This article uses discourse analysis to the expressive practices around “clean eating”, looking at the engagement of a popular cookery writer with those that foreground non-processed foods, the informed consumer and assumptions around health, much of which we will see dismissed as “faddy food trends”. Looking at the example of popular cook, food writer and television presenter Nigella Lawson, the article will explore the discursive work undertaken to manage discourses around clean eating, including associated discourses around health and well-being. In the management of a critical relationship with “clean” food, we will see the importance of particular claims of authenticity in the integration of clean eating within Lawson’s expressive lexicon of popular cooking.

This paper will therefore explore an aspect of clean eating, its culinary ingredients, to show how these have become normalised in some ways by cooks who would otherwise shun them. Nigella Lawson is on record for her views on food fads:

What I hate is the new-age voodoo about eating, the notion that foods are either harmful or healing, that a good diet makes a good person and that that person is necessarily lean, limber, toned and fit […] Such a view seems to me in danger of fusing Nazism (with its ideological cult of physical perfection) and Puritanism (with its horror of the flesh and belief in salvation through denial). (Nigella Lawson, *How to Eat* 1998: ix)

This strident refusal to engage in faddy food trends by is one that underpins her cookery writing for the next 20 years. This is in the face of a seemingly never-ending series of diet trends that promise us good health, mostly through giving things up or replacing them with new-fangled ingredients. What this paper seeks to show is the insidious influence of such trends which ultimately affect even food writers such as Nigella Lawson who have explicitly rejected them. We will see how clean eating, as one of the many disputed notions of just what is “good food”, has become normalised in contemporary food culture.

**Food trends: towards clean eating**

A great deal of research has explored the imposition of commerce on food. At the centre of this, the nutritional necessities of life have become bound up within what Bourdieu (1983) famously describes as a system of “distinction” in which ingredients, process and practices around cooking and eating are used to exercise judgement and taste, as well as to demonstrate social and intellectual standing. This could be in the form of the knowing consumer who is environmentally aware, as Kennedy et al (2018) have explored in their study of the eat-local movement in Canada. There is also the organic food movement, although as Aarset et al (2004) have pointed out, just what this means is actually rather fuzzy in the minds of consumers, and is a concept in food that overlaps with the whole-foods trends in food shopping (Johnston, 2007). As we will see, terms such as “clean eating” are, like “low-fat” and “organic”, amorphous buzz-words that hook consumers into engaging with products, where we are convinced by the marketing that these are “good” for us (eg Ledin and Machin 2020; O’Neill and Silver 2017).

According to Grunert (2013), today ́s food consumption in industrialised societies is particularly affected by three major trends: health concerns, sustainability, and convenience. Of particular interest in this paper is the first of these: health. As a term, like “organic” in Aarset et al’s study, “health” is inherently unstable and Rousseau (2012) has explored how this buzz-word can mean a wide range of different and often contradictory things. Health concerns such as low-carb, low-fat, high protein, gluten-free and vegan are driven by consumers’ affluence, but also explained by the increasing number of food and lifestyle related diseases such as diabetes and obesity (Kearney, 2010; Weis, 2007) and allergies and intolerances towards some specific food products or components such as gluten. These factors have encouraged consumers to be more interested in food products that support healthy lifestyles and reduce the risk of certain diseases. Traditionally, healthy eating messages have appeared most frequently in magazine articles aimed at women (Cairns and Johnston 2015), but as Schneider and Davis (2010) have shown in their case study of *Australian Women’s Weekly*, the confusion relating to just what constitutes “healthy eating” is found in the often-contradictory guidance such publications offer. For example, across “healthy eating” magazines, “nut milk” is promoted as a healthy alternative to conventional milk, but there is often also a promotion of heavily processed gluten-free bread as healthy choices in the same issue.

Westernised societies, as Petersen and Lupton (1996) have shown, are characterised as being in a “new public health era” which is permeated by ideas of self-care expressed in the buzz-words mentioned here. People are expected to be responsible for their own health and, as such, to make lifestyle choices that would limit harm (Rose 2006; Johnston 2007; Cairns and Johnston 2015). Part of this is through food choices that are glossed as “healthy eating”, furnished with the knowledge to know what is “good food”. Shugart (2014, 261) claims, “the contemporary discourse around ‘good’ food is a prominent way in which class is rhetorically recreated and reconfigured, specifically to the end of remaking the myth of the middle class”. As hinted at above with reference to Bourdieu (1983), the collocation of “good food” with social class is one that has a long heritage. Furthermore, as Shugard (2014) shows, the main protagonists of clean eating are young white, middle-class females such as the Helmsley sisters (Melissa and Jasmine) in the UK, Jordan Younger in the US, Emily Skye in Australia, and perhaps most famously, Gwyneth Paltrow internationally. All of them urge their followers to use “organic” products, without actually identifying the specific properties these foods would bring to the diet. However, as with Cairns and Johnston’s study (2015), it remains the case that women are at the forefront of the diet/lifestyle.

