.

Tuggle, 31, starts with 30 ounces of water to battle overnight dehydration. A little later, she chases that with a quart of juiced vegetables or maybe a smoothie made with fresh fruit and veggies flavored with lemon juice and ginger.

She has been starting her day that way for about three years, ever since she went on the increasingly popular raw food diet.

Raw foodists, as some call them, believe that cooking food destroys its vital enzymes and nutrients. If you eat these foods raw, the beneficial components are more easily absorbed into the body, and you do not lose as much energy through the digestion process, they say.

"A lot of people have clearer skin, more energy and need less sleep," Tuggle said.

Some raw foodists are raw vegetarians; others, like Tuggle, are raw vegans, meaning they avoid all animal products including dairy and eggs. Still others incorporate raw meats into their diet.

No sacrifice of flavor

My first reaction when I thought about eating raw fruits and vegetables all the



Amy Tuggle

time was "Blech!" I love fresh produce but wondered how a cold, bland diet could satisfy anyone on a long-term basis.

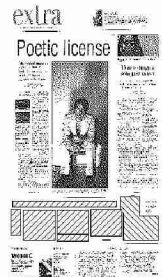
Tuggle says the diet is plagued by those misconceptions — that it lacks flavor and all you get to eat is mushy, cold food.

Tuggle said she eats a salad just about every day, blending a homemade raw dressing made with citrus juice, honey (the only nonvegan product she eats) and

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fresh herbs. She is also fond of blended soups, which she flavors with herbs, garlic and onion and makes in her trusty Vita-Mix blender.

As it blends, the Vita-Mix actually warms the soup to almost 110 degrees, enough to take the chill off but not enough to destroy nutrients,



she said.

She also incorporates fruit for sweetness, avocados for creaminess and ingredients such as hemp seeds for protein.

For a treat, she might make a smoothie with fresh mint and dark chocolate. Or she might follow a recipe for no-bake pies or cookies.

"I have yummy things," she assured me, "because I can make them and I can make them healthy. I made lemon meringue cookies for the potluck on Sunday."

The potluck is a regular occurrence for the raw food group that Tuggle organized through Meetup.com, a Web site that allows people to find other people near them who share similar interests.

She started the group "for sanity reasons" after moving back to Roanoke — she's a North Cross School graduate — from New York City in November.

"I think when you are doing something that is a little against the norm, it is really important to have the support around you of people who are doing the same thing," she said.

The group has about 30 members who share recipes and get together for food and fellowship.

A big commitment

A friend in Seattle first got Tuggle thinking about a lifestyle change. Once a year, her friend followed a 30-day detoxification diet, which cleared up his complexion and helped him lose weight.

But "the next week, he would just retox right back into it," she said.

After moving to New York City, Tuggle decided to try her own detox, going on a raw food diet for three days. She felt so wonderful that she has been eating raw ever since, with her diet consisting of at least 90 percent raw foods.

Tuggle says lots of people get hung up on those percentages, saying you aren't a true raw foodist unless your diet consists of at least 75 percent raw foods.

"People try to overcomplicate everything," she said. "I think that every little bit counts. If tomorrow you ate one more apple, you are eating raw. That's it."

Registered dietitian Nancy Robbins, who teaches nutrition classes at Jefferson College of Health Sciences in Roanoke, said she has seen an increased interest in the raw food diet.

"I think what happened is that people on the West Coast have been doing it for a while and then the celebrities picked up on it and then you are going to start seeing it in the press," Robbins said.

She said she would never discourage clients from trying the diet, but they must understand it is a big commitment of time and energy to maintain the lifestyle.

Benefits of the diet include weight loss, cholesterol control and more fiber intake, she said. But like any plant-based diet, it needs to be supplemented with vitamin B-12, iron, calcium and other nutrients that may be missing.

Robbins also said it has not been scientifically proved that the body benefits substantially from the plant enzymes in raw foods.

"We are not plants. We need our own enzymes," she said. "Our bodies make the enzymes we need for digestion."

Overall, Robbins said, there are great lessons to be learned from any diet, whether it be to decrease sugar intake, eat fewer carbohydrates or con-

sume more vegetables. And Americans in general do not eat enough raw foods, she said, so Tuggle is right to encourage folks to eat raw, even if it's just a little bit at a time.

"You would just have to try it and see how you feel," Robbins said. "Obviously, if you are eating healthy, you are probably going to feel better."

To learn more

■ Join the Meetup group by heading to www.meetup.com and searching by the topic "raw food" and your ZIP code.

■ Attend Amy Tuggle's raw food class at Grandin Gardens on Grandin Road in Roanoke at 5 p.m. Sunday. It's called "Family Friendly Simple & Delicious Raw Food." There is a suggested donation of \$10. To reserve a spot for the class and keep up with upcoming classes, head to <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Raw-Food-Roanoke/>



Nancy Robbins



Want to make pickles? We've got recipes on the blog.