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The Juice Cleanse: A Strange and Green Journey

By JUDITH NEWMAN

A MONTH ago I went on a juice cleanse. You know what it cleans out of you best? The will to live.

This is not entirely fair, because I didn't strictly play by the rules. But I was trying this increasingly popular purge after realizing there was perhaps room for improvement in my lifestyle choices. When did I know this for sure? Was it when I was at the Temple Bar one evening, having eaten nothing all day so I could enjoy my repast of three mojitos, five bowls of popcorn and six deviled eggs? Or was it the day I realized that I was about 20 pounds overweight as I rounded out my 40s?

I had to start somewhere. Why not here?

The idea of consuming only water or juice to rid the body of so-called toxins is not new. Virtually every major religion has some fasting and cleansing ritual that supposedly allows the body to heal, regenerate and, in a sense, apologize for being such a jerk. The Hebrew word for fasting, for example, is "tsum" — which means, roughly, "to afflict the soul." But everything old is new again, which may be why juice cleansing has been on the rise; this year, juices and juice-cleanse companies were as ubiquitous at [Fashion Week](#) events as [cigarettes](#) and Adderall.

Cleansing's more recent popularity is traceable to the 1990s, when Peter Glickman, the [Scientologist](#) and entrepreneur, repackaged a 1940s diet called the Master Cleanse (Stanley Burroughs wrote the book "The Master Cleanser" in 1976). The Master Cleanse involves lemon juice, cayenne pepper, maple syrup and 10 days of your life. Celebrities as varied as [Beyoncé](#), Jared Leto and the Moore/Kutchers (Demi and Ashton were tweeting about it this week) swear by its energizing and weight loss effects, weight loss being not all that surprising, when you consider that you are essentially sucking lemons and a few teaspoons of sugar for 10 days. And the diet has a glorious circular logic to it. As Mr. Glickman explains on his Web site, if you experience symptoms like cravings, fatigue, [irritability](#), headaches, pains, nausea, [vomiting](#), hot bowel movements (!) ... congratulations! That means you were supertoxic, and the cleanse is working.

In the last few years, the idea of cleanses has again evolved. Now there are kinder, gentler — and seemingly saner — alternatives. The new cleanses contain about 1,000 to 1,200 [calories](#) a day; there is generally a nut-milk component for fat and a little protein, and vegetable juices for [vitamins](#) and minerals and live enzymes. [Salma Hayek](#), a juicing aficionado, started Cooler Cleanse, a home-delivery juicing program with Eric Helms (who owns Juice Generation); and the detoxina [Gwyneth Paltrow](#) champions a similar system called Organic Avenue. On Ms. Paltrow's Web site, [goop.com](#), Denise Mari, the Organic Avenue founder, explains that her juices are based on the elements of LOVE: live, organic, [vegan](#) experience.

Many people make their own concoctions. But being able to buy the prepackaged juices and a philosophy is convenient and comforting. These programs are meant to convince the trend-averse among us that cleanses are not just the province of vegans and breatharians, but are also pretty mainstream — or at least mainstream for the reasonably chic; as vital to one's upkeep as, say, Pilates and an oxygen facial.

I decided to go with BluePrintCleanse, founded a few years ago by the raw-foodist Zoe Sakoutis and Erica Huss in a Chelsea kitchen, and now the big macher of cleanses in Manhattan. I chose the company after extensive research, which consisted of liking the clever copywriting, the pretty sky-blue labels and the friendly font. I felt healthier just looking at the spare design and architecturally satisfying containers, which — not coincidentally, I believe — are reminiscent of baby bottles. In the way I believed my Vitamin Water instills in me a pure shot of nutrients and hydration (rather than, say, the trace amounts of vitamin and nine teaspoons of sugar a bottle that the F.D.A. recently noted), I believed that for \$65 a day, BluePrintCleanse would set me right.

Besides, BPC, as it is known, has the right people behind it. The designer [Jason Wu](#) recently said that he cleanses with BPC one to two days a week because he “forgets to eat.” And [Sarah Jessica Parker](#) was recently photographed carrying a bottle. Roland Barthes could find no more persuasive signifier than S.J.P. and a bottle of this juice.