**The rise and fall of clean eating**

In this section, we will look at how the branch of healthy eating known as clean eating has been building in popularity for the last ten years. In the wider context of rising awareness of diet and health discussed above, there are particular claims to authenticity in clean eating based on a rejection of industrialised processes which are seen to be detrimental to our health and ruinous to our relationship with the environment. There is a frequent mantra of “our lifestyles are killing us”, which has led to the development of a profitable market for alternative remedies. These have included such things as specialised lights to counter “seasonal affective disorder” (lethargy and depression supposedly caused by a lack of sunlight in the winter months in Northern hemisphere countries), and in the UK family doctors “prescribing” mindfulness courses to stressed patients (at the top end, such courses are held in a location removed from urbanised contexts). The fear of industrialisation that has been circulating since the dawn of the industrial revolution has moved to focus on the individual, and in particular the food we eat. Helena Siipi (2014) has studied the semantic collocation of “natural” with “healthy” food, and found that there is a strong conceptual collocation in the minds of consumers. There are many scientific studies that suggest “processed foods” carry a range of health risks, including premature death (see for example Lawrence et al, 2019; Bes-Rastrollo, 2019). Such longitudinal studies define “ultra-processed” foods as industrialised formulations derived from foods and additives with little nutritional value, but which are extremely tasty, convenient to prepare/eat, and are low-cost alternatives. They are often presented in attractive packaging, highlighting the issue of social class and food that Shugart (2014) has explored in relation to health and diet. Such studies usually list savoury snacks, meat products, and soft drinks as the most common sources of ultra-processed foods. What is relevant about these studies, though, is that they focus on diet rather than product, by which methodology they find that sustained and excessive consumption of such products is harmful to health, whilst occasional consumption has no impact. In referring to them as “ultra-processed” foods, they are drawing on the lexicon of the industrialised world, and their findings link ill-health with this in a negative way, and so such studies are part of a wider global discussion about the negative effects of mechanisation that is often linked with a “back to basics” mantra. In fact, Lawrence et al (2019) make one of their recommendations that policy makers should shift towards encouraging “unprocessed or minimally processed foods” (ibid), echoing Siipi’s findings relating to the semantic connotations of “natural”.

Part of this focus on “natural” food relates to the desire to remove ourselves from the industrialised processes of the modern world, to cleanse ourselves in one way or another. Like the long-standing, if somewhat confusing, trend in organic produce and its links with “natural” food, the term “clean eating” has its origins here, with this desire to detoxify our bodies and our lives. As Cairns and Johnston (2015) found in their study of North American dieting trends, the “responsible” knowing consumer is one who maintains “health” without overtly dieting to lose weight. As such, clean eating fits perfectly into this as it is a lifestyle rather than just a diet.

Clean eating is discursively associated with eating only “whole” and “unprocessed” food (whilst never actually articulating what this might be, as Shugart (2014) has explored). There is surprisingly little academic research into “clean eating” as a cultural concept, although there is a great deal of scientific research that has explored specific aspects of the dietary components attributed to this. However, if we look at the various recipe blogs and cookery books, we can see the clean eating promoters drawing on largely unattributed scientific claims to support their own experiences and thus enhance the credibility of their choices, engaging their audiences with buzz-words that produce a semantic field of “clean eating”. In fact, as the clean-eating movement has grown, it has become increasingly powerful and its messages are aligned with wider issues of health and society. This links with the mindfulness aspect of clean eating, where fast food is demonised both as being “dirty” and by the common rejection of high-pressure lifestyles that leave little “me time”. As such, many of the recipes in the blogs and recipe books gather food, not under occasion for cooking (such as “soups and starters”), but as with Robyn Youkilis (2016) and Amelia Freer (2015) they adopt pseudo spiritual ethos such as “breath”. “chew”, and “sparkle”. The current culinary trend to eat “bowl food” is found across clean eating media, where it is presented as being comforting but healthy, usually pictured with the clean eating writer holding the bowl with one hand and a fork in the other, where the colourful food is just visible beneath their serenely smiling faces. The message is that this is food that makes people happy and relaxed as well as healthy, and this message is one that is readily shared on Instagram and other social media where the neat circular frame of the bowl allows for the creative arrangement of colourful components.

Clean eating, like the terms “organic” and “whole-food” studied by Aarset et al (2004) and Siipi (2013), is a vaguely all-encompassing label. As with the general concept of healthy eating, it is often contradictory, as is a generic feature of the magazines Schneider and Davis (2010) analysed. The prototypical ingredients of clean eating are gluten-free and dairy-free foods, and although not necessarily vegetarian, there is a general avoidance of red meat. There is an emphasis on fresh vegetables, and ingredients that were initially unusual or rare, such as quinoa, coconut oil, chai seeds, and avocados. With all of this comes the implicit promise of extraordinary health benefits. However, there are tensions in terms of what “healthy” food actually is. For example, writing from the perspective of a development chef[[1]](#footnote-1), Anthony Warner has commented incredulously on the rise of coconut oil as a health food. He has observed that this was once a “great dietary demon” (2017: 66), and has a very high level of saturated fat (see also Mansor et al, 2012).

