



# An Interview with Rod Rotondi of Leaf Restaurant and Leaf Organics

by Sharon Hall

*“Let Food Be Thy Medicine”*

- Hippocrates

Rod Rotondi, owner, founder, and chef of *Leaf Organics* in Los Angeles, is a living testament to the benefits of a raw food diet. When my editor and I visited the restaurant, *Leaf*, on a warm afternoon in November, my impression was of a vibrant and radiantly healthy man, somewhere in his mid thirties. I had previously encountered some of Rod’s creations at health food stores and become a fan of the Atlantis Pâté — a taste of the sea minus the fish — often making a lunch of it alongside his raw flaxseed crackers. But my previous encounters with raw food did nothing to prepare me for the feast we encountered at the restaurant: a cornucopia of textures, tastes, and colors, ending in a grand finale — a slice of Raspberry Cacao Cheesecake swirled with pure raw raspberry puree in a crust of dates and chopped nuts. As a cook myself, I just had to know; in spite of Rod’s insistence that anyone could be a raw food chef, how easily could this food be prepared?

After reading Rod’s book, *Raw Food For Real People*, and viewing his instructional DVD series of the same name, I had an opportunity to speak with him about his culinary background. Rod was raised in an Italian household. There, he’d learned to cook and gained an appreciation for food and preparation. He went on to travel extensively and lived all over the world, experimenting with various cuisines. I wanted to know how he’d made the switch from traditional chef to raw food master, and why.

WP: Rod, how old were you when you first became interested in cooking?

RR: I started when I was a little kid. Everyone in my family did.

WP: Because you’re Italian?

RR: My Dad — on holidays or even weekends — was always up early making something. He was a great baker. He could do everything in the kitchen, but he was especially good at baking. We’d be coming down the stairs and he’d be making pizza dough, or apple pies for the holiday meal. He’d get everybody involved. The littlest one would mix the sugar and spices. When you were a little bit older, you might be put to work peeling apples. When you’d graduated to the next level, you might be put to work on the dough itself, putting



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together pie crust; rolling it out, crimping the edges...the whole deal. I can still make a picture-perfect American apple pie.

WP: In your book, you described being able to make a raw one that your dad liked.

RR: He loved it, yeah.

WP: One of the things you emphasize in the book and the DVDs is how easy it is to make raw foods and that it’s not complicated or difficult. You said, “If you have a blender, you can do it.” You also mention three necessary tools for making raw foods.

RR: A blender, a food processor, and a dehydrator. I think I said that you don’t really need those; all you really need to be a raw-foods chef is a good knife and a cutting board. Human beings had been making raw foods for thousands of years before the invention of electricity. It’s just a lot easier with electrical gadgets.

WP: Right. You wrote in your book that humans have been eating their food raw since before the discovery of fire — a really long time ago.

RR: Six or seven million years. The discovery of fire was approximately 60,000 years ago — we don’t know the exact date. That may seem like a long time, but it’s a tiny fraction of the time we’ve been human. Think about it: cooking our food is really an aberration, in one sense. Because we live in a time period where everyone eats cooked foods, we just assume it’s the way to go.

WP: Well, I know there’s a controversy about raw versus cooked. I’ve read nutritional information that claims humans may lack the

ability — in terms of enzymes — to break raw food down in the gut, and that cooking allows for easier digestion and assimilation.

RR: Actually, all food comes with its own digestive enzymes. Take an avocado, for example; it contains lipase, a water-soluble enzyme that breaks down plant fats. But, when food is cooked above 118 degrees Fahrenheit, it kills the digestive enzymes.

WP: What about advocates of the macrobiotic diet who make claims that, unless you lightly cook or ferment food, your body won’t digest it thoroughly?

RR: Every animal in nature eats its food in the raw state. Yet, we have the idea that, somehow, humans are not capable of digesting food as it comes to us in its natural form? That just seems ridiculous to me. Does that mean Nature made a mistake?

WP: I'd heard somewhere that's why humans have such long digestive tracts — because it takes more time for us to digest raw food.

RR: Virtually all herbivores have long digestive tracts; long and folded intestines, like humans have. Only the carnivores have short, straight, smooth intestines. They also have a very high acid level in the body. In fact, if you judge just by our intestines, we were made to eat plants! I don't feel Nature makes mistakes like that.

Humans somehow managed to live on raw foods — just raw foods — for millions of years. And they did it without fire or an oven.

WP: I've noticed people making cooked meals for their dogs or cats, and now we see pets coming down with the same kind of diseases that humans have, like diabetes, high blood pressure and kidney failure.

