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BOOK EXCERPT

A nutritionist explains in a new book why diet sodas might not be a healthier choice in the long run

An excerpt from 'The Power Of Imperfect Eating: From Fear To Freedom, Navigating the Chaos Around Food with Compassion and Clarity' by Kavita Bhatnagar.

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Chachas and mamas are at the cusp of being responsible adults and carefree friends for children. They are like a father-turned-brother-turned-friend. Playful and affectionate, they are like a

watered-down version of a strict parent. Mudit claims he is “the most favourite” nephew of his chacha. I tease him, “Elders don’t play favourites.”

We reached chacha’s house and he welcomed us in his signature style – as we attempted to touch his feet, he caught us midway and engulfed both of us together in a warm embrace.

“It’s scorching today. Come sit here.” He showed us to the coolest spot in the room: bang opposite the AC and frantically pressed buttons on the AC remote. “Kanchan, get some cold drinks for the kids. There is a heat wave outside! They must be feeling hot.” He rushed chachi ji, who was talking over the phone.

Disclosure: We live around 5 km from their house, travelled in our air-conditioned car and parked the car in the basement, and took the elevators.

Looking at chacha’s affection, I wonder if Mudit really is “the most favourite”?

We all have different ways to express and receive love – words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. Cooking, feeding (overfeeding) and sharing food is also a form of love language. Is this chacha’s love language? I wonder.

Just while I was wondering, our five-year-old nephew, Abeer hopped in flagging his paper in glee, “Hurray! I have got a zero in maths...zero, zero.” He kept jumping and dancing around the room. Everyone looked amused at his innocence.

“Why are you so happy?” asked Chachu, “Zero is not a good thing beta. Zero is nothing.”

“But it comes before one. My ma’am taught me counting – 01234...so zero is better than one Dadu,” Abeer said happily.

“But do you remember, I also said: Try to come first!” said his Dadu amusingly.

“Dadu you also said second position is not as good as first and third is not good at all,” said Abeer, “and zero comes before one, so zero is the beesssst,” Abeer said proudly.

We all laughed loudly. Chachi got a chocolate and asked Abeer, “How many chocolates are there in my hand?”

“One,” said Abeer.

Then she hid it in her fist. “Now?”

“Now, zero,” said Abeer as a matter of fact.

“So beta which is good: zero or one?”

Abeer stared at his grandma. It dawned on his childish brain that zero is not a good thing. Tears rolled down his pink plump cheeks. He gave a dejected look, a look that said it all. He rubbed off his tears with the back of his hand, pouted his mouth and said “I will never bring a zero now.” Mudit picked him up and flung him in the air. “One more time, Mamu,” Abeer laughed, and Mudit dotingly flung him in the air again; bringing him back in his secure embrace.

Chachi ji quickly emerged with a tray full of snacks and beverages.

“Can I just have a glass of water instead?” I asked with a smile.

“Oh this must have lost its fizz and gone flat.” Chacha looked at Chachi, annoyed. “Kanchan, I have told you a hundred times not to bring 1 litre bottles. Wait I will get you some chilled cans,” he almost jogged to the refrigerator.

Chachi looked puzzled and sat next to me. Before I could explain that I preferred water to any other beverage and it had nothing to do with the fizz, Mudit chimed in, “That’s a great idea Chacha. Drinking straight out of the can is a different experience altogether,” he grinned and like a carefree teenager, walked towards the children playing on the other end of the living room.

Bhanu breathed a sigh of relief, plopped down next to me on the couch and said, “Now you take charge of the kids Bhaiya, let me have some adult time with Bhabhi.”

“Bhanu, shall I get you something to drink?” asked Chacha, handing me a chilled can of beverage. I took it from him and placed it on the table, unopened.

“Dad, I will have the sharbat that you bought from Sharma aunty. Bhabhi you must try it too. It’s homemade. She stays in our building and prepares delicious sharbats of almond, khus, lemon and my favourite from the lot is rose-sandalwood. She started with just 10–30 bottles a month, depending on the orders from the residents here. Now she owns a small factory and is doing a roaring business.”

“Sure. Let’s taste it,” I replied. Chacha came with a jug of sharbat and began pouring glassfuls.

“Just give me half a glass, please,” I took the glass and diluted the sharbat.

