

Thou shalt not eat wheat, sugar or dairy – the three modern-day commandments, or more precisely, three deadly sins. I swear there are many people on this planet who think they'll go to hell if they eat one of these foods.

I know. I was one of them.

In 2012 I moved from Melbourne to a cottage near Byron Bay in a last-ditch attempt to heal from an ongoing battle with chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). Over five years I'd tried countless conventional and not-so conventional remedies, "cleansed" myself to near death and attempted every elimination diet to the extent that there were more foods off my list than on it.

In addition to wheat, sugar and dairy, at various stages I'd given up other popular intolerance-test culprits such as citrus, nightshades such as tomatoes and potatoes, eggs, yeast and vinegars. At my most extreme I'd forsaken all grains and fruit. To compensate I was provided with "substitute" supplements – so much so that at one point I was popping up to 15 pills with each meal.

It did nothing to alleviate my illness. If anything, this regimen made things worse and by 2011 my digestive system had finally broken down, leaving me living off purées and soups, a walking skeleton weighing just 37 kilograms.

After arriving in Byron, something shifted; my body started talking to me. Or more accurately, I actually started listening to it, maybe for the first time in my life. What I discovered was simple, but profound.

I realised that for a long time my food choices hadn't been determined by me but by a chorus of voices – marketers and the media, together with well-meaning doctors and nutritionists. The deeply personal act of eating had been replaced by a rule book written by someone living in a body that wasn't mine.

I began tentatively by asking my body to show me what it liked and what it needed. I started to shop with my senses rather than my intellect and suddenly



NO FEAR

Sharon Sztar once considered wheat, dairy and sugar the "devil's foods". Now she sees them as a life-affirming gift.

previously banned foods were screaming to me from the shelves "Buy me!"

Milk and sugar came first, which I consumed in the form of breakfast porridges and bedtime nightcaps. These comforting moist puddings and drinks gave me a new appreciation for how sweet tastes can stimulate our entire organism. My brain started to feel like it was actually being fed and rather than dull my mental capacity, including these foods seemed to improve it.

Wheat followed shortly; I became obsessed with the packages of bread lining the shelves of my local organic food store. I would just stare at them trying to summon the courage to take

a loaf. This was the hardest shift to make as it had been ingrained in me that I was a borderline coeliac. But once I had a slice, there was no turning back. A deep sense of calm overtook me; it truly felt as if I had been waiting for that bite for a lifetime. Gluten and wheat had been blamed for nearly every symptom I'd experienced, from my tinnitus to my fatigue to my insomnia, yet when I started eating wheat again, these problems got better, not worse.

Over the next 18 months I began teaching myself to eat practically all foods again. "Okay, time to try the next one," I would tell myself, not unlike a baby shifting over to solids. One month

I ate a previously forbidden piece of fruit; the next an outlawed egg; the next I ventured into the prohibited territory of cheese. And all the while I began to feel stronger, healthier and happier.

I would visualise the foods assembling in my body like a winning management team; a diversified group offering something that made the whole stronger than the individual parts. This team became my immune system. As I ate more of the "apparent" intolerant foods, I actually developed a tolerance for them.

I began to see that the real problem was not wheat, sugar or dairy, it was our

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relationship to food generally. For those of us without life-threatening allergies, it was how we thought about food and how we produced, prepared and consumed it.

I started choosing foods that came from the earth, not a factory or laboratory. Foods that still resemble their source, mother nature, such as unhomogenised milk, unprocessed sugars, handcrafted cheeses and sourdough organic breads.

Quantity was important. Dairy, wheat and sugar are all concentrated foods that aren't required in large portions. In small amounts they are fuel for the body; in large amounts they can crash it.

Secondly, in embracing these "no-no" foods, I chose to embrace life, because for years I'd been ruled by fear. I used to madly inspect and clean the chopping board in absolute terror of finding a crumb of wheat, not appreciating how the stress of this was doing more damage to my health than minuscule granules of gluten or fructose could ever do.

I began to enjoy wheat, sugar and dairy again and it saved me, not only for the added nutrients it provided to my diet, but because it allowed me to replace fear with acceptance and tolerance.

Today my motto is that it's not what you eat, but how you eat it. I eat nearly all foods, but not in every form. By following the seasons and my body's intelligence I can usually find the perfect formula for me at any time.

Free of CFS and back to a healthy weight, I now see those "three deadly sins" as one of the greatest gifts my illness could have given me. •