‘The food nature intended you to eat’:
Nutritional primitivism in low-carbohydrate diet discourse

Christine Knight

Discipline of English, University of Adelaide
November 2007
# Table of contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... 3

Thesis declaration............................................................................................................................... 4

Acknowledgements............................................................................................................................ 5

Chapter 1. Low-carbohydrate diets and nutritional primitivism: an introduction.......................... 8

  Primitivism, food studies and low-carbohydrate dieting: a literature review .................................. 12
  Low-carbohydrate diets and health.................................................................................................. 20
  Thesis outline.................................................................................................................................. 25

Chapter 2. Low-carbohydrate diets in social and scientific context.................................................. 27

  Tracing the recent low-carbohydrate trend..................................................................................... 28
  Contested definitions...................................................................................................................... 32
  Health and safety debates.............................................................................................................. 37

Chapter 3. Studying low-carbohydrate discourse: diet books and their readers............................ 42

  Reading low-carbohydrate diet books ............................................................................................ 42
  Interviewing low-carbohydrate dieters........................................................................................... 48

Chapter 4. The natural / unnatural binary in low-carbohydrate dieting............................................ 55

  Whole food / refined carbohydrate: a defining dichotomy.............................................................. 59
  Unrefined food and moral virtue ..................................................................................................... 67
  Low-carbohydrate dieters and the natural / unnatural binary ....................................................... 74

Chapter 5. Nostalgia, authenticity and tradition in low-carbohydrate discourse............................ 82

  Nutritional nostalgia...................................................................................................................... 83
  The authentic ethnic....................................................................................................................... 89
  Dieters’ accounts: family traditions and ethnic food .................................................................... 94

Chapter 6. Neo-Darwinism and genetic determinism in low-carbohydrate theory.......................... 102

  Evolutionary nutrition.................................................................................................................... 104
  The thrifty gene hypothesis .......................................................................................................... 113

Chapter 7. Indigenous nutritional research in Protein Power............................................................. 124

  The North American Inuit............................................................................................................. 124
  Aboriginal Australians .................................................................................................................. 127

Chapter 8. Low-carbohydrate dieters and nutritional primitivism.................................................... 143

  ‘I sat down and read it and it all made sense’. ................................................................................ 143
  ‘I can see that all of this is an hypothesis’. ..................................................................................... 147
  ‘We can’t go back a hundred million years’. ................................................................................ 150

Chapter 9. Summary and conclusions.............................................................................................. 158

Appendix. Ethics submission ............................................................................................................ 163

Bibliography....................................................................................................................................... 180
Abstract

In this thesis I examine the low-carbohydrate diet trend as one response to the twin obesity and diabetes epidemics. Sociological and cultural studies of dieting to date have been dominated by feminist critique of the thin ideal. Because of their focus on health, low-carbohydrate diets cannot be adequately understood via a feminist approach. Instead, I take a multidisciplinary approach drawing on literature from cultural and literary theory, sociology, history and philosophy in the broader fields of food studies, public health and postcolonial studies. Methodologically, this thesis is based on a close reading of five bestselling low-carbohydrate diet books (*Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution*, *The South Beach Diet*, *Protein Power*, *The Zone* and *Sugar Busters*), supplemented by interviews with low-carbohydrate dieters living in South Australia.

What I term *nutritional primitivism* is one of the distinguishing features of low-carbohydrate diet discourse, though it is not unique to low-carbohydrate dieting. I use the phrase *nutritional primitivism* to refer to the pursuit of supposedly simpler, more natural and more authentic ways of eating as part of a quest for health. I argue that nutritional primitivism in low-carbohydrate diet discourse comprises appeals to Nature, nostalgia, authentic ethnic cuisine, evolutionary theory and genetics, and images of the Noble Savage. Together these form a reactive response to modern Western nutrition: that is, a backlash against modern Western ways of eating as they impact upon health.

This thesis offers a critique of nutritional primitivism in low-carbohydrate diet discourse. Nutritional primitivism presents both logical/evidential and political/philosophical difficulties. Its definitions of natural and authentic food and evolutionary diet are tautological, and it uses a highly romanticised image of the past to criticise modern Western diet. Further, nutritional primitivism relies on Eurocentric and racist evolutionary hierarchies which align contemporary fourth-world peoples with prehistoric hunter-gatherers. In proposing a return to more ‘natural’ and ‘traditional’ ways of eating as the solution to obesity and diabetes, nutritional primitivism also obscures known socioeconomic and environmental factors in the development of ill-health and disease.

