

10 MINUTES WITH WELLNESS CHEF, SAMANTHA GOWING



Before nutrition became trendy, there was chef Samantha Gowing - spreading the word on healthy cuisine and all it encompasses. The Chef-hat winning restaurateur traded her fast-paced city career to follow her passion for health and wellbeing – re-training as a clinical nutritionist and furthering her qualifications with a Master's Degree from Le Cordon Bleu. Combining these skills with her already celebrated cooking talents, Byron Bay-based Gowing has established herself as Australia's leading spa chef – kick starting the 'food as medicine' movement. She is highly sought after and writes prolifically on the future of food, food trends and 'the cult of the green smoothie'.

Q: You've had a long and celebrated career as a restaurateur and chef. Was there a particular experience that led to food as medicine becoming the focus of your career?

A: In the late 90s we had just sold our wonderful pub Gowings Grace Darling in Melbourne's Collingwood and I was looking for a career path that would help me understand why I had lost my Dad to cancer. I fell lightly into fitness instruction, and then deeply into the study of human nutrition. At the beginning of my health science journey there was a subject called 'food as medicine' that focussed on the healing properties of food based on Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine. It was 1999, I was 33 and had been running restaurants and pubs for 15 years. I had found my calling.

Q: What does 'food as medicine' mean to you?

A: My recipe for food as medicine investigates the benefits of individual ingredients, the synergy of combining ingredients and the health outcomes they might provide. I then add a jolly good dose of happiness and a dollop of reality into the research-based evidence I find.

Q: Can you name a few foods that punch above their weight in the healthy food stakes?

A: Watercress, turmeric, Kakadu Plum, beet greens, chard, maca, shitake and wheatgrass.

Q: I notice you didn't mention kale. Is it really the super food it's cracked up to be?

A: No. We have reached Peak Kale and it's time to re-embrace the broccoli.

Q: Green smoothies. Yes, or no?

A: Yes – if you have an awesome blender and use gentle-on-the-tummy greens like butter lettuce and parsley. No – if you use raw kale (steam and cool it first).

Q: What are some small, healthy changes we can make with our food that are still 'do-able' in people's crazy-busy lives?

A: People have this notion that they want to save time in the kitchen, but they never spend the time they save, so I ask them to make time to have a cook-up at least once a week. Four hours plus the shopping and a handful of great recipes will have you stocked up for days and enjoying guilt-free whole foods that, most importantly, you have made yourself. Eating out exposes us to a myriad of trans fats from cooking oils and preservatives in products, so cooking from home for a few weeks can have life-changing results when it comes to habitual eating.

Q: Someone tells you they're on the Paleo diet and they've never felt better. What do you say to them?

A: I share how I felt when I did it, and then tell them how sad I was because my serotonin levels had plummeted...so I ate a bowl of rice and felt much better. I would also tell them that when you clean up your diet for a few months - for example remove acidic grains, stop eating flour-based products (which are often loaded with preservatives), reduce sugar and alcohol, and watch your fat intake, you are bound to lose excess fluid, drop a few kilos, sleep better and move faster. However, there is no one size fits all when it comes to diet. Hormones play a huge part as we age - especially estrogen and cortisol for women.

Q: You're a fount of knowledge about wellness and nutrition, and you clearly walk your talk. But when you need that occasional naughty food fix, what are we likely to find you eating?

A: Peking duck and a damn fine dimmy!

Q: What's exciting you right now in your career and what's on the horizon?

A: Campaigning for authenticity when it comes to food and health claims, delicious Byron Bay Cooking School executive events, keynote speaking gigs and a whole summer to nut out the flavour of my next book. Stay tuned!