

What I had learned (about food) by the time I was eighteen

Earlier in my life I was a child soldier. Well, an adolescent soldier. Too young to vote or legally drink, we still thought we were badass and all grown up. But looking back on it now, we were just kids.

Much can be said about this. The exploitation of young people in third world countries, or the relative immorality of the various permutations of communism, colonialism, nationalism and pure human greed. Or even more relevantly, the repeating tragedy for generations, of poor kids being sent off to kill each other, so that rich old people can pursue their ambitions.

On the positive side though, this does give a young person the chance to learn and gain life experience. Not like the good old traditional Kiwi OE, but a wealth of opportunity nonetheless, though admittedly, many of these skills are not transferable. Laying landmines, booby trapping and proficiency with automatic weapons are not that useful when starting a new life in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand.

But this is a story about food, and I want to share with you the valuable lessons about food and eating that I learned as a teenager.

1. Rats, prepared correctly, are surprisingly good to eat. Skinned, split, lightly smoked and then seared over an open fire, the flesh just melts off the bones, and tastes like.... well, rat. Not bad at all. I don't even want to think that these were the disgusting vermin we see in horror movies, feeding on corpses. We chose to believe that African bush rats were different, more wholesome creatures. Tasty as they were, I have not eaten a rat since I escaped the war.
2. The five second rule – meh! In over a year of stalking through the bush, with absolutely no food hygiene, not one of us got sick from food poisoning. It is remarkable how expired food can be and you can still eat it. The last piece of meat looks a bit dodgy. No worries. Brush that maggot off, quick wash, cut the rotten bits away, cook it hard, add salt, good to go. Admittedly, this did not stretch to rats, we had some standards, and only ate those fresh.

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3. Intermittent fasting. We never realised that this would become a worldwide trend for healthy living and weight control. It was just how we lived. I cannot recall feeling any better for it, only hungry, but we did not get fat. Neither can I remember being 'hangry', but we were a bunch of heavily armed, teenage psychopaths, so I guess it would have been hard to tell.
4. Salt is King (or Queen). If you don't have enough salt you die, and more people die of salt depletion than from excessive salt. You have to work hard to die of salt depletion though – like consuming large quantities of pure water while running a marathon. No, more importantly, salt is a condiment second to none. It can lift disgusting food (see point number 2 above) to just edible, like it can lift your Lamb Rogan Josh from okay to sublime. Always have salt.
5. Sweet tea is the best rehydration fluid. When you wander around semi-desert scrublands (picture Outback Queensland) you get dried out. And there wasn't much water, so we were sometimes limited to just one drink a day. For that, we chose sweet milky tea. Heaven. If we hadn't been young and ignorant, we may have realised we were losing ten percent of our precious water by boiling it, but we were and we didn't. Sports scientists recommend a mix of electrolytes and sugar for post-exercise rehydration – and, with a bit of added protein and fat, that is pretty much what sweet milky tea is.
6. Chlorine will save your life. Chlorine, as in bleach, kills just about every microbe. Most countries put it in the drinking water for a reason - to prevent mass waterborne infections. It even kills COVID, but I do not recommend you ingest bleach to deal to COVID. Although chlorine kills bugs, at higher doses it kills everything. In the scrublands, what water there was, was stagnant, and has been walked through and shat in by a multitude of animals, including humans. The only thing between us and a painful death from horrible bacteria like cholera, or ghastly gastro viruses,

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were the little chlorine tablets we shook into our water bottles every time we filled them. We never got sick.

7. Plant-based diets can be very sustaining. We were ahead of our time as proponents of plant-based diets, though our main motivation was hunger, and because these were often the only foods available. Rice, oats or maize-meal, even prepared in faecal contaminated, and now heavily chlorinated water, are tasty, filling and can keep you fighting another day. Even better with salt. Or sugar. The only downside of this diet is that if you are short of water to cook it in and wash it down with, you go hungry.... or eat rat.

8. At the end of the day, food is just fuel for the body. Especially when you are on an involuntary, plant-based, intermittent fasting program. Subtly infused with saffron, cooked perfectly rare, or 'this would be at home in a Michelin-starred restaurant' are nice, BUT JUST GIVE ME FOOD. NOW! I know that many foodies out there will dispute this, and I am not proposing we all eat plain, tasteless food. No way, but I am good with plain, tasty food. And really, how necessary is high end cuisine for our planet in 2022?

9. Powdered milk neutralises the venom of the Mozambique Spitting Cobra. Okay, I am showing off now, and hopefully this is a piece of information nobody in New Zealand will ever need. But its true. One of our squad went off into the dark to relieve himself, only to come staggering back, clutching his face, screaming that he had been spat in the eye by a cobra. This is not good news at any time, but particularly when you are in remote bush, in the midst of a civil war, with a bunch of uneducated delinquents. But one of us (not me) yelled out that you pour milk into the eye of someone who has been spat by a cobra. We had not seen fresh milk for weeks, but after he collapsed, howling in agony in front of us, and with no other ideas, we mixed the last of our milk powder into the last of our water, stirred it up, then dribbled it into his eye. It worked, saved his vision and shut him up. I later found out that plain water would have been just as effective.

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So, after all that, where does this knowledge take you?

In my case, to a peaceful, safe country, with an appreciation of good food. Actually, an appreciation of all food. With a lifelong resistance to nasty diseases, and empathy for people fleeing poverty-stricken, corrupt, war-ravaged lands.

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