



Primal Scream

by Susan Bourette

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An
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chapter
from



"The Sexy Chicken is my favorite," declares a paunchy man with pale-blue eyes that gleam like marbles under the warm glow of the kitchen lights where a group of forty have gathered this evening for dinner.

"Do you know why I call it that? Aajonous Vonderplanitz asks rhetorically while scanning the room before locking his gaze upon a busty, Cameron Diaz look-alike. "I call it Sexy Chicken," he continues, "because it makes you really, really horny."

An older couple holding hands on my right exchange a come-hither look. Clearly, at \$4 a pound, it's a low-cost alternative to Viagra, although it's unlikely that Sexy Chicken would ever get the Food and Drug Administration's safety stamp of approval.

"Is the recipe in your new cookbook?" queries a dishy, young man with glossy dark locks, perfect teeth and a grill that looks to have been chiseled straight out of the Colorado Rockies beneath our feet. The crowd erupts with laughter. Apparently, I'm in good company. Pretty boy's a rookie too. "It's not a cookbook," Vonderplanitz grunts derisively. "On the Primal Diet, we don't cook anything."

It's more than simply a matter of semantics. Those who follow the Primal Diet don't order in, pick it up from the caterers or have others prep the meal for them. The cuts of meat here are not prepared in any traditional sense. They've never seen the inside of an oven, or touched a grill. Their temperature is determined by nothing more than the setting on the thermostat – room temperature that is.

This is a raw meat potluck. The ultimate in fast food. And those gathered here in one of North America's most exclusive playgrounds,

have come to dine on dishes like Sexy Chicken, Orange-Glazed Duck, Meat au Gratin and Steak Tartare. But this is more than a meeting of raw meat gourmets, a sharing of epicurean secrets. Those milling around the buffet table tonight are following a diet that's similar to the one that homo erectus consumed when he first roamed the savannah more than 10,000 years ago. A typical day's feast? Several raw eggs, a pound of raw meat and a couple of green salad shakes. In fact, many gnawing on raw animal flesh behind the cover of silk drapes in this swank, Aspen mansion are former vegetarians. They've come from as far away as Connecticut and Arizona to find a cure for everything from cellulite and acne to multiple sclerosis and cancer. But first, they're going to learn how eating like a cave-dweller will have them swinging from the trees.

"When I was a fruitarian, ejaculatory orgasm was pleasurable but exhausting," Vonderplanitz explains with the same matter-of-fact tone he will employ in a detailed discussion of bowel movements following dinner. "I got depressed and irritable if I had regular ejaculations." I suddenly have an urge to invoke the "table talk" rule, but I can't get my jaw off the ground fast enough to high-jack the conversation and head Vonderplanitz off his unusual prescription for the boudoir blues. "Now that I consume so much raw protein and fat," he continues, "I enjoy sex from one to six hours daily and have up to three ejaculations. I finally feel like I have achieved heaven on earth."

To the some 20,000 North Americans reportedly following his Primal Diet, Vonderplanitz is a messiah for the new millennium. A charismatic leader with an evangelical jag. His prodigious claims are a

strange brew of new-age meets stone-age. Think caveman with the chimes and crystals and you get the picture.

He says he played a construction worker on the soap opera General Hospital before finding his calling as a nutritional palm-reader, iridologist and "scientist." This evening, the 60-year-old Vonderplanitz (AKA John Richard Swigart, John Planitz, Richard Garritt and Brock Bison) is dressed as Everyman. Light-colored khakis, a long-sleeved, grey T-shirt and hiking boots. His hair is the color of gingerbread and the texture of a Chia plant in full bloom. It frames a face scorched by one too many noonday sessions at the pool. The fact is, with his looks, he's perfect to play a desert-island castaway. But look deep into his crystalline eyes, he explains, and you'll see evidence of a heart, lungs and organs operating like those of a man 20 years younger. The healing miracle of a rejuvenating diet comprised of more than 90 per cent raw meat and fat. Food laced with microbes like e.coli and salmonella – the "janitors," the "clean-up crew" he claims that have helped cure him of everything from a litany of health woes—including diabetes, autism, bone and blood cancer.

Tonight's potluck is hosted by Kim, a slinky, early-40s woman clad in all-black with a cascade of dark hair sweeping midway down her back. She's a former pharmaceutical saleswoman and a self-taught nutritionist, who hopes to spread the word about the pure primal pleasure of dining on uncooked meat. It's an eclectic crowd. There's Mary, Pat, Robert, Lisa, Fabio and a Cher among us— seemingly drawn from all age groups and social strata. From high-tech moguls to sweat-lodge owners and hippy-dippy snowboarders.