At first, clean eating sounded modest and even down-to-earth: rather than counting calories, you could eat as many nutritious home-cooked foods as desired. It quickly became clear that “clean eating” was more than a diet: it was a belief system which spread the idea that the way most people eat is not simply fattening, but impure. The concept pervaded sport, and Spencer (2014) shows particularly how in mixed martial arts (MMA) the aesthetic of “clean” food over “dirty” food (burgers, pizza, alcohol) characterise a diet that seeks to produce the idealised MMA body that is fast and powerful. Seemingly out of nowhere, a whole universe of coconut oil and spiralised vegetables emerged. As if to underline this point, a range of “clean eating” gadgets appeared to meet an apparent need for new equipment: spiralisers to make thin ribbons of vegetables to replace wheat-based pasta; perhaps most famously, the “Nutribullet” juicer which promised to “detox”.

In particular, gluten is portrayed as physically noxious and is explicitly excluded in many such diets. Implicit in Shugart’s (2014) point about the middle-class nature of clean eating is also the expense of buying specialist food (see also Kennedy et al 2018 and Johnston 2007). For example, gluten-free foods are often those which cost more than their wheat-based alternatives. In addition to this, the necessary ingredients to produce gluten-free products such as bread are often highly processed as manufacturers strive to achieve the “texture” of their wheat-based originals. This highly processed food is anathema to many clean eaters, hence the self-declared need for recipe books and blogs to offer home-cooked alternatives. Gluten-free diets are therefore central to clean eating bloggers’ outputs.

Gluten-free diets are medically associated with coeliac disease, which is real and serious. However, recently, it has become fashionable for non-coeliacs to adopt a gluten-free diet in the misguided belief that it is healthier for everyone as part of a clean eating diet. For example, Robyn Youkalis promotes the idea that gluten-intolerance is the new norm: “most of us can no longer digest [gluten] very well (indeed, as the research piles are building, we wonder whether anyone can!)” (2016: 156). Here, Youkilis’ modality of certainty is ameliorated by the concession that digesting gluten is not an absolute impossibility (we can digest it, but not very well), then her friendly aside in parenthesis employs the discourse marker of certainty “indeed” before offering evidence in the form of vague “piles” of research. She finishes this aside with an exclamatory suggestion that gluten intolerance is so widespread, no-one can digest it; a claim that is certainly not true. Clean eaters often cite (largely unattributed) scientific evidence to support their lifestyles. Even when evidence is explicitly backed up, is it often not quite as straight forward. See for example, Amelia Freer citing scientific evidence that being gluten free is healthier: in *Eat. Nourish. Glow*, she quotes Alessio Fasano (“a world-renowned expert on [coeliac disease] at University of Maryland School of Medicine”) as “confirming that the human body cannot digest gluten” (2015: 35). A simple online search finds that it is taken out of context, and Fasano is actually referring to the intolerance *some*, but not *all*, people have. In fact, in an interview for the Celiac Disease Foundation (Watson, 2014), Fasano was questioned about this and stated that for most people “our bodies cope with gluten just fine”, and criticised the celebrity trend for gluten-free diets as “jumping on the lifestyle bandwagon”.

As with Fasano’s point about the “lifestyle bandwagon”, there is a rejection of the clean eating ethos in popular cultural texts. Nigella Lawson, one of the earliest and most vocal critics of this, joined the voices of those who pointed to the links between clean eating and more specific eating disorders. Although the clean eating promoters claim not to be about weight loss dieting, Katrine Kjaer has argued the associated “detox diets”

are obesity discourse narratives because despite their ostensible focus on individual wellbeing, they produce collectivities that depend on a disassociation with a non-dieting Other, who is fat, unhealthy, unhappy and unproductive. These collectives, in turn, connect healthiness to dieting, dieting with happiness, and happiness with a productive working on the self. (2018:2)

In particular, Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop web site (which has developed into a multi-media franchise) has come in for a great deal of mockery and criticism for the pseudoscience that it is said to contain, as well as the infamous diet and exercise regime to “get the Gwyneth Paltrow body”, combining strenuous exercise with a diet of just 700 calories a day in its extreme form. The Goop diet is one that is based around removing certain foods which, in Paltrow’s case, is a long list including eggs, dairy, sugar, shellfish, deepwater fish, wheat, meat, soy, bell peppers, corn, aubergine, “anything processed at all”, coffee and alcohol. In excluding these foods, Paltrow claims, she is healthier and more energized (see Rousseau 2015). Whilst Paltrow’s personal list is more extensive that most clean eaters’, it contains the “dirty” foods of diary, eggs, sugar, meat, wheat, and soy. These are the demons in the world of clean eating, and contrast to the saintly ingredients of avocados (sanctified to the point that some clean food writers refer to it as “God’s butter”), coconut oil, quinoa, and assorted gluten-free flours.

These ingredients are now quite widely available in Western supermarkets. This has happened relatively quickly in the UK, where gluten free flour, for example, was very difficult to obtain just ten years ago (as coeliac friends can testify). Coconut oil is also widely available now. However, the clean eating health claims for this product are in addition to the more traditional use of coconut oil in beauty products. The associated health claims are only made on clean eating blogs and in associated publications rather than on the labels of the product itself is relevant. EU regulations mean unsubstantiated health benefits are not permitted on food labels. Indeed, in one of my own local supermarkets, coconut oil is not found in the food aisles at all: it is in the hair care aisle.

