Fatty fads

Like many things, fats come in and out of fashion

In 1614, Giacomo Castelvetro, an Italian kitchen gardener living in England, described how he would make a salad: “turn the salad well with your hands, until every leaf is coated in [olive] oil. The Mediterranean diet was by then well-established in Italy but it wasn’t until the 20th century that scientists showed that it had health benefits including lower levels of heart disease.

Today, Moroccan argan oil (from the argan tree) is gaining a reputation as a cure-all for hair and skin problems, with at least equal heart benefits to olive oil, although there’s not yet much evidence to back up the claims.

Palm oil, which is used in products from biscuits to fabric softener, is falling out of favour due to the devastating impact that the industry has on rainforests (see ‘Ethical aspects of fat’ for more on this topic).

In recent years, concerns have been raised about the chemical changes that occur when fats and oils are used for frying. When oils are heated repeatedly to high temperatures, as in deep fat fryers, trans fats and other harmful compounds are produced. However, scientists have not yet been able to provide solid evidence of links between re-used frying oils and specific health conditions.

REFERENCES

- Possible adverse effects of frying with vegetable oils (2015)
- Information on Giacomo Castelvetro, from ‘Virgin Territory: Exploring the world of olive oil’ by NH Jenkins
- An overview of ‘The Fruits, Herbs and Vegetables of Italy’ by G Castelvetro

[continued]
• Wall Street Journal: Hard nut to crack – beauty and antioxidant oil

• Independent: The guilty secrets of palm oil – are you unwittingly contributing to the devastation of the rain forests?