The introductions out of the way, the group forms a line in front of the buffet table. "Chicken cerviche!" someone squeals. I can't tell if it's a shriek of delight or horror because for staunch meat-eaters like me, the only thing crazier than no meat is a serving of raw meat on the dinner plate

This seems an ideal backdrop for a celebratory meat fest. Located in the clouds – some 8,000 feet atop the Rocky Mountains -- Aspen was once the summer hunting grounds of the Ute tribe. And although these days you're more likely to be shooting elk through your camera lens than with a gun, demand is booming in the town's chi-chi restaurants for factory-free, low-fat meats like elk, bison and venison. But it's more than that. Maybe it started with Walter Paepcke in the 1940s, a wealthy industrialist, who wanted to create the "Aspen Idea." He hoped to transform Aspen into a cultural Utopia; a place where great thinkers

would travel to renew their spirits and exchange ideas. A counter-cultural sanctuary. In other words, a place that would be welcoming to any group such as this -- one whose collective mantra is "EAT SHIT AND LIVE."

It is with this in mind that I find myself at the end of the buffet line with an empty plate in hand. Some guests, like Aaron, have gone primitive and opted out of cutlery and china altogether. He's cutting a New York steak with scissors, and eating directly from the supermarket styrofoam. "It's like sushi," the effervescent acupuncturist and the town's longest Primal Diet devotee explains. "You've got to cut against the grain. It's the same trick," he says plopping a cube of meat in his mouth. "When you start to eat all raw you go, 'Wow. Wow!' It's from the higher vibration of the food. "You finally realize you don't have to rely on outside entities for your healthcare. You can take care of yourself."

It's a recurring theme this evening. Just as the hippies of the early '60s sought to wrest corporate control of the food supply, those who've come here tonight view the Primal Diet as a kind of personal vindication. Triumph over a conspiracy perpetrated by the establishment: big government, big-pharma, HMOs and Fortune 500 companies. These raw meat rebels are driven by the most American of impulses: the rejection of authority. They are asserting their independence in a world where much of what we eat is handed to us through a window by a kid dressed in a polyester costume who asks, "Do you want fries with that?" oblivious to the nutritional and environmental devastation caused by his company's nuggets and burgers.

Scanning tonight's spread, I feel an eating disorder coming on. It's not just the thought of eating mystery meats. I'm panicked by the idea of eating foodstuffs I've been taught to avoid for dear life. Raw meat laced with potential pathogens like E.coli 0157:H7, salmonella, campylobacter and listeria. There has been a dramatic rise in consumer demand in both Canada and the United States for raw dairy products teeming with many of the same kind of bacteria found in meat. Black markets are booming even as police crack down on producers in jurisdictions where it's illegal to sell raw dairy products. In late 2006, one of Canada's most feted chefs rallied to the cause of a local farmer shut down for selling raw dairy products to hundreds of Toronto families. Chef Jamie Kennedy lined up alongside dozens of customers who waved placards like hardened protestors to oppose the police's confiscation of bottled raw milk and blocks of unpasteurized cheese. Kennedy argued alongside like-minded consumers that raw dairy contains natural enzymes, antibodies and

vitamins that are destroyed in the heating process of pasteurization. Despite the consumer surge, health authorities aren't swayed. They warn of lurking pathogens, pointing to recent outbreaks of illnesses.

Meanwhile, Aaron, the glowing acupuncturist, assures me there's nothing to worry about. The meat being served here at the raw meat potluck tonight is organic—the good stuff—and it's not going to make me sick, he says. I figure I have less chance of dying from E.coli than salmonella. So, I set my sights on a scrap of carpaccio, gussied up with bocconcini, tomato and basil – the equivalent of Primal Diet pablum, specially made for novices like me. However, I'm suddenly saved from my raw meat by divine intervention. Vonderplanitz calls an end to dinner and the beginning of the evening's discussion.

We gather in the living room, squeezed side-by-side on leather couches and oversized ottomans. Vonderplanitz claims a seat at the front of the room, perched like a lion overlooking a den of cubs.

"Dr. Aajonus," a whipper-thin woman with a pinched face begins, "Do I really need to put on 10 lbs to heal?" Here in the land of the scrawny haunches, it seems that asking Kate Moss wannabes to eat shit is one thing. But ask them to swap their size zero for a size six? It's tantamount to lunacy.

Vonderplanitz calls it like he sees it. "Women like you wouldn't have been given much of a second-look in earlier times," he explains. I scour the room, observing this super-class of cadavers shift nervously in their seats. Vonderplanitz explains that the cycle of weight gain and loss helps rid the body of toxins typically stored in fat. In the past, he explains, we had an intuitive understanding of the link between health and fat. "A heavy-set, Rubenesque woman was probably considered the best asset that a man could have when they were considering women as assets. A man would look at a skinny woman and say, 'Oh, poor thing.' she couldn't get married off. No one would take her."

