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**Exclusive interview
with Ani Phyo**

**Autumn
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Interview with Ani Phyo

Most of us spent two, three or more decades eating some variant of the standard diet before we upgraded our eating habits to something more conducive to vibrant health. But not Ani Phyto. This raw chef is one of the tiny percentage of today's adults lucky enough to have been raised on a high-raw whole foods diet.

She tells me that home was in the Catskill Mountains, 100 miles north west of New York City, where her family had a plot of land for growing food. "I grew up eating lots of raw vegetables, nuts and seeds and my Mom would always make us veggie juices," she recalls. "She would take everything from the garden and put it in, and the juice would come out a mud brown sludge colour! We were mainly vegetarian and because we're Korean there was no dairy. We had no candies or sugars or snacks in our house. A treat would be fruit. All those nutrients from such a young age – I'm really grateful to my parents."

But Phyto left 18 years of healthy eating behind when she went to college. The dining hall served foods she'd rarely if ever eaten – most of them made from combinations of dairy, white flour and refined sugar – and the first time she went home on vacation she had gained a stone. "The concept of gaining weight had never entered my mind and because this was the 80s and I was wearing a lot of stretch Lycra I hadn't even noticed!" she recalls. "But my Mom noticed and she took me for a blood test. My cholesterol was sky high – almost 300. The doctor wanted to put me on medication. Mom said no, and put me on a vegan detox diet."

"I started eating raw food in order to be more productive. I was using it so I wouldn't have to sleep as much."

But it wasn't until a friend took her for dinner at a raw restaurant several years later that Phyto discovered she could take healthy eating further still. "I noticed I didn't sleep that night, but that I felt great and very alert the next day. As I ate more raw food I started correlating the two and then I started eating raw food in order to be more productive. I was using it so I wouldn't have to sleep as much – I could work all night and feel fine in the morning. But I wouldn't recommend that to anyone! It got a bit extreme but it was such an exciting time."

At this point Phyto was a design director and home was San Francisco. She was working full time in a studio, teaching several university classes a week on top of that, and weekends were spent doing workshops or working on other projects. "I understood the power of raw food and harnessed that and everywhere I went people were interested in it." >>

Ani's top 10 daily health practices

- 1 Every day I engage in an activity that makes me sweat for at least an hour – I do cardio exercise most days and one day a week I'll sit in a sauna.
- 2 Deep breathing.
- 3 Meditation.
- 4 Skin brushing – for exfoliation and circulation.
- 5 Laughing and being happy.
- 6 Spending time with my dog, Kanga – she's so good for my health.
- 7 Hugging someone every day and ideally more than once a day.
- 8 Connecting with a loved one every day and telling them I love them.
- 9 Practising gratitude and giving thanks. I give thanks immediately upon waking up to a new day.
- 10 Seeing the positive in everything, including every challenge.

Ani's daily diet

"I drink some rooibos tea first thing in the morning. An hour or two later I'll have my first smoothie. Lately I've been doing 50% hemp protein with a banana and some E3 Live [a brand of blue-green algae]. That's the base and sometimes I'll add other stuff. At around 11am I work out – I go on a hike or to the gym. Then I have a similar smoothie again, sometimes with spinach in it. After another hour I have a big salad. Sea vegetables are really good for everyone with so many minerals from the ocean, so I include kelp noodles in my salads and also crumble nori over them.

I've been increasing my protein intake, and cutting back a lot on fats. I used to eat a couple of avocados a day and put hemp oil all over my salad. I've decreased that, and now when I snack on almonds I only allow myself 10. But at the moment I'm working on a new book so I might have some crackers or breads from the dehydrator.

At dinner I usually have another salad. I love cabbage and spinach and I put some more kelp noodles in there. I also like to have almond yogurt in my fridge – it's so easy to make. You just mix a cup of almonds with a cup of water and some probiotics, leave it out overnight, then store it in the fridge. I think it's even more important to eat raw when you live in an urban environment like I do. I can't clear the air outside but I can control the food I'm eating."