The impact of celebrity cooks on what is stocked in supermarkets is well known, with perhaps the best-known story being of UK tv cook Delia Smith who caused a national shortage of cranberries when she demonstrated her own recipe for a dish that included these relatively rare ingredients on her tv show in 1995. This became known as “the Delia effect”. Whilst the impact of celebrity food fads is well known, it is now more likely to come from online communities than tv shows. Most of the clean eating writers started as bloggers or YouTubers, with very few reaching mainstream television.

Clean eating, and Paltrow in particular, is the focus of some passionate criticism. Anthony Warner set up a blog and Twitter account under the name “The Angry Chef” to point to the flawed science behind the promises of clean eating. In punning the name of a gadget to make the juices that are central to the detoxing ethos of clean eating, the Nutribullet as Nutribollocks, fellow nutritional scientist Ian Marber (who founded The Food Doctor diet in 1999) added to the vehement arguments that emerged against the clean eating lifestyle. In extreme cases, clean eating was promoted as a cure for terminal illness, and there were several high-profile, tragic deaths of people who had adopted such a lifestyle in the belief that they would be “cured”. The high-profile reporting of the deaths of several people who followed the clean eating mantra as a cure for terminal illness led to the main promotors of this removing it from their web sites after criticism by scientists such as David Gorski (2014).

Yet the main ingredients and associated lifestyle of clean eating have influenced cookery writing and this paper will explore the extent to which a mainstream cookery book author who previously rejected the notion of clean eating has integrated this into recipes that engage with this trend by any other measure (such as in the replacement of specific ingredients to be gluten free, or dairy free). The author chosen, Nigella Lawson, is a writer who is not professionally trained and firmly places her recipes in the context of the family home. In parallel with clean eating itself, Lawson therefore offers particular claims to authenticity, based on self-training and her place within the domestic realm. As shown in the quotation at the beginning of this paper, Lawson has previously explicitly rejected the notion of clean eating. As such, she would appear to be immune from its lure. However, this article will explore how she comes to actually normalise such specialist ingredients.

**Theoretical framework**

As explored above, clean eating is a discursive construction that includes a range of specific “buzz words”, specifically in this paper, “gluten-free” and “coconut oil”. In the case of clean eating, these semantic properties relate to the general sense of purity and the associated practices of mindfulness. This paper will explore how this discourse of clean eating is used in the case of Nigella Lawson, using an analytical model that allows us to here to explore the wider social conditions of clean eating, whilst also looking at how these have influenced and are influenced by her. Lawson is well-known as being the authentic “friend” in the kitchen, her writing style employing what Fairclough refers to a “conversationalisation” (1995). This is the “colonization of public orders of discourse by the discursive practices of the private sphere” (1995: 19). By the “private sphere”, Fairclough is referring to the linguistic features associated with informal, conversational language practices. When employed in a mass media text, such as a tv programme or book, where the text will be consumed by spatially and temporally distant audiences, this forms part of what Fairclough terms “synthetic personalisation”. This is the “compensatory tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people ‘handled’ *en masse* as an individual” (2001: 52). Synthetic personalisation, in Fairclough’s terms, is the linguistic strategy employed by authors to produce something akin to the voice of a friend. He refers to it as “a major strand in the systematic restructuring of the societal order of discourse” (2001: 179). By using linguistic features that are closely aligned with those of informal spoken interaction, we can be persuaded of the authenticity and sincerity of the unknown other to such a degree that we can regard them as a friend who can give us advice and help without resorting to bullying or lecturing. This strategy of conversationalisation is one that Lawson uses, as we will see.

Added to this, the concept of “normalisation” is relevant. Vaughan’s work (1996) on this concept in the context of negligent behaviour in the NASA Space Shuttle programme shows how in some organisations people “become so accustomed to deviant behaviour, that they don’t consider it deviant” (1996: 25). As such, behaviours and practices contrary to conventions of correctness and responsibility become an informally sanctioned part of an organisation’s culture. This is relevant to this paper in that clean eating as a concept is at odds with the stated good food philosophy of Lawson, and indeed as discussed above, at odds with dietary advice more generally.

The concept of normalisation is one that conversationalisation can facilitate. Normalisation is the process of making something appear more acceptable by making it routine or unremarkable. The process of demystifying unusual ingredients, for example, could be part of this normalisation process. As Asioli et al (2017) and Aschenmann-Witzel et al (2019) point out, where an ingredient is unknown or unfamiliar, consumers are less likely to choose it, therefore its normalisation is an integral part of the process of acceptance.

In using these analytical models, we will explore in some depth the first of Lawson’s cookery books that engages with clean eating ingredients: *Simply Nigella* (2015). We will see how Lawson draws on three different strategies to engage with clean eating ingredients: the accidental use of them (such as running short of a more traditional ingredient); the coincidental use (particularly when chosen for their epicurean value); and the deliberate use (most clearly when cooking for someone else with a food intolerance).