He confesses a penchant for beefy women. In fact, it was modeling icon Twiggy herself who turned him off skinny women forever. "In 1972," he explains, trumping up his minor, long-ago celebrity, "at the request of my publicity agent, I took Twiggy to the Butterflies are Free premier at the Westwood. Everybody was so intimidated by this young girl. But she was a hyperactive, basket-case. I mean she was an emotional rollercoaster. I couldn't handle it. I never called her again."

The moral of the story? "Fat, mellow and happy. That's a better way to live," he says. A shy, middle-aged woman, neatly coiffed in a

twin-set and freshly-pressed khakis, falters in a childlike voice as she begins to recount her own story. A few years ago, both she and her husband were diagnosed with Lyme disease. For two years, the couple meticulously followed doctor's orders, gobbling down one dose of high-antibiotics after another. But when traditional medicine didn't work, they started looking for alternative ways of healing, eventually stumbling upon the Primal Diet. They've been following it for months. The only problem? "Well, I don't know how to say this," she utters, sotto voce. "It's the parasites. I have parasites and I'm having trouble getting rid of them."

You'd think it might be a conversation killer. But here, at a raw meat potluck, nothing seems to get an after-dinner conversation rocking like a discussion of parasites. Everyone's got war stories. Naturally, no one can top the guru's. "I was in Vietnam when I shat out a 45-foot tapeworm," Vonderplanitz explains. "I know how long it was because I chased it across the room and measured it. Then, for some reason, I had a craving for onions. I ate two of them and immediately felt better."

Orange alert. My head is spinning. Maybe I'm suffering low blood sugar from my no-cal dinner. Truthfully, I couldn't feel worse right now if it were me passing a 45-foot tapeworm. I'm grateful when I realize that talk has shifted from the practical aspects of housing intestinal freeloaders, to the theoretical--although some might say heretical. The "science" behind the Primal Diet. "Modern medicine's fear of pathogens is based on speculation, fear and junk science," Vonderplanitz explains. "The idea that microbes are always harmful and must be eradicated is based on ignorance. Health department officials are living in the cerebral dark ages.

"I say, crack some eggs. Let them get rotten. Eat your raw meat with your salmonella, eat your e.coli," he shouts now, pumping his fists in the air for emphasis. "They are your body's janitors. They go in there and eat up the damaged tissues. They eat your cancers." Although, extreme cases sometimes call for more extreme measures, he explains. Sometimes terminal cancer patients may find a speedier recovery dining on "high meat" – animal flesh that has been aged for a few months in the fridge – completely decomposed and swimming in worms and bacteria. Or, by dining directly on the feces of a healthy herbivore -- a gopher, a sheep or a goat for example.

More than 90 per cent of cancer victims following the Primal Diet, Vonderplanitz tells us, are now in remission. Unfortunately, he has no scientific back-up, no researchers have followed his lead. When

pushed on it, he has all the answers, counters all doubt. Keeping records, he explains, might be construed as a medical act and land him in deep trouble with the authorities.

It's the same argument Vonderplanitz first found an audience with in his 1997 book, *We Want to Live: The Primal Diet*, and later, *Recipes for Living without Disease*, published in 2002. I leaf through a well-thumbed copy of *We Want to Live*. Admittedly, it's the first book I've ever read that comes with a warning absolving the author and publisher of any liability due to injury or damage caused by its contents.

Reading on, I find the only thing harder to swallow than a pound of raw flesh, is Vonderplanitz's explanation as to how he stumbled upon the Primal Diet. A story that began more than 30 years ago. Weak and sick, and poisoned by the "cures" of modern medicine, Vonderplanitz writes that he went to an old, Indian burial site to fast himself to death. One night, he was awakened by a coyote, motioning him to follow his lead, Vonderplanitz trailed the animal to a clearing. There he met a pack of coyotes that offered him a freshly killed jackrabbit and encouraged him to eat it raw. Vonderplanitz did eat it, reluctantly at first, and then voraciously once he came to the realization that the pathogens in the raw meat might kill him quicker than his fast. The next morning, to his astonishment, he woke up, completely revitalized. He quickly expanded his diet, feeding on rattle snakes and birds, and raw goats' milk and eventually returned to Los Angeles to spread the word.

