

Food for Thought: A Taste for Flesh --- Refined or Repulsive? Any Way You Slice It, It's Still Raw Meat

By Robert Templer

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Chefs are cooking less and less these days. There's hardly a menu around that doesn't feature a list of raw foods -- carpaccios, tartares, ceviches and variants of sashimi are everywhere. Rawness offers a slippery sensuality, a return to our primal nature in an ever-more processed and packaged world. Carpaccios and tartares are no longer restricted to beef. Now everything from lamb to kangaroo to mahi-mahi comes sliced thin or chopped but not cooked.

The application of fire to food has been around for a paltry million years or so. Before that, our forebears would have gnawed tough meat straight off the bone. Today, the refined troglodyte can have that meat carved into the thinnest of slices, drizzled with olive oil and lemon and topped with shavings of Parmesan. Another variant is to have it as a tartare, chopped and mixed with flavorings such as capers, anchovies and onions and bound together with raw egg. These are male foods: With a hunk of raw meat, the tamed man sheds his suit and tie to reveal the loin-cloth-clad carnivore within.

Generally, taste isn't the reason to eat flesh raw -- most raw dishes are bland enough to require the addition of strong sauces or such fiery condiments as wasabi. One reason we cook food is to enhance its taste: When meat or fish are heated, sugars combine with amino acids, creating and liberating complex aromatic chemicals. The aroma of roast beef, for example, contains 600 chemical components. Many of these are pyrazines, complex molecules that can act both as powerful poisons and stimulants. Scientists believe pyrazines may cause the "Proustian madeleine effect," whereby the scent of a food triggers powerful memories. Raw foods, with fewer chemicals to stimulate the nose, offer a far more limited olfactory stimulation.

FULL TEXT

Chefs are cooking less and less these days. There's hardly a menu around that doesn't feature a list of raw foods -- carpaccios, tartares, ceviches and variants of sashimi are everywhere. Rawness offers a slippery sensuality, a return to our primal nature in an ever-more processed and packaged world. Carpaccios and tartares are no longer restricted to beef. Now everything from lamb to kangaroo to mahi-mahi comes sliced thin or chopped but not cooked.

There is more than a hint of danger to this rawness, as anyone who has ever been felled by a bad oyster will recall with a shudder. But living on the culinary edge has its appeal, and rawness is the means of the moment.

The application of fire to food has been around for a paltry million years or so. Before that, our forebears would have gnawed tough meat straight off the bone. Today, the refined troglodyte can have that meat carved into the thinnest of slices, drizzled with olive oil and lemon and topped with shavings of Parmesan. Another variant is to have it as a tartare, chopped and mixed with flavorings such as capers, anchovies and onions and bound together with raw egg. These are male foods: With a hunk of raw meat, the tamed man sheds his suit and tie to reveal the loin-cloth-clad carnivore within.

The best reason not to cook is the texture. Raw meat that is thinly sliced or finely chopped has an appealing -- or, depending on your view, horrifying -- softness. Likewise, raw fish is either velvet on the tongue or something that fires off your gag reflex

Generally, taste isn't the reason to eat flesh raw -- most raw dishes are bland enough to require the addition of strong sauces or such fiery condiments as wasabi. One reason we cook food is to enhance its taste: When meat or fish are heated, sugars combine with amino acids, creating and liberating complex aromatic chemicals. The aroma of roast beef, for example, contains 600 chemical components. Many of these are pyrazines, complex molecules that can act both as powerful poisons and stimulants. Scientists believe pyrazines may cause the "Proustian madeleine effect," whereby the scent of a food triggers powerful memories. Raw foods, with fewer chemicals to stimulate the nose, offer a far more limited olfactory stimulation.

The rawest food I ever ate was a lobster in Taiwan. Brought to the table alive and kicking, its tail was deftly sliced into strips of sashimi that were fanned out behind its head. It clung to life throughout the meal, antennae waving and legs scrabbling as it tried to escape the platter. Each passing waiter would foil these bids for freedom and flick it back. I'm no card-carrying member of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, and I was aware that its fighting spirit was just the last gasp of a very simple nervous system. Regardless, I found it a dismaying sight. Raw is one thing, alive is another. The taste didn't seem worth it either -- the flesh was bitter and metallic. It tasted of coins.

What was disturbing about the lobster was not the rawness but the lack of culinary manipulation. For raw meat or fish to be perceived as appropriate to eat, it needs to be sliced, shaped, dressed or altered in some way. Raw dishes, particularly sushi, are far from simple -- they require considerable skill on the part of the chef and come to the table elaborately transformed. Raw foods in many cultures -- steak tartare and sushi -- seem to require public preparation, as if to prove the transformation from animal part to foodstuff.