**Analysis: Nigella Lawson and clean eating ingredients**

Nigella Lawson is a food writer and broadcaster whose initial book*, How to Eat* (1998) was followed by the first of her many tv series. She has attracted some academic attention in terms of her gender, with Joanne Hollows (2003) in particular exploring her broadcast persona relating to postfeminist discourses. Lawson wrote *How to Eat* whilst pregnant with her second child, and the tv series a year later (*Nigella Bites*, Channel 4) showed her in her home cooking for family and friends. However, her husband at that time, John Diamond, was in the late stages of cancer and he died during the filming this series. Lawson married art collector Charles Saatchi in 2003, but this ended acrimoniously and publically in 2013. This is not mentioned in Lawson’s books or tv programmes, but her 2015 book and tv series, *Simply Nigella*, is set against her “new life”. Lawson’s life experiences have also informed her whole attitude towards food. In the twentieth anniversary tour to mark the publication of *How to Eat*, she made the point that, having watched three people die of cancer (her sister, mother and first husband), it was not possible for her to equate thinness with health[[2]](#footnote-2). Thus her attitude towards food is not that of the typical food writer whose recipes are embellished with references to low fat and low sugar associated with “diet”.

**New ingredients: normalising the usual**

In Lawson, we have an internationally-known food writer whose credibility hinges on her access to the perspective of a busy mother. She shuns diets for weight loss, and explicitly referred to the concept that would become clean eating in *How to Eat,* in the quotation shown in full at the start of this article, particularly the first part where she states she “hate[s]”…”the notion that foods are either harmful or healing, that a good diet makes a good person and that that person is necessarily lean, limber, toned and fit” (1998: ix). She highlights the explicit link that clean eating makes between virtuous food and virtuous people, with the bodily governance that such a diet represents, as we saw earlier in brief discussion of Gwyneth Paltrow. More recently, this notion of there being foods that are harmful can be seen in the 2012 book by Reader’s Digest *Foods That Harm: Foods That Heal*, which offers medical information, food advice and recipes “to beat disease”. Whilst not a book that fits into the lifestyle of clean eating mentioned earlier, this book’s title does follow the dichotomy of harmful/healing, good/evil that is so problematic for Lawson and for other critics of clean eating.

Lawson repeats her anti-fad assertion in her 2015 book, *Simply Nigella* (written in the aftermath of her messy breakup from Saatchi and an equally shambolic court case when it was revealed that Lawson had had a coke habit). In *Simply Nigella*, she elaborates this rejection of clean eating explicitly:

The Clean-Eating brigade seems an embodiment of all my fears. Food is not dirty, the pleasures of the flesh are essential to life and, however we eat, we are not guaranteed immortality or immunity from loss. We cannot control life by controlling what we eat. But how we cook and, indeed, how we eat does give us – as much as anything can – mastery over ourselves. (2015: lx)

In explicitly drawing attention to the diametric opposite of “clean” as being “dirty”, Lawson is able to draw on pseudo-religious metaphors to make her point. With her intertextual reference to biblical allusions that warn of “pleasures of the flesh”, she is able to link this with food through her long-standing insistence that food is pleasurable and also essential to life. In acknowledging the argument that our diet affects our health, and that *how* we prepare food as well as *what* we prepare is linked to this, but she is also able to make the point that we all die eventually. She is explicit in referring to cooking and eating as process as well as product, a theme she repeats throughout her cookery writing from her first book’s title – *How to Eat*, not *What to Eat*. Her point is therefore that we might as well not feel guilty in eating, but that we should enjoy food in its entirety. The conversational style of her writing is also clear in this example, where she juxtaposes her own fears with the wider needs of her readers, marked as part of an in-group of like-minded foodies through the use of the collective pronoun *we*.

It is clear from the style of writing that Lawson is presenting her recipes in an autobiographical way. She writes in the first person: it is her experiences in the kitchen, not the impersonal tone of many recipe books where the only text relates to the recipes’ ingredients and methods rather than a personal narrative and use of personal pronouns. Nigella Lawson’s authentic voice is the one that shines through, and with it, a sense of truth and sincerity that we have already seen reflects an ethos on diet and lifestyle, associated with the recipes themselves.

*Simply Nigella* is the book and accompanying tv series which showed Lawson enjoying and embracing her single life, with grown-up children who are no longer part of her daily routine. The calmness that *Simply Nigella* emits is embodied in the pink and green colour scheme not only of the book and tv show’s design, but of the recipes themselves. Chapters and episodes have titles such as “Quick and Calm”, “Bowlfood”, and “Breath”, which are all buzz-words that can be found throughout the clean eating recipe books that seek to promote the concept of clean eating with its close association with mindfulness (several books include sections on yoga and meditation, and the trendy concept of “bowlfood” is integral to their recipes). In Lawson’s case, bowlfood is “a simple shorthand for food that is simulating soothing, bolstering, undemanding and sustaining” (2015: 55), employing adjectives that appear liberally in clean eating texts. Bowls symbolise a rejection of formality, which enhances the informality of Lawson’s cooking style, and indeed the cover photo for the first edition of *Simply Nigella* shows her standing holding a stack of four large white bowls. As mentioned previously, bowlfood is closely connected with clean eating and whole phenomenon of Instragramming food. *Simply Nigella* embraces this phenomenon with its pink and green colour scheme, framed by white crockery. In explicitly referring to bowlfood, Lawson is presenting herself as “one of us”, where informal dining is preferred to “silver service” formality.

