

God Is in the Diet

Offering not only weight loss but also spiritual healing, fad diets move from cult status to cult.

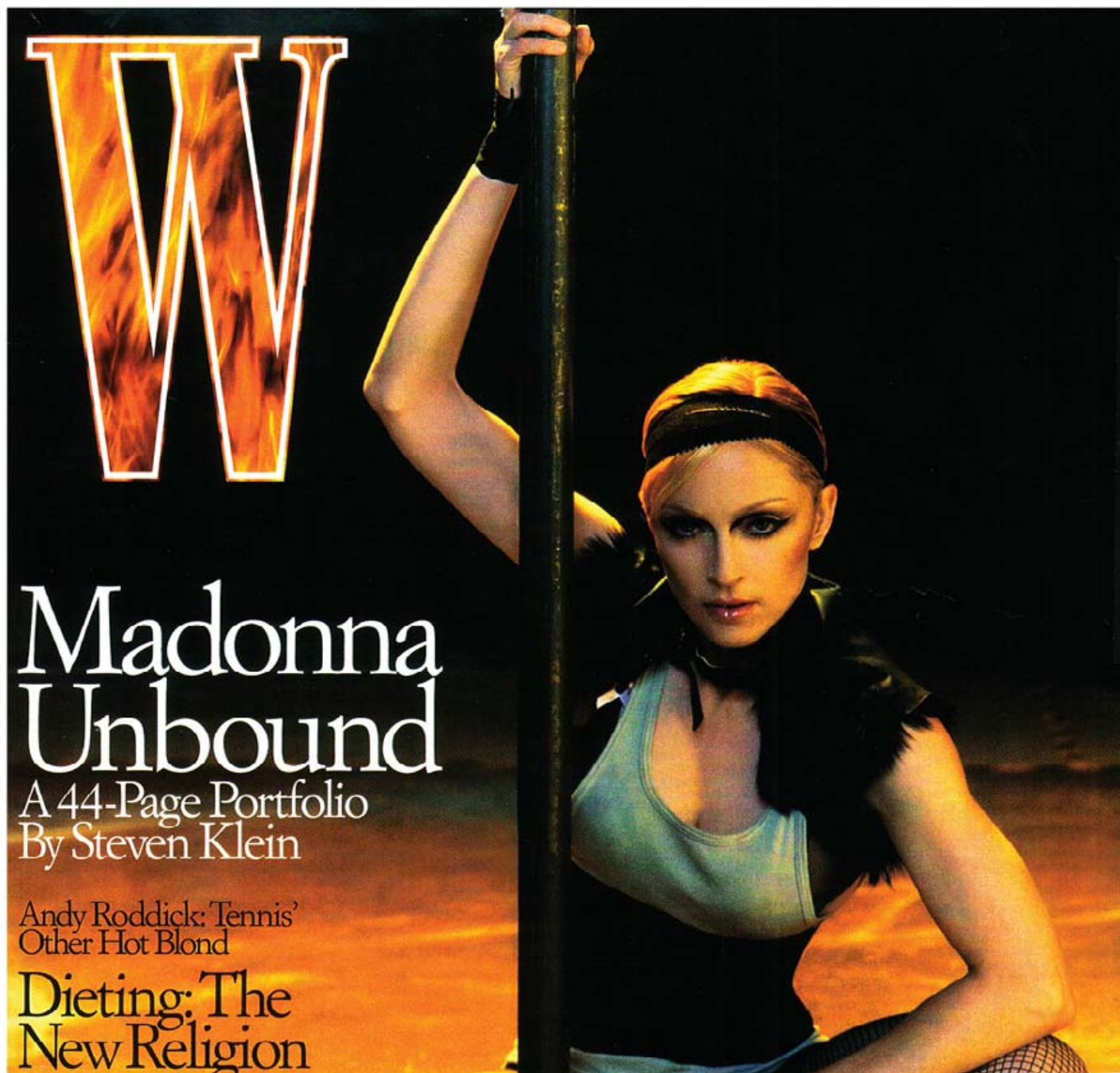
PHOTO BY RICHARD PIERCE

Karl Marx famously said that "religion is the opiate of the masses," but if Marx were around today, he might come up with a slightly different maxim: "Dieting is the religion of the elite." These days, it seems, more and more people are devoting themselves to diets with a piousness that borders on the fanatical. And no longer are eating regimens simply a means of shrinking your way to sample size. They can also be a springboard to a complete lifestyle overhaul—offering happiness, fulfill-

ment, cleansing and, in some cases, spiritual awakening.

Like many of the world's religions, today's most popular diets—from the Atkins plan to the raw foods craze—often equate sacrifice with enlightenment. Abstaining from bread, sugar, processed food and other worldly pleasures, according to devotees, can bring benefits that go way beyond a slimmer waistline. "These are what I like to call idealistic diets," says nutritional guru Oz Garcia. "It sometimes becomes about living the ideal, and people become focused in a religious manner." Garcia's own foray into the subculture of diet-

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Dieting: The New Religion

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ing and spirituality began when he read Paul Bragg's trailblazing book, *The Miracle of Fasting*, some 20 years ago. Bragg's fasting-friendly theories inspired Garcia to follow a raw foods diet—and before he knew it, he'd fallen in with a group whose main obsessions were coffee enemas and meditation. "I was on the search for deeper meaning and purity," he says. "I wanted to really attain new heights of clarity and spirituality."