RR: There's a very famous study known at Pottengers Test.\* He looked at three generations of cats; one group was put on cooked food and the other on raw. By the end of the study, the cats put on cooked foods couldn't procreate; they had lost the ability to reproduce. The implications are staggering. In nature, it is very rare to find animals with heart disease or diabetes.

WP: I've seen this in some of the citified, housebound pets of people I know.

RR: But, we're no different; we're animals too.



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WP: Yes we are. By the way, I noticed you use a lot of tropical produce — things like coconuts, mangoes, and bananas. Many people feel eating local and seasonal as much as possible is important — both in terms of health, and to support local farming practices. Could you talk about that?

RR: Well, that's certainly the ideal. But if you can't get avocados locally — we get avos from Mexico when we can't get them here — does that mean you can't eat

avocados? I think that would really be taking it too far.

WP: In your book you have a section on feeding kids and mentioned avocados as the perfect baby food. I know that's how my relatives in the Chicago area feel.

RR: I personally think avocados are enough of a reason to move to

California!

WP: Is there any cause for concern about the high levels of fruit sugar in the raw foods diet? You use sweet fruits, coconut, dates, agave nectar, and even chocolate. Is this a diet suitable for someone with diabetes?

RR: There is nothing that combats or eliminates the symptoms of diabetes as well as the raw food diet. There's a film called, "Simply Raw," in which a group of people are put on a raw food diet for 30 days. By the end of the trial, every person on the diet had eliminated all their symptoms. My dad is diabetic. He came to visit me and he was on 52 units of insulin per day. For

nine days he just ate raw foods. By the end of the nine days, he was down to 15 units per day. He told me that he probably didn't even need it, but was afraid to let go of it completely.

WP: That's pretty amazing.

RR: Of course, you could just eat raisins and that would be "raw food" or just dates, and that obviously would not be a healthy diet. There are raw foodists who just eat fruit. But I'm not recommending that; I'm recommending a healthy and well-balanced diet, and not even 100% raw in all cases; that's not necessarily what everyone needs. But I know for myself, the more raw foods I eat, the better I feel. But, it has to be balanced.

WP: You consistently recommend balance. I notice a wide variety of textures and flavors in your food. As someone who loves to cook, I really appreciate that.

RR: The words, "vegan" or "raw foodist" or "vegetarian" really say more about what you're not eating than what you are. A vegan doesn't eat any animal products. A raw foodist doesn't eat cooked foods. It doesn't say what you are eating. In order to get to a really healthy diet, you have to get beyond what you're not eating, to what you are. That's what's important.

WP: I hear that. How old you were when you first started the switch from a traditional Italian diet, or other cooked cuisines, to a more natural or raw foods diet? I know you were eclectic — you traveled extensively [Rod's grandfather was the American Ambassador to Italy], studied in Paris, and learned to cook many different kinds of cuisines. When did you start moving in this direction?

RR: I was a vegetarian by the time I was 26 or 27. I didn't become a raw foodist until about 15 years ago, when I was 35.

WP: I have to tell you; I thought you were about 35 now.

RR: I'll be 50 in December [2010].

WP: I don't believe that. This alone could convince me to go raw!

RR: You know, it's not an ideology, it's not a religion...it just works.

WP: Didn't you miss the Italian food? I know I certainly would.

RR: Well, the Mediterranean diet is relatively healthy in comparison to the typical American diet. But, one thing became clear to me; when I'm not eating raw foods, I tend to gain weight.

WP: I loved that you mention in your introduction that Rotondi means "the round ones."

RR: I look at normal food and gain weight. When I switch to raw foods, I lose any extra weight and my body just starts grooving. I don't know how to explain it. Within a few weeks of eating raw, I feel totally different; my energy levels are what they were in high school. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, said, "Let food be thy medicine." It really is. When you give your body real fuel, then it's amazing what it can do. Even after years of abusing the body with bad food, the body has the ability to regenerate.

WP: I really like to cook, but you are a convincing argument for raw. I'd certainly like to regain the kind of energy and vitality you obviously possess.

RR: Look...cooking is wonderful. The cuisines we have around the world are a treasure; this is culture, this is art. I'm not saying give up cooking 100%. I did go for years just eating raw food, but I don't give up cooking completely. I found for myself that the balance is somewhere in between. My diet is mostly raw food but I love making these foods, as a chef.

WP: That's what keeps it interesting.

RR: By the way, I think that it is really important to love your food no matter what you're eating. Enjoy it, and don't be fearful as your eating it. A lot of people who eat healthy food tend to be afraid of food, and that's not good.

WP: I've seen that myself. I think of cooking as an active form of love. When people get afraid of some ingredient or other, I believe it's the mind driving them crazy, not the food.