The food that Lawson is advocating is framed by her own lifestyle and in the case of *Simply Nigella*, this is a lifestyle that is aiming for calmness and tranquillity. This is reflected in other chapter titles, which offer recipes that are quick to make but are not challenging (“Quick and Calm”), and ones that are easily prepared but take longer to cook (“Breath”).

Typically, she makes no mention of the cost of ingredients and it was reported in the *Daily Mail* (3 November 2015) that viewers of the tv series had commented on social media that she was pictured shopping at a local deli in affluent Chelsea in London. They noted that the avocados she picked up cost twice those found in national supermarket chains, and the loaf of German bread she enthused over would cost three or four times the amount of even a good quality supermarket loaf. Lawson’s lack of comment about the cost of ingredients also links with the wider world of “good food” that Siipi (2013) and Johnston (2008) make in relation to this being an affluent consumer’s lifestyle choice.

Whilst the established ethos of Lawson’s cookery books and tv shows is very closely aligned with the zen-like practices of clean eating’s mindfulness, more recently books have included explicit reference to the ingredients associated with the clean eating movement: quinoa, coconut oil, gluten-free flour, and so on. Whilst the clean eating trend is not exclusively vegetarian, it does tend to favour white meat and fish. What this paper argues, however, is that the clearly articulated aversion of clean eating by Lawson is not quite borne out in her recipes. Sometimes, this is apparently as the result of an accident. For example, the recipe of “Spiced and fried haddock with broccoli puree” (2015: 35-37) makes use of gluten-free flour. In the pre-recipe narrative, Lawson writes:

This recipe could hardly be easier, and requires no complication, not any effort to keep it simple. Good fish, lightly dredged in spiced flour then flash-fried, is an old-fashioned pleasure, and one to be savoured. Here I use gluten-free flour in preference to regular plain flour to coat the fish. I had wanted the slight grittiness of rice flour, but had none in the house, and gluten-free flour (which I did have) contains rice flour and worked fabulously. Obviously, you can use plain flour if you wish.

Thus her desire for a specific texture of batter is what initially drives her to use gluten-free flour in the form of rice flour, but it is an accident of mismanaged shopping that leads to her using general gluten-free flour. The aside in parenthesis serves to normalise the presence of the gluten-free flour (she hadn’t had to buy it specially), but in drawing attention to this, is also acknowledging that she needs to recognise the presence of this ingredient that she had previously not used in her cookery books. There is no explanation as to why she didn’t reach for plain flour instead, with the use of rice-containing gluten-free flour left to the reader to assume that this also has a “gritty” texture. The underlying theme is one that recurs throughout Lawson’s cooking; that she is working at home and in a rather *ad hoc* way without much forward planning. In other words, she is an ordinary cook, just like us. Her chatty style, developed right from the start of *How to Eat*, is the voice of friend who is in the kitchen with us. She rescues herself from the assertion that she is drawing on clean eating strategies by the use of these conversational features, as seen in the final sentence of the above quotation where she uses the common-sense axiom “of course” to make this recipe more inclusive of readers who are not on gluten-free diets. By framing this recipe as “simple” and “good, old-fashioned pleasure”, she is also helping to normalise the inclusion of very new ingredients in the form of gluten-free flour, and as we shall see, coconut oil.

Coconut oil is presented as a more deliberately chosen ingredient from the clean eating repertoire. In the same pre-recipe narrative, she explains her use of this:

I use frozen broccoli simply because I find that, cooked in this way, the taste is – counterintuitively – fresher and needs no more added to it than a little salt and pepper to taste, along with the mildest yet emphatically creamy, hint of coconut. If you cringe at the idea of coconuttiness, however delicate, then use butter or a really good extra-virgin olive oil.

As usual, her chatty style of writing offers asides to the reader (here, in terms of aligning scepticism about frozen rather than fresh products with the element of surprise glossed as “counter intuitively”). As with Lawson’s style of cookery writing, there is a luscious description of the addition of coconut (it is mild but emphatically creamy), and an additional neologism in the form of “coconuttiness” to enhance her playful approach to this ingredient. However, as with the gluten-free flour, she also includes an option to replace this with a more standard olive oil or butter from the traditional ingredients that would be excluded in a clean eating diet. This option is presented as a direct address to the supposed reader who “cringes” at the thought of coconut, showing her understanding of a wider audience who are not embracing new ingredients and thus distancing herself from the evangelical tendencies of “clean eaters”.

All of these elements and options are in the subsequent list of ingredients, so their inclusion also in the narrative is one that could be read as Lawson attempting to engage her readers in the wider possibilities of clean eating ingredients without making the health promises that clean eating so problematically espouses. In fact, this is the first of her recipe books that includes such ingredients, which were only just becoming readily available in 2015 due to the power of the clean eating lobby. As with Asioli et al (2017) and Aschenmann-Witzel et al’s (2019) argument, she is normalising the use of these components by acquainting her readers with unfamiliar ingredients, partly through providing alternatives, but mostly through her chatty, engaging style of writing which makes their use less alien. In the case of the gluten-free flour and coconut oil used here, the only benefit of using these ingredients is the epicurean pleasure of their taste and texture.

