

Hereford Times – Talking Point: Andy Link, chef/patron
The Riverside Inn, Aymestrey
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Myth Busting

Fashion, fad, or fact? We hear so much about the foods that are supposed to promote health and well-being, the so-called ‘superfoods’ for example. But is there any truth to these claims? Can one food item really be better for you than the next one?

And at the other end of the scale we have the food ogres, those beasts that allegedly do us harm, and should be avoided at all costs.

The problem is, even public health information on the subject of food changes, let alone popular beliefs. Take eggs: at one stage it was recommended that we eat just two per week (excluding ‘hidden’ eggs, in cakes, pies etc), but now the humble egg is back on the menu, and within reason, we can tuck into as many as we like.

It's also very easy to fall into the trap of following food trends that claim to have some scientific basis. Coconut oil has become very popular as a supposedly healthy fat, but a bone fide scientific study found it to be much higher in saturated fats than butter or lard. I remember when processed margarine was considered to be better for you than butter. More recent findings have proved the opposite –trans-fats in margarine and other foods, can increase the risk of heart disease and stroke, and are certainly not a miracle alternative. The amount you eat of any particular product is the real issue.

Omission is another trick used to baffle consumers. Low-fat yoghurts were once all the rage. Low in fat they may have been, but they had more sugar packed into the pot than regular yogurt to provide flavour lost by removing the fat, and to aid shelf life.

Confusing and contradictory stories appear every week, highlighting food risks, promoting health-givers, and encouraging us to part with money unnecessarily on the latter.

With all food, moderation is the key. We can all eat whatever we like, so long as we don't overdo it – too much fat, salt and sugar is obviously not healthy, but that doesn't mean these products are inherently bad.

Eating plenty of fresh vegetables and fruit is also important. I also think we need to take a closer look at where food comes from: with meat, how is it raised; with fruit and vegetables, have these been drenched in chemicals? As a rule of thumb, natural products will be better for you than something that has been processed – manufacturers can be very clever about hiding what's really in the product with a smoke and mirrors ingredients list.

Organic or ethically produced meat might be more expensive than mass produced meat, but its provenance can be traced, and you know what you are eating. I feel it's better to eat slightly less meat and have a high calibre experience than eat huge quantities of a lower quality product. Here at The Riverside, we select all our food very carefully, and, as most of our suppliers are in Herefordshire, we can meet them and discuss the food chain, so that we understand exactly what ends up on the plate. On an everyday basis, consumers can emulate this by cooking from scratch with fresh ingredients.

Preparing and sharing food with family and friends is a pleasure, not a burden. And eating is one of life's joys, so don't let the fads and anxieties spoil that.