RR: Exactly. I always sign my books for people, "love your food, love your planet, love yourself."

WP: I have that in my copy! By the way, how would people, if they wanted to, make an all-raw holiday meal?

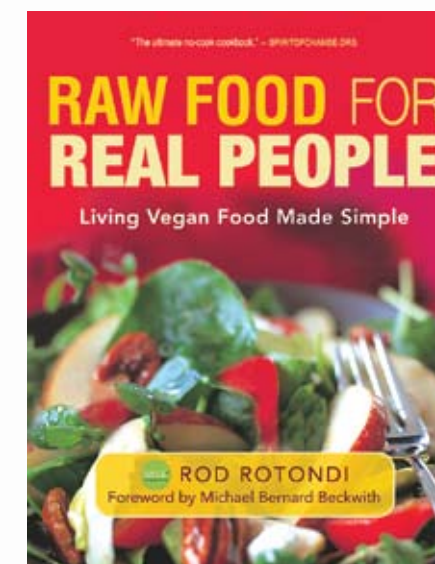
RR: There's a lot of ways to do it. If you wanted to emulate the typical meal, there's a lot of ways to do that. Or, just re-invent the holiday meals. Look at what's fresh, what's available in the season...what parts of the traditional meal can I borrow and put into the raw one? I have a pumpkin spice cheesecake at the restaurant right now, with the same taste you would get from regular pumpkin pie, but even better.

WP: If it's anything like the chocolate

raspberry cheesecake that I had when I visited the restaurant...that was fabulous. Can we use it for a Valentine's Day recipe?

RR: That's a great idea. Chocolate is so perfect for Valentine's Day.

WP: So, there's no problem with using raw for any time of the year, or any season; it can all be adapted. But I could see how people in



Minnesota might say: I really need some hot food in winter.

RR: Some people will say they need cooked foods in order to stay warm, but the warming or cooling to the body is based on the minerals, not the temperature of the food. What they probably need is lot of calories to stay warm in colder weather.

WP: Anything else you'd like people to know about, like a possible TV show?

RR: That's still in development. I do teach courses all around the country, but mostly in LA. You can get this information from my website.\* I'm teaching four of the Fundamentals courses in January; then a course called Just Desserts. There's also a course on fermentation, and I'm teaching an intermediate level course as a full-day workshop. Then in Spring, I'll be offering courses leading up to an instructor certificate. All of this information is available online at my website.

WP: Do you also travel and teach?

RR: I teach all over the place. I have taught in Santa Barbara and New York — I have offers to teach in Europe — I love teaching.

WP: In your DVDs, you make it clear and easy and you obviously enjoy teaching.

RR: Thank you; both the book and the

DVD were labors of love. I just know this stuff works. There are so many people who are suffering and sick and dying because in part of the foods they eat. But, they just don't know how to do it for themselves. It's not hard; it's not expensive, and it doesn't take that much time if someone shows you how to do it. And that's what the book and the DVDs are there for.

WP: Well, we will put it out there. Hopefully, people will say: I want to do this. I've been wanting to learn more about raw... Let me take a course and stop by the restaurant. And thanks again for the incredible meal I had there. Next time I'll bring some friends, too.

RR: You're welcome. Just let me know when you'll be down. One more thing about January; I'm starting a program where people can get the full raw food menu delivered to their home or offices. I'm also doing a program where people can sign up for a week of raw lunches or 10 days of raw food delivered to their house or office.

WP: That's a great idea. Thanks again Rod, and good luck with everything.

This interview was conducted and written by Sharon Hall for The Whole Person Calendar.

\*Details of the study can be found at [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis\\_M.\\_Pottenger,\\_Jr](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_M._Pottenger,_Jr).

**Rod Rotondi**, world traveler and culinary eclectic, has used his unique experience and perspective to translate world cuisines into delicious and affordable raw, organic, and vegan offerings. Changing the world one bite at a time has become Rod's approach to social activism. Leaf Organics, one of the first certified-organic restaurants, in both Culver City and Sherman Oaks, received rave reviews. His newest in Los Angeles serves both raw and vegan meals. Rod lives in L.A. with his wife and baby daughter, and takes part in many charity events, speaks at colleges and schools, and has catered for the Grammy awards and other entertainment industry functions.

LINKS:

This is the main link for finding out about classes, ordering DVD, or anything else:

[www.leaforganics.com](http://www.leaforganics.com)

*Raw Food for Real People*, forward by Michael Bernard Beckwith. New World Library, 2009 by Rod Rotondi.

To reach the restaurant by phone and for catering: 310-397-0700.