It is not just in the savoury recipes that Lawson acknowledges the existence of clean eating principles. In the section of *Simply Nigella* that is devoted to “sweet”, she starts the chapter in typically unapologetic fashion, professing opinions about sugar-free eating that are line with the anti-clean eating sentiments of many others, including Anthony Warner.

I want to say that I have no truck here with the ‘no sugar’ bake, simply because anything that tastes sweet is, effectively, made with sugar. A cake that is made with agave syrup, for instance, is not a sugar-free cake, even if this is a fashionably held belief. I’m often – though why, I do not know – asked for diet desserts, and my response is simply ‘then don’t eat dessert’. But I am not going to apologise for keeping it sweet: it is a part of life, and, further, a part that is central to the way human society celebrates, and I am more than happy to honour that. Those who disapprove should turn away now. (2015: 273)

The “common sense” discourse Lawson draws on has the hint of impatience with the concept of clean eating that she has long demonstrated. She uses scare quotes (Tuchman 1972) to indicate that the concept of being sugar-free is one that is highly questionable, if not dishonest. However, this is her opinion, a no-nonsense approach to cooking that she embraces in the form of being anti-fad: she has “no truck” with sugar free desserts. She dismisses the call of unnamed others to provide diet dessert recipes with an aside of incredulity, then a self-quotation of an imagined response, framed as a simple, authentic voice of common-sense. This is contrasted with her following sentence which contextualises her common-sense argument as being part of human nature (it is both “part of life” and “central” to human celebrations), which draws on the “natural” food discourse that other food trends also appeal to. She finishes what could have been a lecture with the imperative that places the nay-sayers in a powerless position of not being involved in the rest of the chapter. However, as we saw with recipes earlier, there is a conscious engagement with clean eating principles. She continues this chapter overview with an explicit engagement with gluten-free and dairy-free food. In fact, the index in *Simply Nigella* has a helpful colour-coded key to identify such recipes in the baking section: green indicates dairy-free and pink indicates gluten-free. This key applies only to the baking recipes, not to the rest of the book, although in her next book, *At My Table* (2017), this coding extends to every relevant recipe, adding vegetarian and vegan to the list. In *Simply Nigella*, she explicitly addresses the use of these ingredients:

Many of the cakes below are either gluten-free or dairy-free, or both. Anytime I have friends for supper there are always some in these camps, and since I have invited them because I want them to feel welcome, why would I cook them something they can’t eat? I’m not making any health claims here, and am not in a position to – and I’m always mindful of the late Marina Keegan’s irritation as a coeliac, at what she felt was the craziness of the Hollywood gluten-free diet – but I can certainly attest to their deliciousness. And if more people can enjoy that, the happier I am. (2015: 273)

Here, rather than being accidental in terms of the ingredients being to hand, there is a much clearer acknowledgement of the wider dietary world through the guests she welcomes to her home. That such guests are not uncommon is emphasised in the claim that “there are always some” such people. In using an interrogative, Lawson is able to include the implied agreement of the reader who is aligned with her sense of hospitality. Rather than pass over these guests in the same way as sugar-free dieters, Lawson instead embraces the challenge of this cooking. She explicitly avoids the health claims of clean eating, downplaying her food expertise by stating she is “not in a position to” make such claims. But rather than dismissing the gluten-free lobby, she offers evidence to question it in her reference to Marina Keegan. This is couched in terms of authenticity and loss[[3]](#footnote-3). Lawson here frames this diet as “craziness”, but juxtaposes it with the highly positive adjective “deliciousness”, and explicitly distances herself from the health-giving promises of such diets.

Elsewhere, Lawson’s recipe for “Warm raspberry and lemon cake” is highlighted in the pre-recipe narrative as being both gluten- and dairy-free, inadvertently. Like many of Lawson’s recipes, it is developed from an earlier one, here identified as “Marmalade Pudding Cake” in *Kitchen* (2006). The use of polenta and almonds rather than flour in this later version is explained again in terms of epicurean values of “sweet […] almonds and the soft crunch of polenta”. Once again, this is then broadened out to the wider readership with the suggestion of non-specialist ingredients, but this requires greater changes:

But if you want a more old-fashioned cake taste, then make it with 200g soft unsalted butter (plus a little more for greasing the tin), which you cream with the sugar and zest, and use 225g plain flour in place of the almonds and polenta. You will also need to add 4 eggs rather than 3 – the flour being less sweet than both the almonds and the polenta – I’d advise you warm the lemon juice that goes on top with 2 teaspoons of honey first.

This rather complicated, discursive substitution for “old fashioned” ingredients places the use of polenta and almonds (as gluten-free ingredients) in a different category that fits with the optimistic tone of the whole book (they are implicitly “sweeter” than conventional wheat flour), where clean eating’s core ingredients are enthusiastically adopted for their epicurean values. Unlike the fish recipe mentioned earlier, here “old fashioned” is not being used to normalise new ingredients, but instead as a way into traditional ingredients as an option over those associated with clean eating.