BPC has a raw-food option, allowing you to combine raw-food delivery (quinoa tabouli, cucumber macadamia soup) with juices, but no food for me. I was All About the Juice.

There were three levels of intensity in these cleanses: Renovation, Foundation and the ominous-sounding Excavation (“We're digging deeper”). The difference in intensity has to do with the number of green juices consumed every day. While common sense should have dictated that I take the beginner's Renovation level, I opted for Foundation, since Renovation involved drinking beet juice. Maybe beet juice is considered a fruit, or fruity, or something. But in my mind beet is a fruit in much the way [Joe Lieberman](#) is a Democrat.

Before I ordered I asked the service representative, delicately, if a cleanse meant that I wouldn't be able to be more than 10 feet from a bathroom for three days. She laughed. "No, not at all," she said.

In fact, a juice cleanse is not cleansing in the sense I feared it would be. You're drinking about 20 pounds worth of produce a day, Ms. Sakoutis told me later, but not [roughage](#). The cleansing component comes mostly from the other part of the program, the part that, in my enthusiasm, I didn't really consider: At the beginning and the end of the three-day program, the BPC people highly recommend a colonic. A colonic is better known as many gallons of water shot into your rectum through a tube, only to pass out of you again, this time with the contents of your intestines.

So, colonics: a big "No thank you."

Colonic or no, BPC advises its juicers to prepare their bodies for fasting by spending a couple of days ahead of time eating lightly: [salads](#), fruits, raw foods. No problem! Of course, the strip steak I had two days earlier surely didn't count, because it was resting on a bed of lettuce, along with its friends the hard-boiled eggs, bacon and avocado. You were also supposed to forsake tobacco, alcohol and caffeine. I don't smoke, so I was already many virtue points ahead of the rest of the world. And a white wine spritzer isn't what anyone would really call [liquor](#). It was practically another juice. Also — and this was key — you are allowed to cheat with a half cup of black coffee during the fast, to ward off a caffeine withdrawal [headache](#). So already I decided that in choosing the religion of juice cleanses, I was going with Reformed.

Anyway, I really did stick with the precleanse program, and by the time my juices arrived in the morning, I was already feeling so pure and good that I wondered if all this fuss was really necessary.

But the six juices, numbered and meant to be drunk in a particular order, looked so tasty. What's not to like about spicy lemonade, or pineapple with mint? Cashew milk flavored with vanilla and cinnamon was a little cloying, but ... I mean, c'mon, cashews, the [George Clooney](#) of nuts. When it came to the green juice, I read the label and tried hard to concentrate on the "lemon" and "apple" parts of the equation: romaine, celery, cucumber, green apple, spinach, kale, parsley, lemon. Bright side: no beets.

Here's the thing. That green juice? It was like drinking everything bad that ever happened to me in high school.

Yet I knew there was a reason I'd gone with BPC: I was buying a little therapy with my juice. On the first day I got an encouraging e-mail: "By now, you have probably made it through your first

juice and asked yourself at least once why you decided to embark on this somewhat strange and green journey. The answer lies ahead — your body will thank you at the end of it all!”

Both BPC and I like exclamation points. I wrote back, explaining that I was having a little trouble! with the green juices! I did not explain that while I was walking down Bleecker Street trying to choke down my second bottle of malignancy the reek so sickened me I had to stop and steady myself on a parked car.

Soon I got this lovely, if not 100 percent believable, note back from someone named Micki Olivia: “Thanks for your e-mail! We’re glad to hear that you are sticking with the cleanse, and we hope you learn to love the taste of our juice! Even those of us in the office who used to shy away from green juice at all costs, crave it now, and we drink it every chance we get! Keep up the good work, and enjoy!”

So now I was not only queasy, but also ashamed of myself. Micki Oliva wanted me to succeed. I’d have to power through.

The next three days could be summed up thus: 1. I need food. 2. Hey, this isn’t bad! 3. Kill me now.

