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Paulina Rychter,
Exiting the Pool,
2023, 105 × 90 cm,
oil on canvas

Health in the Age of Wellness

Agata Passent

Polityka magazine and Polish Radio One

In today's world, conversations about one's health have become omnipresent, almost ritualistic. Whether among friends at the table or during casual workplace chats, declarations of dietary restrictions abound: "I don't eat meat – for ideological reasons," "I haven't touched processed foods in years," "I've completely cut out sugar," "Wine? After I turned thirty, it just stopped making sense," "Since I gave up gluten, I feel fantastic."

How did we get to a point where, even if I don't start a conversation about food, others are constantly offering me their dietary confessions? It's as though personal health choices have turned into moral statements, manifestos, with food becoming a symbol of our values, aspirations, and fears. The obsession with "clean living" and a modern interpretation of wellness permeates our lives, creating an endless list of habits to adopt and products to avoid in the pursuit of optimal health. Today, dietary restrictions serve as badges of honor – or even acts of resistance – with each decision

carrying social and ecological implications. For some, giving up meat isn't just about health but about taking a noble stand against cruelty to animals.

Yet dietary restrictions are one thing, incessant discussing them is another. Lately, I've begun to suspect these conversations are actually a kind of coded politeness – thinly veiling much harsher judgements, like: "Ms. Passent, I've been watching your show and reading your columns for years, but seeing you here with a herring fillet and a glass of vodka honestly makes me nauseous. Don't you know fish ingest plastic? That one might have munched on a plastic bag you'll never manage to digest. And alcohol? It's poison – you're melting your brain!" Or perhaps: "Don't you know pho soup is made with beef broth? It's not vegan. Have you ever heard cows sing as they're led to slaughter? Ever toured a slaughterhouse? I highly recommend it. By eating meat, you're poisoning yourself with suffering and polluting the planet. Oh, and by the way, basil plants can dance and have feelings, too."

It wasn't always like this. Not so long ago, food was primarily about survival – and occasionally, pleasure. I miss the days in Poland when people simply ate whatever was available: whatever grew in the garden, was stocked in the store, or hadn't been crossed off the restaurant menu. Back then, vegetarians were simply called *jarosze* in Polish, "plant eaters," and the only restaurant option for them was the so-called *bukiet jarzyn* – not really much of a "bouquet," simply a side-dish of boiled vegetables. Now seems quaint, doesn't it?

I try, of course, to maintain a balanced diet for myself and my children, but I remain an omnivore. The constant food indoctrination and endless focus on what to eat can sometimes feel overwhelming – especially when, on top of maintaining a healthy lifestyle, doctors keep piling on recommendations for preventative care. Prevention has become yet another pillar of wellness, with endless lists of checkups and screenings. A person is barely out of the womb before getting handed a schedule of tests and exams.

For me, my doctors' advice feels more like marching orders. So, after eight hours of sleep in a room kept at 50% humidity and a cool 19°C, I wake up at six AM. I drink two glasses of water, practice yoga poses – downward dog to the side, back, and down – fol-



lowed by lotus position, clapping push-ups, and squats with a medicine ball. Sitting cross-legged, I wake my son, and we have a breakfast of prunes soaked overnight, mixed with vegan yogurt and sprinkled with fiber. For his lunchbox, we pack celery sticks, organic carrots, and eco-apples (complete with worm).

We cycle to school, and I continue on to the clinic, where today's appointment is a mammogram (which alternate with breast ultrasounds). And while we're on the topic, menopause and andropause are no longer taboo. In fact, they've become great conversation starters – perfect for chats over kale smoothies at weight-loss retreats. After the clinic, it's time to hop on my bike again and make it to my endocrinologist appointment.

All this cycling makes me hungry, so it's time for a healthy second breakfast. My gastroenterologist recommends four meals a day. Today, I'm having a pear, some blueberries, and an oat bar so hard that my dentist is already anticipating a cracked tooth. Pears are great for the gut, after all, and the gut is apparently our second brain. I've learned to handle colonoscopies better than overnight train rides to Zakopane – they're quicker, quieter, and far less bumpy. And when you're in a risk group, as I am, there's no getting out of it. "Ms. Passent, let's schedule a gastroscopy for five years from now," my doctor says casually.

Next, I pick up my child from school – he's been let out early for a sports doctor appointment. Preventively, there's an echocardiogram, because who wants a nine-year-old collapsing on the soccer field? While we're at it, we swing by the pediatric orthopedist. The steep fee rivals that of adult specialists – but better to safeguard his knees now than risk a torn ligament during junior sports later.

My phone rings. "Ms. Passent, we are expecting you? You confirmed yesterday." Wait, what did I confirm? "Natalia, the hygienist, is ready for you – a cleaning." Ah yes, the TV director had insisted I clean my teeth – or stop smiling on camera – because with today's high-definition screens, crooked teeth or tartar is all anyone notices. I've already given up tea, and I don't smoke, so do I really need this cleaning? Absolutely, according to my dentist. It's essential for preventing gum disease. Plus, there's fluoride treatment – another steep fee. While we're there, we may as well make a mold for my son's new upper retainer.

All this preventative care has left me no time to read – or sit down and write this essay, for that matter. And how am I supposed to avoid stress? Stress, they say, is terrible for your health. More and more young people are having strokes, and antidepressants are practically standard before leaving home each day. Instead of stress, experts recommend mindfulness, slow living, and Japanese jogging.



In this era of endless health and dietary obligations, health is no longer a goal in itself – it's becoming an obsession. Where's the room for simple joys, like eating without overthinking? Maybe it's time to put the recommendation lists aside and simply enjoy the moment – whether it's with a glass of wine or a strong cup of coffee. While wellness is undoubtedly important, it doesn't have to be the only priority. Especially now, when the pursuit of perfection and the fixation on healthy living often overshadow other, equally important values. Life isn't just about avoiding risks and following orders. It's also about finding joy, nurturing relationships, and allowing yourself small indulgences without guilt. Maybe that's where true health lies, in striking a balance – between caring for the body and the soul, between discipline and spontaneity, between wellness and the pure joy of living. ■

Paulina Rychter,
Tennis Player, 2023,
110 × 90 cm,
oil on canvas

Paulina Rychter – painter and graphic artist, graduate of the Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poznań. Her works can be viewed in the gallery and at art auctions at Art in House in Warsaw.