

Religious Origins of the Detox Diet

Saturday, October 25, 2008 12:16 PM

By Newsweek



Tricks of the Trade: Beyonce (left) and Gwyneth Paltrow have undergone the detox. *Photos: Getty Images*

By Karen Springen and Anna Kuchment

Saint Augustine once said that “fasting cleanses the soul [and] raises the mind.” Were he alive today, he might be surprised to see the fast detached from its spiritual roots and transformed into little more than a quick ticket to weight loss. Taken up by the likes of Beyoncé Knowles and Madonna and splashed across the pages of gossip magazines and Web sites, these “detox diets” or “cleanses” are everywhere. Publishers are churning out books like “The Fast Track Detox Diet,” “The Raw Food Detox Diet,” “Super Cleanse: Detox Your Body for Long-Lasting Health and Beauty” and “21 Pounds in 21 Days: The Martha’s Vineyard Diet Detox.” And as many as 3 million Americans flock to the nation’s 5,000 colonic hydrotherapy centers for enemas, a component of many detoxes, according to the International Association for Colon Hydrotherapy. Proponents say detox diets rid the body of impurities and boost energy.

Some regimens are more extreme than others. To prepare for her role in “Dreamgirls,” Beyoncé lost 20 pounds in two weeks by drinking purified water mixed with lemon juice, maple syrup and cayenne pepper (a.k.a. “The Master Cleanse”). More moderate approaches allow clients some food they can chew. Last spring, Oprah completed a 21-day cleanse in which she gave up meat, fish, eggs, sugar, gluten, alcohol and cheese. What was left? A lot, she says, including strawberry-rhubarb wheat-free crepes for breakfast.

The concept behind these cleanses is as old as human history. “There’s a straight line from detox diets to classical religious fasting,” says Harvey Cox, professor of divinity at Harvard University. In many religions, fasting is associated with enlightenment and atonement and understanding the suffering of the poor. “It’s a way of resetting one’s moral clock, of starting with a clean slate,” says Michael McCullough, a psychology professor at the University of Miami. Christians fast during Lent, Muslims fast during Ramadan and Jews fast on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement that follows the New Year. “Fasting builds self-control,” says McCullough. “It allows people to build strength for when they have to adhere to some other moral dimension of their religion.”