Let me rephrase that. By the third day I felt great in the way I’m told that the imminently drowning feel great right before they give up and inhale that last mouthful of water. My juice-aficionado friend Gilly told me I was on an endorphin high. Later, Dr. David Colbert, the New York internist, dermatologist and author of “The High School Reunion Diet,” told me I was in ketosis. “That giddy feeling you get is what diabetics get when your body runs out of sugar and starts using other products for energy,” he said. “I had a model come in recently, clutching the furniture, explaining to me that she’d been juicing for a week. Your sugar metabolism is completely out of whack.”

If that was true for me, it was at least partly my own fault. On Day 2, I had given up on green juice and was subsisting on lemonade and pineapple juice. I think I threw a couple of cashew milks down the hatch, too.

So, what’s so bad about juice cleansing? Done occasionally, for a few days at a time, apparently nothing. Done regularly, for a week or more, quite a bit.

Dr. Colbert said: “You have to ask yourself this question: With a juice cleanse, what are you really cleaning? Really, nothing. The bowel self-cleans. It’s evolved over millions of years to do this.”

If you’re going to have liquids, said Dr. Colbert, a staunch believer in unprocessed foods, there is certainly good to be had from eating fresh vegetables and fruits and nuts pulverized into liquid.

“But most people aren’t Einsteins,” he added. “Often their idea of a juice fast is having nothing but orange juice or apple juice for a week. In which case, you might as well call it the Toblerone diet, because that’s how much sugar you’re pouring into your system.”

This is pretty much what I did. And it’s dumb. “Many people are undiagnosed diabetics, and these cleanses can cause spikes and crashes in [blood sugar levels](#) that could be quite dangerous,” said Nancy Kalish, a certified health coach in Brooklyn who advises clients against juice cleanses. “In addition, even if you have nothing wrong with you, this kind of cleansing puts a lot of stress on your body. Your body wants and expects food. And as with most crash diets, which is really what this is, your body thinks it’s starving. It doesn’t know it’s going to get more food. So it lowers your metabolism, and if you do this enough, it can lower your metabolism permanently.”

Moreover, many doctors see juice fasting as just another form of American extremism — as Dr. Colbert put it, “somewhere between religiosity and craziness.”

Marianne Gillow, a psychiatrist in private practice in Manhattan who consults for, among others, the [Fashion Institute of Technology](#), sees a lot of patients with unresolved food issues. “My biggest concern about juice cleanses is that they fuel obsessive thinking,” she said. “People who have trouble managing their weight tend to be all or nothing about things. Cleansing doesn’t allow you to make peace with real food.”

Dr. Gillow recalled one recent client who was “somewhat prone to magical thinking.”

“She had a fantasy that juicing would rescue her from her overeating — and the underlying neediness,” she added. “So she juices intensely, loses 20 pounds, goes on a vegan diet for the next three months, breaks down, and resumes her romance with cheese fries. The weight quickly piles back on.”

Another patient, Dr. Gillow said, “shows up in my office on Day 2 of a juice fast depressed and miserable. She essentially needs me to give her permission to stop juicing. She decides to give up this cycle of juicing and binging, goes on a moderate, portion-controlled diet. Eventually she loses weight. I see both these sorts of patients again and again.”

And me? What did I learn from all this? I’ve decided there is nothing wrong with the placebo effect now and then. What’s so bad about feeling a little better, even if there’s no demonstrable proof that you actually are better?

At the end of the three days I felt rather lithe and long-limbed, like a gibbon. I also felt a kind of shimmering on the surface of my skin, as excess weight worked its way out of my pores and escaped my body. No one would have known I was hallucinating. Or so I thought, until the night of my second food-free day. As I was putting my sons to bed, my son Henry whispered: “Mom,

listen. When we're all asleep, just eat something. *No one will know.*"

I didn't, though. I made it through. And celebrated with a fennel salad and sparkling water. Oh, O.K., an Ess-a-Bagel and a box of Good & Plenty. But I may do a juice cleanse again. Maybe there's some green juice, somewhere, I can drink. Because I did enjoy the floaty sensation, but more than that, I loved what generations before (and undoubtedly after) me loved about fasting: the triumph, however briefly, over sensuality.

I wasn't thinking about food. I wasn't thinking about drink. I wasn't even thinking about sex. The appetites that rule me every single day were my slaves, for once. By that third day I wasn't craving anything. I was free.