

Eat Better, Not Less: Contextualising Clean Eating in Contemporary History

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Introduction. My research examines the rise of clean eating and its associated eating disorder, orthorexia nervosa, in the twenty-first century. Using key primary sources of cookbooks, diet books, and social media, I situate clean eating in wider histories of dieting, food, and obsession. My research asks several key questions about clean eating:

1. Why did clean eating become popular?

Clean eating indicates a crossover between the fad dieting of the twentieth century, holistic healing practices surrounding nutrition, and increasing ecological and ethical concerns over diet.

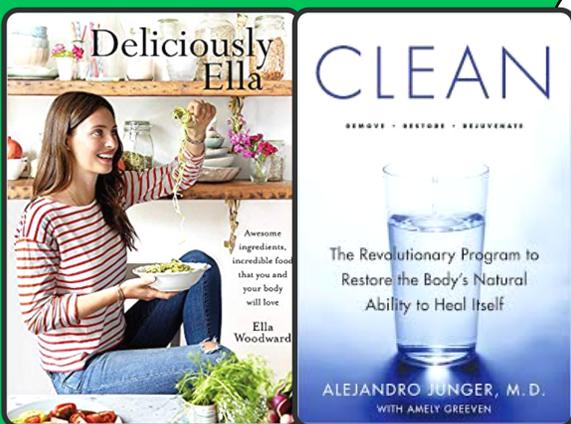
Importantly, clean eaters use traditional diet narratives, such as before and after photos, warnings of 'falling off the wagon', and banning foods – however, it is marketed explicitly as not a diet but a lifestyle. This 'lifestyle choice' has contributed to its success.



2. How did clean eating become popular?

Initially through diet books and juice cleanses, which were endorsed by celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow.

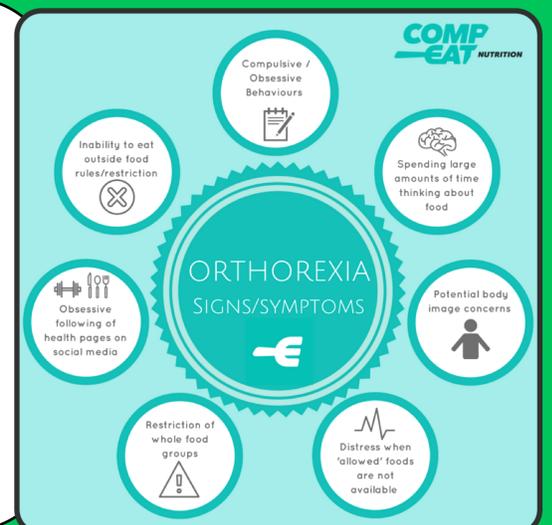
Influencer marketing was vital to its success, with bloggers such as Ella Mills and Madeleine Shaw using social media to gain followings, before using more traditional forms of diet media – such as cookbooks, food products, and magazines.



3. How did clean eating become disordered?

As clean eating reached its peak in 2015, it also faced a massive backlash. Partly, this was due to fat activism, the body positivity, and anti-diet movements which were gaining traction.

Orthorexia nervosa – obsessive healthy eating – was also becoming more widely known as a disorder. My work uses social media, memoirs, and medical journals to understand how this disorder developed.



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Conclusion. Ultimately, clean eating is part of a long history of fad dieting. Where it is unique is in its use of social media as a marketing tool, and its ability to unite both ethical and environmental concerns with dieting for weight loss.