

Raw & Order

When it comes to new trends in health and fitness, this California hotspot is always ahead of the game

Beneath the spindly palm trees on Santa Monica's sunny streets, one thing is clear: this beachfront city doesn't glow with good health – it positively dazzles. It's not just that this California neighbourhood is home to the original Muscle Beach. Evidence of its bright-eyed vitality hits you at every turn. A giant billboard spruiks the baffling prospect of the forthcoming "Vegan Oktoberfest". Meanwhile, a nearby tanning salon offers organic spray-tans infused with antioxidants. Yes, Santa Monica takes its wellbeing extremely seriously. And, after a liver-sapping stay in Vegas (see p43), the chance for a spot of physical restoration is gratefully received.

Predictably enough, Rachel Harper washes her hair with coconut oil and owns a vegan cat. Her credentials as an instructor at the Weekend Detox class at Matthew Kenney Culinary are therefore all present and correct. Fresh-faced, blonde-haired and clear-skinned, Rachel is the healthiest-looking person I've ever seen. "I try to ignore flavours if I know something's good for me," she explains ominously while straining a fresh batch of brazil-nut milk.

The culinary school focuses on plant-based raw cuisine, a style of eating that advocates believe delivers maximum nutritional value. I learn to make a pear and avocado smoothie (apparently pears have less sugar than those decadent tropical fruits). I discover how zucchini can be "spiralised" into a nutritious pasta substitute. And I'm taught how soft dates can double as an effective sweetener in a chia pudding.

Initially, I'm sceptical – some of the recipes sound about as much fun as a wheatgrass enema. But there's no denying that everything

on this DIY menu is utterly delicious. As Rachel explains, simple dietary tweaks like switching to wholegrain bread or replacing sugar with honey can upgrade your nutritional health without forcing your tastebuds into the vegan equivalent of a hair shirt.

"People sit down expecting a meal of persecution," says Janabai Amsden the next day. "But our food should taste like comfort food." We're sitting in Janabai's vegan, raw-food cafe, Rawvolution, enjoying tomato sliders with walnut pesto. Janabai, a self-styled "zen-trepreneur", opened the cafe almost a decade ago and has since co-authored two raw-food cookery books. If LA is the current epicentre of the raw-food movement, she's established herself as its mother nature.

As a raw-food evangelist, Janabai insists that it can improve everything from hydration and energy levels to flexibility and digestion. "The rawer you eat, the clearer and stronger you are," she says. Such claims may sound a little extravagant, yet there is evidence that raw food can help you lose weight. A Harvard study revealed that cooking food increases the number of kilojoules your body absorbs, while the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found the increased amount of chewing that raw food requires can lower levels of ghrelin, the hormone that stokes your appetite.

But you don't need academic research to recognise that eating less processed crap and more fresh fruit and veg is definitely a wise move. "With raw food, you can't hide substandard ingredients," Janabai points out. It's hard to argue with this neatly diced hunk of raw truth.

– Luke Benedictus



Above: chia pudding with nut milk, banana and dates. Below: Santa Monica Pier.



SPLURGE

Viceroy Hotel
Behind the unsigned façade on Ocean Avenue lurks this glamorous boutique hotel where seaside vistas meet hip interiors (viceroyhotelsandresorts.com). Creative and, of course, nutritious California cuisine can be found in the restaurant, while the poolside cabanas are made for sipping a cocktail in the late-afternoon sun. Complimentary yoga classes and beach boot camps are offered seasonally – in Santa Monica even decadence has a healthy twist.

CRUISE

Santa Monica Bike Centre
The best way to explore this beachfront city is on two wheels. One easy scenic ride will take you past the century-old pier and along the boardwalk to the weird and wonderful sights of Venice Beach. It's obviously compulsory to stop and bang out a few chin-ups at the legendary Muscle Beach. Rent a set of quality wheels at the Santa Monica Bike Centre (sbmikecenter.com).

WHERE



TRIP NOTES

Virgin Australia flies to Los Angeles from \$1252. (virginaustralia.com/au/en)