But it was only later that she realized her father, who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness, had been following a raw food diet when she was growing up. He lived 10 years longer than doctors predicted. “My Dad used to eat a bell pepper or a mushroom like an apple. As a child, I didn’t see anyone else doing that and I assumed it was because he was from a third-world country, so he was unsophisticated and didn’t know how to eat food. It wasn’t until I was preparing some of my food for my mother that she made the link for me: “Do you realize this is how your Dad was eating?”

In 2000, Phyto moved from San Francisco to Los Angeles when a client asked her to relocate there for three months. Three months turned into three years. With a climate more conducive to raw food, she found even more people interested in eating this way. Phyto, who by now had become an accomplished gourmet raw chef in her own kitchen, started to emerge as a name on the raw scene when she began to cater events.

“At this time there weren’t many raw chefs and we’d all cooperate with each other. We each had events on different nights to provide raw dining to the community before there were raw restaurants in LA. But I also had selfish reasons for wanting to do this. I didn’t find it fun to prepare gourmet raw food just for myself – I wanted to share it with other people, and after an event I’d have leftovers for several days!”

Word about her talent got around and soon Phyto had people asking her to make *all* their food for them. This grew into Smart Monkey Foods – a line of freshly prepared raw food items sold in stores. “I’d package pizza with the crust, marinara and cheese separate so it would keep in the fridge and they could assemble it when they wanted it,” she says. But then Phyto relocated again, this time to Portland, Oregon. With a tiny raw population it wasn’t feasible to continue distributing perishable items so Smart Monkey Foods became a line of raw fruit and nut bars.

Phyto’s first recipe book, *Ani’s Raw Food Kitchen*, was published in 2007. She spent a year on the book tour and made the decision to drive everywhere and live out of her car. “I have a dog – Kanga – and a two-seater convertible so I drove with the dog next to me and all I had was a dog pillow, a small suitcase and my laptop.”

I had already heard on the grapevine that she chose to give away all her possessions at this time so naturally I was curious to find out more. She confirms the rumour is true, adding: “There was a point in my life where shifts were happening and I realized I was holding onto objects that were blocking the flow of new energy and opportunities that were trying to come to me. When I had a lot of possessions they were occupying a lot of space in my mind as I had to worry about the whereabouts and condition of them.

“When I lived in Portland, I had a four-storey house and one of my bedrooms was a walk-in closet. When I left Portland I took all of my clothes to a place where they recycle clothing. They buy from you at 40% of what they’ll sell it for, and when I took in my clothes I got thousands of dollars.”

However, she reveals to me that it was amazing how quickly she began to reassemble possessions after the Zen-like experience of life on the road. She has settled in Los Angeles again and at the time of our interview she is moving in a few days. Her apartment is empty except for some recipe books, kitchen equipment, ingredients and a bed. “Everything else is at the new place and I don’t miss any of it,” she says. “On a spiritual



“I think it’s even more important to eat raw when you live in an urban environment like I do.”

level I’ve gone through a transformation where I don’t need possessions. It’s very liberating.”

I ask her how this transformation has affected other areas of her life. “I’ve been meditating for two years, and in the last few months I’ve had a really regular practice. When I first discovered gourmet raw food I was working on tons of different projects, and saying yes to everything that came my way. Over time it wore me down. I’m able to say no now to things if I feel they are just going to be spinning my wheels rather than leading to something I want as an outcome. I’m getting clearer and clearer on how I want to contribute to the world. I’m able to discern the projects I want to give my energy to and also have plenty of down time to rest, take care of myself and hike in the mountains.” ■



Raw cookies

Ani Phyo shares three recipes from her latest book, *Ani's Raw Food Desserts*.

Halva Chia Thumbprint Cookies (Makes 9 cookies)

These fun cookies are inspired by a Balkan-style, calcium-rich, tahini-based halva. You can get sprouted chia seed powder from Navitas Naturals (US). Or, you can use dry chia seeds, unsoaked and ground into a powder in a grinder. Or, substitute ground flaxseed powder, which provides many similar nutritional benefits.