As a final example of how Lawson engages with aspects of clean eating, let us explore her *Simply Nigella* recipe for “Dark and sumptuous chocolate cake” which manages to be vegan. Lawson starts the lengthy pre-recipe narrative for this in a state of rapture:

This cake. It confounds me. It delights me. I almost want to leave it there. (2015: 283)

The short sentences and positive lexical choices give an impression of Lawson being in a state of breathless excitement. As the opening narrative for a recipe, it draws the reader in with the tantalising promise of sharing Lawson’s rapture at this mysterious new recipe. She continues:

But I should explain: I never ever thought I would be in rapture about the joyfulness of a – yes – vegan chocolate cake.

Her credentials as an anti-fad cook are set out in this narrative as she sets up her rapture against a background of prejudice borne from experience (emphasised by her assertion that she “never ever” suspected such a cake could be produced). She emphasises this incredulity with the insistent aside of “yes” before the culmination of her declaration: this is a “vegan” cake, which carries the implicature that such cakes are usually unexceptional. Here, she describes the cake as being “joyful” rather than the more expected “delicious”, thus emphasising the mindfulness of cooking. She finishes her incredulous narrative with a return to form:

I hate the worthy association that comes with vegan cakes, and celebrate this one by scattering rose petals and chopped pistachios over it.

She restates her oft-declared aversion to faddy eating with the declaration that she “hates” the moral values associated with veganism. In this way, she regains both her self-proclaimed reputation as a non-faddy cook whilst also asserting her flamboyant approach to cooking by “scattering” pink and green embellishments atop the finished cake.

One other feature of this pre-recipe narrative, caught up in a discussion of origins of the recipe, is:

I now make this as my chocolate cake of choice for people where dietary restrictions are *not* an issue, and I don’t even need to explain it’s vegan.

It would appear that the other dietary restrictions Lawson has referred to throughout the book, such as dairy-free (by default this must be relevant here as the cake is vegan) and gluten-free, are applicable here. The cake can be served to those with dietary “restrictions” and those who don’t have these, without warning or apologising to either group. The use of “restrictions” carries with it the implicature of sanctioned or legitimate constraint rather than the alternative of the more arbitrary “requirements” of clean eaters. On reading the ingredients below this, however, there is a requirement for “plain flour” with no alternative offered. Having made this cake myself for gluten-intolerant guests, I can attest to how well the recipe works with gluten-free flour, so there is no obvious reason why Lawson has not listed this as an option, in contravention of her assertion that this cake is suitable for “everyone”. This is, however, typical of Lawson’s recipes where she makes no explicit mention of alternatives to traditional ingredients when using them in her dishes, which is generally opposite to the rule she applies to the inclusion of ingredients such as coconut oil and gluten-free flour where she does include reference to more familiar alternatives. Ultimately, we can see that Lawson has embraced and normalised the ingredients, if not the lifestyle, of clean eating,

**Conclusions**

“Clean eating” is an amorphous buzz-word, but there are common claims in all of the forms it takes that gluten is bad and coconut oil is good. As we have seen in the case of Nigella Lawson, gluten-free flour is now widely used in cooking. She offers an “accidental” use of the flour, when wheat flour is not to hand, or else she has started using it to cater for guests who are explicitly coeliac (rather than those claiming a clean eating lifestyle). The substituted flours are, in both cases, often also taken as ingredients of choice in terms of their flavour or texture.

Coconut oil is similarly adopted, but in a slightly more nuanced way. Its use by the clean eating bloggers in particular was associated with widespread and unsubstantiated claims relating to its alleged anti-microbial properties. It could, they claimed, fight cancer, epilepsy, hepatitis C, and Alzheimer’s, amongst many other illnesses. As we saw earlier, Warner (2017) objects to the taste of coconut oil, as well as its association with clean eating, but as we have explored with Nigella Lawson, it is used explicitly for that specific taste rather than for any other reason. In this way, Lawson has avoided being drawn into the pseudoscience of this particular product, whilst more generally this “demon” has become a mainstream ingredient.

Thus we can see that Lawson’s recipes have been influenced by the popularity of clean eating, but she has avoided the health-giving promises of this lifestyle, preferring instead to treat it as a side-show to the more traditional task of feeding family and friends with home-cooked food. Her engagement with buzz-words such as “gluten-free” and “vegan” is reserved for the needs of others, not of her own.

It would seem, therefore, that by incorporating the various ingredients associated with clean eating into her more recent recipe books, Lawson is explicitly distancing herself from the largely discredited health benefits claimed of clean eating. She is, however, allowing those who do follow such diets to feel included in her community of readers, a factor that is enhanced by the use of her conversational style of writing which presents her as a friend in the kitchen, and a set of “new” ingredients that are being demystified in the process. This demystification could be seen as a normalisation strategy, and is perhaps also seen in society more widely where it is possible to obtain such ingredients in even the smallest of local supermarkets. As important, however, is the manner in which tactics of discursive authenticity on the part of Lawson are used to counter the claims of authenticity in the food itself.

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1. A development chef is someone who develops recipes for commercial mass production rather than restaurant or catering outlets. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In conversation with the audience, Sage Gateshead, 15 October 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Keegan was an American journalist and writer who died in a car accident aged 22 in 2012. Her journalism had touched on her personal experiences of being coeliac, and her irritation for the fashionable gluten-free diet amongst those who didn’t suffer from this condition. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)