“What are you doing? You are ruining its taste!” Chacha exclaimed.

“Just watering it down Chachu. It’s too sweet for me”, I explained.

He took a sip and said, “It’s hardly sweet. Beta, this is not your age to be scared of sweet things! These rules apply to diabetics like us. Eat and make merry. You have a long life to live!”

“I am not afraid, Chacha – it’s just that I have trained myself to like less sweet things. Also I try to avoid liquid calories,” I said calmly.

“Liquid calories?” He looked at me surprised.

“Yes, calories in liquid form. Any beverage other than water can add on to unnecessary calories. So I am watchful of them,” I explained.

“Then, what do you drink?” He asked with a straight face.

“Do you consume diet drinks, Bhabhi?” Bhanu asked with curiosity evident in her eyes.

“What about juices? Aren’t juices better and healthier than aerated beverages?” asked Chachi, curious to know the difference.

“I enjoy everything, nothing is off-limits for me. Just that I am a bit mindful of beverages and whenever I can avoid them, I do.”

“So are all liquid calories, I mean all beverages bad?” They all asked innocently, their eyes fixed on me, waiting for answers.

This wasn’t my first time encountering such a situation; it felt all too familiar. People often seek my advice on nutrition, looking for validation of their beliefs and practices. Some share their vulnerabilities, while others vent their frustrations about food and nutrition. Each interaction fills me with both sympathy and hope as I offer them new perspectives. On several occasions by sharing my knowledge, I have been accused of ruining people’s moods and meals, bruising their

egos, shattering their walls of denial, challenging people's beliefs surrounding food and nutrition, questioning the stories they keep telling themselves and to those around them to protect their closely guarded but often self-defeating behaviours.

There have been occasions when I have been told that I "over-educate" people and leave them feeling sad, guilty or offended. I am told there's a time to share knowledge and I should let people eat and drink in peace. But I think it's my duty to share knowledge and inspire people to eat and live better. It's my belief that knowledge is empowering and visceral acknowledgment of something that needs a change is the first step to self-improvement.

When people follow their curiosity and embark on an endeavour to know more about food, nutrition and ways to eat and feed better, it gives me hope of a healthier planet.

So I donned the three hats of food scientist, nutritionist and psychologist and so I began to explain. I had everyone's undivided attention.

"Look. Beverages have a purpose. Like on a hot summer afternoon, some beverages can replace electrolytes that are lost by sweating. While some beverages like smoothies, milkshakes, juices etc. can be nourishing as well as hydrating. Also there are beverages like shakes and cold coffee that are consumed recreationally or as an indulgence. Some beverages are a great accompaniment with food and to give company to people while meeting them." I said keeping my glass of diluted sharbat on the table.

"Before having a beverage, we need to know the 'why'. Often our minds do not register the calories we consume as beverages. So without even us realising these calories creep up on us. For example, let's say we have just had a sumptuous meal and are stuffed to the gills. We wash it down with an aerated beverage."

"Masala soda helps us digest it," Chacha proudly added.

"It has nothing to do with digestion, Chacha. The escaping burp is not equal to digestion. It is more to do with psychology than physiology. We just consume six teaspoons of sugar on a full stomach without even realising it."

"Then drink diet masala soda, simple!" pat came his reply.

"Of course you can, once in a while. But remember they contain artificial sweeteners and it's best to not overdo them."

“Why do you say so? So many people consume artificial sweeteners all over the world. If the government has allowed them, they must be safe,” Chacha tried to reason.

“You are correct about the consumption part. Sweeteners like stevia, sorbitol, erythritol, aspartame etc. continue to be consumed in various food products worldwide. Joint FAO/ WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) and other authoritative bodies determine the levels of intake which are safe. However, the science surrounding them is continuously evolving. Their long-term use has links to negative health outcomes but nothing is conclusive. So we can’t be sure. In the short term, many sweeteners don’t get absorbed in the small intestine and end up in the colon. If you consume too much of these, they can cause gas, diarrhoea or bloating.”

Suddenly Chachi sprung into action, “See I have been telling you not to have artificial sweeteners. They are the real reason behind your gas.”

From Fear to Freedom,



*Navigating the Chaos Around Food
with Compassion and Clarity*

THE
POWER



OF IMPERFECT EATING

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