About the same time, a group of scientists half-way across the country were about to set the diet industry on its head, advocating another version of caveman cuisine. Writing in the stodgy *American Journal of Medicine* in 1988, three Atlanta academics from Emory University looked back – way back to the way were before the advent of agriculture– for clues to human health. S. Boyd Eaton, Mel Konner and Marjorie Shostak also looked to the caveman or Paleo diet for ideas in to how to remedy the plagues of modernity such as obesity, heart disease and diabetes. The journal article, "Stone Agers in the Fast Lane: Chronic Degenerative Diseases in Evolutionary Perspective," would soon become the blockbuster bestseller *The Paleolithic Prescription: A Program of Diet and Exercise and a Design for Living* and spawn a string of dietary tomes espousing a similar thesis. Works that included *Neanderthin*, *The Evolution Diet*, *The Origin Diet* and *Metabolic Man*.

The main thrust behind the Paleo diet is the notion that although we are people of the 21st-century, genetically we remain citizens of the

Paleolithic era. Up until 500 generations ago, humankind hunted and foraged. They lived on lean protein, wild plants and fruits. But with the agricultural revolution that began some 10,000 years ago, man was launched on an unnatural dietary path--one comprised of root vegetables, grains and meat from domesticated animals--one for which millions of years of evolution hadn't prepared him. The mismatch between his modern diet and his Paleolithic genes, these scientists argued, sowed the seeds for modern illnesses and chronic disease. Their prescription for health? A return to the cave and the realignment of diet with our ancient genome.

That's where Vonderplanitz and the Paleo diet-types part ways. According to Vonderplanitz, not only did we take the wrong turn with invention of the till and the hoe, but with the taming of fire. "Heating food destroys many health-giving properties and produces disease-causing toxins that accelerate bodily deterioration associated with aging processes," he writes in *The Recipe for Living Without Disease*. Cooking meat not only produces toxins, it kills nutrients and pathogens like salmonella and e.coli that clean up our systems and break down our cancers, Vonderplantiz argues.

However, it's doubtful that researchers were following the former soap actor's lead when they stumbled on a strikingly similar finding. In 1998, researchers at a Yale research center stunned the scientific community when they announced that they had had some success in treating cancer in mice with a modified form of salmonella. Since then, hundreds of dying men and women in across North America and Europe – at research centers like Harvard, Stanford and the University of Toronto – have jumped on the bandwagon. Cancer patients have been injected with everything from the common cold virus to measles, herpes and even the chicken flu in a bid to cure their illness. The results have been nothing short of astonishing, pushing many cancer patients into remission. "Duke University is using a weakened polio virus, Mayo Clinic is using a measles virus," Vonderplanitz notes in his book. "The projected retail price of injection to the patient will be \$8,000. I suggest that we get colds or flu, eat high meat regularly and pay nothing."

As the evening here at the raw meat potluck winds down, Vonderplanitz's patients are gathering at the door, bundling into their ski jackets and boots. A light dusting of snow is falling on the Victorian mansions, and log cabins that look like pebbles resting beneath the sweep of the Rocky mountains. Some guests are headed the exclusive, members

only Caribou Club. Some are going to The Belly Up to listen to a local band, and others are headed home to bed. After all, there are only so many days of powder in a season. A small group lolls behind, squeezed around Vonderplanitz. Hoping to glean one last kernel of wisdom, to finally press the flesh of their raw meat guru. Some will be back tomorrow, meeting with him privately. For \$300, he'll gaze deeply into their eyes, scanning the patterns, flecks and color of their irises before giving them a prognosis and a prescription. How to adjust their raw meat and fat diet to heal what ails them.

There's no time to book me in. His schedule is full, Kim, our host and event organizer, tells me. I occupy myself while waiting to speak to the master by retrieving my piece of carpaccio from the sleek marble countertop. Maybe it's a case of finally seeing the light. Or being too cheap, too bone-headed, too conscientious in my mission. But I won't leave Aspen without eating this piece of raw meat. My hand shakes as I make a couple of foiled attempts before finally getting it into my mouth. I'm lost in a worm hole for the second time tonight. I completely blank out. I have no recollection of chewing or tasting the most expensive piece

of beef I'll ever eat. I reasonably conclude that this is no way to have dinner. Without taste, without enjoyment.

When I'm finally able to have my own audience with Vonderplanitz, we chat briefly about the weather, his trip into Aspen tonight and his small but growing following in Canada, some 300 raw meat eaters, mostly in Toronto. Truthfully, I'm a little surprised, that at least for the moment, he seems like a regular guy. Like the plumber down the street, or the construction worker you'd hire to fix your roof-- just like the guy he played so long ago General Hospital. The male leads on the soap were dashing doctors, the love interests. Having watched him work the dining room in Aspen tonight, I sense that he's stumbled upon the role of a lifetime and his ideal audience. It's a little more like dinner theatre here—these party-goers suspend disbelief while Vonderplanitz plays Dr. Feelgood, a raw-meat therapist. Of course in this role, the dining room isn't all that different than the set of General Hospital. Just like the soap-opera doctors, Vonderplanitz isn't bound by the Hippocratic oath.

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