In interviews with low-carbohydrate dieters I found a critical approach and heterogeneous response to nutritional primitivism in low-carbohydrate diet discourse. Like low-carbohydrate diet authors, dieters generally privileged natural foods above processed foods, but their dieting practice might best be described as a creative reworking of culinary tradition, rather than any simple reclamation of a so-called authentic diet. Dieters demonstrated a critical and sceptical approach towards evolutionary and genetic justifications for low-carbohydrate diets.

While popular critique of modern Western ways of eating is an integral part of response to the obesity and diabetes epidemics, nutritional primitivism in low-carbohydrate diet discourse reinforces a romanticised view of the past, racist and utilitarian attitudes towards non-Western people, and the elision of socioeconomic and environmental factors which promote inequalities in ill-health and disease.
Thesis declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis being made available in the University Library.

The author acknowledges that copyright of published works contained within this thesis (as listed below) resides with the copyright holder/s of those works.


Signed:        Date:   6 April 2008
Acknowledgements

This thesis was made possible by funding from two sources: an Australian Postgraduate Award administered by the University of Adelaide, and a divisional ‘top-up’ scholarship paid by CSIRO Human Nutrition, which covered my research and administrative costs and also paid for associated conference travel. I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the support provided to me by CSIRO Human Nutrition, which dramatically expanded the potential of this research. I thank in particular Drs Carlene Wilson and Katrine Baghurst for taking the initial chance on this project.

My joint supervisors, Drs Heather Kerr and Carlene Wilson, have supported and nurtured this thesis from its inception and I would like to thank them both sincerely for their encouragement, proactive approach, and insightful and extremely rapid feedback, which has made the path toward PhD completion a very smooth one.

Many friends, fellow students and colleagues at CSIRO have offered encouragement, support and advice during my candidature. Thanks are due to all the ‘shark tank’ girls, past and present, for their collective sense of humour and friendship: Nadia Corsini, Natalie Sinn, Juliet Summers, Emily Brindal, Kirsten Dunn, Kamelia Todorov, Gilly Hendrie and Diane Hosking. Thanks also to Adam Harrison and Lisa Moran for their much-valued friendship and support. Manny Noakes and Grant Brinkworth deserve special acknowledgement for their willingness to assist me with the science of low-carbohydrate dieting. Very special thanks are also due to Leanne Griffiths, CSIRO Human Nutrition librarian, who delivered my many random library requests with a smile.

Many friends, near and far, supported me in different ways during my PhD candidature. I would like to thank them all for their selflessness and tolerance. Thank you especially to Benjamin Gray, Michelle Hickey, Emily Moskwa, Jessica Murrell, Sarah Olive, Kate Seymour, Kate Wycherley, Emily Anderson, Kelly Donati, Wendy Mendes, Tanja Schneider and Anna Tucker.

Several friends have invested so much of their time, effort and love in this thesis as to deserve special mention. Gemma Parker, my housemate, christened my PhD (aka Bryce), bought me chocolate, made me tea, forced me to leave the house at least once a day, and plastered our house with affirmations. Without Gemma’s unfailing good humour, sympathy and creative encouragement Bryce would have been relegated to the understairs cupboard many weeks ago.

Anna Garretson had the dubious pleasure of providing feedback on a late version of this manuscript, and her effort and encouragement were very much appreciated. I hope to return the favour in the coming months.

Two very dear friends, Jessica Shipman Gunson and Alison Wood, shared the emotional and intellectual ups and downs of the first three years of this project with me. As I write, both are (separately) forging new lives in the UK. Their intelligence, kindness and generosity have not been lost to me by distance, although I sorely miss their presence here.
Jeska Rees has celebrated every milestone of the last six months and dragged me kicking and screaming toward the finish line. This thesis would not have happened without her mentorship and her willingness to drop everything to help.

Anne Fitzpatrick has been my constant inspiration and truly amazing best friend for more than twenty years. No matter where Anne’s itchy feet have taken her during the course of my candidature, Anne has been with me every step of the way.

Most of all, I would like to thank my family – my parents Anne and Brian, and my sisters Bronwyn and Michelle – for their unstinting love, faith and support, and especially for their encouragement and assistance in the final months, weeks and days of this project. My mother Anne, a lexicographer and librarian, I acknowledge very gratefully for proofreading a version of this manuscript. Its errors – and linguistic idiosyncrasies – remain my own.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all the volunteers who participated in my interview study, without whom this project could not have happened.

Christine Knight, November 2007
What we are seeing in the United States today is the full-tilt exploration of patterns formed in the 1920s: fascination with the primitive as an expression of fears about what the West has wrought in the world, even of white European self-loathing – often with an accompanying utopian impetus for change. Utopian desires are emerging strongly once again at the end of the twentieth century, in movements that envision the primitive as a locus of harmony and as a shelter from the dangers and fragmentation of modern life.¹