Raw food in Asia generally means Japanese seafood prepared as sushi or sashimi. These dishes have their origin in China in the Tang dynasty and probably reached their peak of popularity in the Sung dynasty, when uncooked fish and meat were eaten with vinegared rice. Sushi mostly died out in China, although it flourished in Japan, where most people had access to fresh fish. Even though Chinese cuisine has been shaped by perennial shortages of fuel and the need to cook quickly, that striving for efficiency has not meant going so far as to leave it raw. Long before the discovery of bacterial causes of disease, Chinese were aware of the dangers of eating uncooked foods grown where fields are fertilized with night soil.

Secreted by Ants

There are, nevertheless, a number of dishes of uncooked meat still found in Sichuan and Yunnan provinces. Raw chopped beef is mixed with large quantities of pepper and chili to produce a fiery, intensely flavored tartare. In Thailand, there are a number of dishes in which meat or fish are "cooked," like Latin American ceviches, by pickling them quickly in an acid such as lime juice. One dish found in areas along the Mekong river in Laos and northeastern Thailand includes a fish that is pickled in the formic acid secreted by ants.

Many other dishes are rare rather than raw. In Vietnam, Pho bo, or beef noodle soup, is served with raw slices of beef that are barely cooked when hot broth is poured on top. There is a Cantonese dish of undercooked pink chicken with noodles and sesame seeds -- it is not often served these days, having proved itself something of a direct route to salmonella poisoning.

Indeed, it is the anxieties about food poisoning that keep many people from eating raw foods. The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta offers up a range of warnings about what you may contract from raw fish or rare meats, ranging from BSE, or Mad Cow Disease, to worms to listeria. Ceviches have been blamed for outbreaks of cholera in South America. Raw food is a definitely a risk but as long as there is no taste sensation quite like sashimi, it will be a risk many of us will find worth taking.

Mr. Templer is a writer based in Berkeley, California.

Raw Food Risks

I grew up watching my father, a specialist in tropical medicine, look suspiciously at any meat that wasn't cooked to a cinder. Like many doctors, he shudders at the thought of eating any flesh uncooked.

It's true that any meat not cooked through to 160 degrees centigrade holds some risk. Anyone who is pregnant, elderly or suffering liver disease or any weakening of the immune system should not eat any raw or rare food. Undercooked pork can contain parasites such as tapeworms, or transmit illnesses that can lead to cysts developing in the brain. Undercooked chicken likewise should always be avoided.

Beef can carry tapeworms, but infected meat is very rare in countries that have advanced meat-inspection regimens. Australian and U.S. beef is generally safe.

Raw fish carries the risk of acute bacterial infections such as dysentery. Regardless how fresh the fish, there's a chance of contracting more serious infections with paragonimus, or lung fluke, which is common across Asia. Many Chinese are infected eating "drunken" fish dishes in which the fish is drenched in alcohol but not cooked. Most Chinese who visit the doctor because they're coughing blood have been infected with this parasite. Lung fluke is microscopic, so it's impossible to tell if fish is infected. Raw or drunken fish dishes are best avoided in China. Also, be wary of packaged sushi.

There's a heirarchy in the riskiness of raw fish. Shellfish are the most dangerous because they feed on whatever is in the water and are susceptible to a number of viruses and algae blooms. Freshwater fish are next because of their exposure to human waste. Deep seawater fish, such as tuna, are the safest.

If you want more information on food safety and the risks of raw food, there's information on the Web site of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod> or the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition at <http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/>.

-- B.T.

DETAILS

Business indexing term:

Industry: 31171 : Seafood Product Preparation and Packaging

Subject:	Beef; Food safety; Poisoning; Poisons; Disease control; Bacterial infections; Tropical diseases; Fish
Publication title:	Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong
Pages:	P8
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	1999
Publication date:	May 28, 1999
Section:	Personal Journal
Publisher:	Dow Jones & Company Inc.
Place of publication:	Victoria, Hong Kong
Country of publication:	United States, Victoria, Hong Kong
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
ISSN:	03779920
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	NEWSPAPER
ProQuest document ID:	315526636
Document URL:	http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-taste-flesh-refined-repulsive-any/docview/315526636/se-2?accountid=11311
Copyright:	Copyright Dow Jones & Company Inc May 28, 1999
Last updated:	2023-11-20
Database:	ProQuest One Business, ProQuest Central

LINKS

[Linking Service](#)

Database copyright © 2024 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)