For the cookies

- 3/4 cup sprouted chia seed powder
- 1/2 cup tahini
- 3/4 cup almond meal

- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 cup agave syrup
- 1/3 cup pitted semi-soft Medjool dates
- 2 tablespoons Raspberry Sauce (see below)

For the Raspberry Sauce

- 1/2 cup fresh or frozen raspberries
- 1/4 cup pitted semi-soft Medjool dates
- 1/4 cup agave syrup
- 1/4 cup filtered water

Combine all the ingredients in a blender and blend well. Will keep for three days in the refrigerator and a few weeks in the freezer (thaw before using).

To assemble

- 1 Combine the chia seed powder, tahini, almond meal and salt in a mixing bowl and mix well.
- 2 Add the agave syrup and mix well.

- 3 Add the dates and mix with your hands or a spoon.
- 4 Roll the dough into 9 balls (about 2 tablespoons each) and place on a sheet tray lined with parchment paper.
- 5 Use your thumb or the end of a wooden spoon to make an indentation into the centre of each cookie. Fill each with a generous 1/2 teaspoon sauce.
- 6 To make the flower-shaped cookies in the photo, place the dough in the centre of a flower-shaped cookie cutter on a sheet tray lined with parchment paper. Press to 1/3- to 1/2-inch thick, and then make an indentation in the center to fill with jam.
- 7 To serve, chill in the refrigerator for 20 minutes or more to firm up.
- 8 Will keep for several days in the fridge or many weeks when stored separately from jam.





Carob Walnut Cookies

(Makes 8-12 cookies)

Sweet raisins, malty carob and rich walnuts are ground together to make a delicious, dark, sweet cookie. Packed with antioxidants, vitamin E and EFAs, these cookies keep you trim and your skin radiant.

- 1 cup raisins
 - 3/4 cup raw walnuts
 - 1/2 cup raw carob powder
 - 1 teaspoon mesquite powder (optional)
 - 1/8 teaspoon sea salt
- 1** Combine the raisins, walnuts, carob powder, mesquite powder if using, and salt in the food processor.
 - 2** Process until the dough begins sticking together.
 - 3** Press the dough into 2-inch cookie cutters placed on a sheet tray lined with parchment paper. Shoot for a thickness of 1/3- to 1/2-inch. Or, make 1-inch to 1 1/2-inch balls and flatten.

- 4** Place the cookies in the freezer to chill and firm up for 30 minutes or more before serving or transferring to the fridge for serving later.

- 5** Will keep for many weeks in the fridge or freezer. Thaw 5 minutes before eating.

Oatmeal Raisin Cookies

(Makes about 10 cookies)

Here's a modern version of old-fashioned cookies with the sweet maple flavour of Medjool dates, a sprinkling of raisins and a hint of cinnamon. The recipe calls for raw oats: If they are not available in your area, you'll find them at my online store at www.AniPhyo.com. Regular quick oats or steel cut oats will work, too, though they are not technically raw, as they're cooked during processing. Your cookies will still taste delicious either way.

- 1 cup raw oats
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/2 cup firmly packed pitted Medjool dates
- 1/2 cup raisins

- 1** Combine the oats and cinnamon in the food processor and process into small pieces. Add the dates and process to mix well.
- 2** Add the raisins and pulse to mix.
- 3** Press about 3 tablespoons of the dough into cookie cutters on a sheet tray lined with parchment, or roll the dough into balls and flatten.
- 4** Serve immediately or store in sealed container or bag.
- 5** Will keep for a week at room temperature or for many weeks in the refrigerator or freezer. Thaw for 15 minutes before eating.

For more information, for recipes, and to watch Ani's videos, visit aniphyo.com. Ani's books are available in the UK from fresh-network.com. The Fresh Network will be hosting Ani Phyo for an event in London on Saturday May 15. Further information will be posted in the next issue.