Today, with Kraft Foods taking over soy-based Boca Burgers, and McDonald's reporting the first-ever quarterly loss in its 47-year history— not to mention reports from Italian newspapers that the Pope is on the Zone diet, to help with his arthritis—it seems that food piety has hit the mainstream. Forget the four food groups; it's all about the 10 commandments of the diet du jour.

Celebrities, as usual, are at the forefront of the trend—with a lot of help from their private chefs and yoga gurus. And the stars aren't shy about proselytizing: We all know by now that Madonna and Gwyneth have gone macro, that Jennifer and Brad have been in the Zone, that Demi and Alicia Silverstone like it raw. Donna Karan's much publicized "life food" diet (consisting of vegetarian foods consumed in their most natural state and not cooked above a temperature of 108 degrees) has given her more than a svelte new physique. "I love it because I have found something that feels

Lesla Carlson, founder of Seed Live Cuisine Delivery in Los Angeles, is a life-food chef with a growing client list of Hollywood celebrities—for instance, she recently prepared a lunch for Sting to take aboard his private plane: ravioli made of raw sweet potatoes and walnuts. So wowed are many new converts to raw foods, Carlson says, that she regularly receives testimonials that read like religious experiences. "They say they have feelings of euphoria," Carlson says. "They feel completely new sensations and have even gone so far as to say that it has changed their lives."

Garcia says the tendency to get ritualistic about dieting comes from the astonishing difference people feel when they go from merely sustaining their health to optimizing it. Yet he also cautions that this ideal leads people to become "food phobic." He saw a lot of extremism among his raw foods cohorts when he was a strict follower of that plan: "God forbid if you ever went off a little bit," he recalls. Once, when out with some raw foods eaters, "We stopped at a Haagen-Dazs on a whim and had some ice cream," he says. "The group was so miserable over it that they all did a cleanse the next day."

Garcia believes you have to find what is right for your own body and today lives at the opposite end of the diet spectrum. (His newest book, *Look and Feel Fabulous Forever*, advocates the hunter/gatherer Paleotech diet, which features



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good to me," says Karan. Along with the new cuisine, her regimen includes rigorous daily yoga, meditation and massage. "At this point I don't feel like I'm on a diet, since it's a way of life."

Karan, who had a self-described "cookie problem" prior to her life-food existence, says she now eats cookies made of nuts and raisins. "It's different than an Oreo," she says. "You should feel awakened by what you eat."

Kate Hantman, nutrition educator at the tony Casa Spa & Fitness gym on New York's Upper East Side (where Matt Lauer and Aerin Lauder are members), says that many of her clients have begun to view their diet as part of something much larger. "I see people try these new diets, and they have a great enlightenment when their body chemistry matches their food chemistry," says Hantman. "Suddenly they look and feel better. It's like they've found the key to the puzzle."

Among all the current dieting trends, the raw foods regimen seems to come with the strongest spiritual associations—perhaps because followers believe that cleanliness is next to godliness. "With raw foods, people are obsessed with cleansing and become fanatical about not polluting their bodies with white flour and meat," says Akasha Richmond, a Los Angeles-based private chef to such celebrities as Billy Bob Thornton and Pierce Brosnan. Richmond notes that the raw foods movement has grown to cultlike proportions on the West Coast, and it's easy to see why: "I'm into balance, but sometimes involving yourself in the cult atmosphere is the only way you can stay on these tough diets."



Clockwise from top left: Madonna is the macrobiotic diet's poster girl; Donna Karan, Alicia Silverstone and Demi Moore sport enviably sleek bodies, thanks to a raw foods diet.

the foods our ancestors ate before the advent of agriculture: fruits, vegetables, lean game, fish and fowl.) Casa's Hantman also observes her own share of food phobia. "I've had clients scared to eat a protein bar because they thought it had hidden carbs in it," she says.

Suzanne Havala-Hobbs, assistant professor of health policy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, believes that restrictive diets usually appeal to people who need structure. "These diets give people a feeling of control over their lives," says Hobbs. She also points out that some of these regimens are diametrically opposed to each other—consider the meat-heavy Aktins plan versus the raw foods regimen—yet equally popular.

Instead of practicing self-denial with a group of culinary ascetics, recovering food fanatic Garcia now prefers to dine out with a good friend, such as Anthony Bourdain, the celebrity

chef whose book *Kitchen Confidential* celebrates eating for adventure rather than for health. "I'd like to give a copy of Anthony's book to everyone who's missing out on life because of a diet, because [the book] humanizes food," Garcia says, laughing as he recalls a time when he grew alfalfa sprouts all over his apartment and owned three different wheat grass juicers. Serious dieters, he says, often simply can't resist being holier-than-thou.

"A former nun I know said that the nuns in the convent were always tripping over themselves to prove who was closer to Jesus," says Garcia. "Similarly, with dieters, it's who is more macro and who can juice better." —DAHLIA DEVROTA