

# FOR THE *Love of Food*

ALLOWING NATURE TO INFORM OUR DIETS AND AVOIDING PROCESSED FOODS ARE PART OF THE SIMPLE MESSAGE SHERRY STRONG HAS BEEN SPREADING AROUND THE WORLD: WHAT WE EAT IMPACTS ON OUR HEALTH AND WELLBEING. HER FOOD PHILOSOPHY WILL SOON BE SHARED IN BOOK FORM AND AT THE WORLD WELLNESS PROJECT.

BY KATE HENNESSY

In a sparse, working-class home in Calgary, Canada, a mother is feeding formula to her newborn baby. “It’s best for the baby.” The mother is 20 years old and this is her third child, a girl named Sherry. It’s 1967 and the formula is still laced with monosodium glutamate (MSG). Her first two babies were breastfed and later she returns to breastfeeding for her fourth. It’s cheaper that way.

Fifteen years later, baby Sherry is a teenager and she’s found a book she can’t put down. The other kids are playing outside but she’s in her high school library doing a home economics assignment. She’s reading about how certain food products are marketed by manipulating nutritional research. It’s a revelatory moment, a betrayal of trust. Until that moment, young Sherry Strong, raised on staples of Kraft dinners, cheese whiz, tomato ketchup and Miracle Whip, had done what most people do: eat without questioning the serious damage certain foods may do to her health. These days, that’s all she does. Strong is a Melbourne-based food philosopher, nutritional strategist and speaker with a dizzying array of projects on the boil. I’ve left far too little time to browse her biography in the cab heading to meet her for dinner. Since leaving Canada in 1987, Strong has been head chef at some of Melbourne’s finest restaurants, run a cooking school, chaired the Victorian arm of Nutrition Australia, headed up Melbourne Slow Food and travelled overseas for speaking engagements and to do lifestyle makeovers. She has popped up numerous times on TV and radio. These days, she’s writing and illustrating a book, developing a seminar series called *Make Me Well Now* and curating The World Wellness conference. “How does Sherry find all the time?” reads her bio, coyly. Yes, I think, as the cab pulls up. How does she?

## A FAILED EXPERIMENT

“The past 50 years of food has been a big experiment that’s failed,” Strong tells me over our entrees. Coming from anyone else, Strong’s food philosophies may seem overtly political. Her insights have echoes in Morgan Spurlock’s nauseating McDonald’s documentary *Super Size Me* or in 2008’s agribusiness exposé *Food Inc.* But, unlike many opponents of the food industry, Strong doesn’t batter her audience with stomach-curdling facts. She is gentle and polite and utters her opinion in a soft Canadian lilt, reverting immediately to listening mode at my slightest interjection.

“My message comes across differently because I don’t think anyone should or shouldn’t do anything. It’s totally non-judgmental and I teach my philosophies with love. I can’t change anyone; it’s about people deciding how *they* want to feel. Do they want to wake up every day with energy? Do they want to reduce the risk of lifestyle diseases? If so, what I am teaching can help.”

Strong may seem calm and logical now but she’s had her moments of naivety, too. In 1999, she sailed into a Victorian meeting of Nutrition Australia in a highly excited state. She had resigned as chair of the organisation two years before but now returned bearing a gift, a healthy eating model she’d developed called The Steps of Nature. The ubiquitous food pyramid, Strong told her stunned audience, needed to go.

“I was so naive,” she recalls with a giggle. “I said, ‘Look! You can replace the food pyramid with The Steps of Nature! It’s a much better model because it is based on science and nature, not on the interests of the food industry.’”

“The response was very aggressive. One of the dieticians was so livid she was shaking. She kept saying, ‘What are your references for this?’ I left the room with

my tail between my legs.”

The Steps of Nature and the Consumption Concept are based on what Sherry calls Nature’s Principle. According to this principle, we should eat lots of foods that are highly “bio-available” in nature – like vegetables and fruit; eat less food that is harder to obtain in nature – like meat and grains; and avoid anything that’s not possible in nature – like refined sugar, white flour and certain oils. These “denatured” foods make us sick and sap our energy, says Strong. Many are processed using extremely high temperatures and toxic chemicals such as bleach. They emerge highly addictive and with little nutritional value. Yet the food pyramid does not distinguish between a natural food such as cold-pressed olive oil and its highly processed version: a refined pure olive oil.

“The food pyramid is not getting the right message across. And, as obesity soars in Western countries, we’re swamped with nutritional information. With information, food companies and people with agendas can manipulate you.”

I tell Strong about a recent visit with my parents. My father told me yellow melon reduces blood pressure and my mother announced two apples a day keeps Alzheimer’s away. Interesting, yes, but is this information useful in such isolated snippets? Strong thinks not.

“The nutrition world focuses on macro and micro nutrients rather than looking at the broader context. They say you shouldn’t have too much fat in your diet but the Inuit people eat around 80 per cent fat — seal blubber — and they’re healthier than many Americans on low-fat diets,” says Strong.

“Your body is a more accurate source of information about what’s good for you than any one piece of scientific information. It’s about what gives you lasting energy and makes you feel good for longer. My version of



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## SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

Strong has not always felt this way. Or looked this good. In the mid-90s, she was twice the size she is now. “I had unresolved issues from childhood and I was eating to meet my needs through food. My home life growing up was impoverished on a physical, mental, spiritual and emotional level. My parents were really loving but they were children raising children. My mother had three kids by the time she could get into bars and was a grandma at 32.”

When Strong was in Year 8, her family moved from Calgary to a small town on Vancouver Island. The family moved regularly with little thought to its impact on the children and Strong had already been to 11 schools. Once settled on Vancouver Island, the family stayed — a blessing for the studious Strong, who attended the same school until Year 12. One day, 15-year-old Sherry answered a knock at the door. A girl her age called Kirstin greeted her brightly before introducing her to a certain fundamentalist Christian church. She persuaded Strong to attend a meeting after which she decided to become a missionary. Her family protested but Strong didn’t waver.

“My grandma had pointed to me once and said, ‘She’ll end up like her sisters, pregnant before she’s 18.’ I remember thinking, ‘That’s not going to happen to me.’ So I think I became religious to create boundaries to protect myself against a fate I didn’t want.”

Strong graduated from school and joined missionary school. “I was looking for a respectability I felt I didn’t have in my home. My grandfather was an alcoholic and my parents misused alcohol. As a child, I also suffered a difficult event at the hands of a family friend and, between that, the poverty and the moving, I had a lot of shame. I wanted to feel clean and pure and religion was a way of doing that.”

Religion served a purpose for Strong but it was short-lived. While vacationing in Europe, Strong was assaulted and forced to return home. She was 20 years old and at a deep emotional low.

“When I came back to Canada, I had pneumonia and I was terribly distraught. I didn’t have the support network to cope. I lived with four other celibate women studying to become missionaries who could not comprehend what I’d been through. I was unhappy and I knew religion wasn’t the answer. So I walked away from it. Leaving religion meant leaving Canada. I’d met a girl in Europe who had a room in Melbourne, so I decided to travel to Australia.” There was a spare room — and a new life — waiting for her there.



