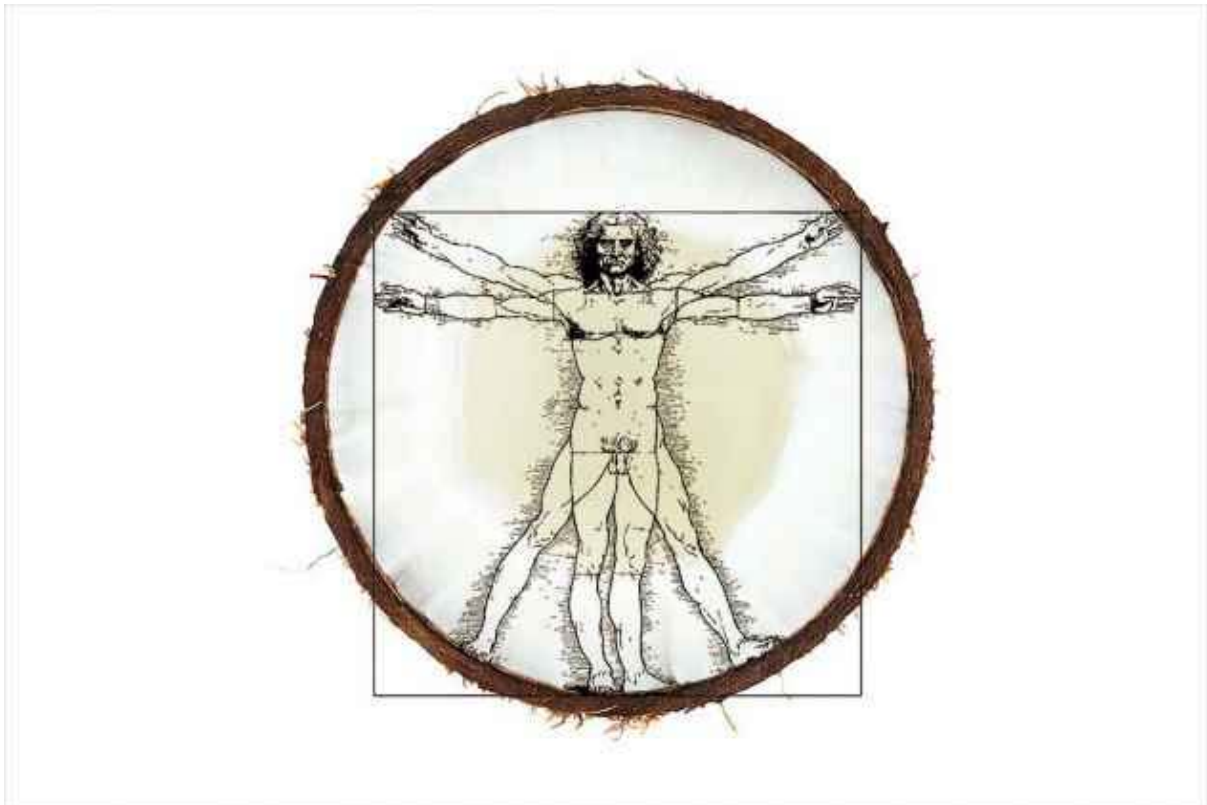


# The Well-Oiled Coco Comeback

Shadowed by new oil fads and bad publicity in the past, coconut oil makes a dashing re-entry  
STUTI AGARWAL



Startled from his dream of a holiday in the depths of the Monteverade forest in Costa Rica, Miraan Punjabi drags himself out of bed. It's 6:30 a.m. and he's ready to pump-prime his day with his morning dose of energy—his make of the 'Bulletproof' coffee: 'grass-fed unsalted butter' quickly blended into his dark roast coffee brew, with a dash of vanilla. And wait. A dollop of coconut oil. Bulletproof, aka Ketoproof, coffee is Punjabi's new power drink. All of Silicon Valley, where this energy booster was formulated, swears by it: the Medium Chain Triglyceride (MCT) in the coconut oil, or brain octane oil that is alternatively used, is the secret ingredient that kick-starts the day for countless techies.

His morning cup ingested (he takes two a day), Punjabi is ready for what the day has in store. Today, his dog, who seems to have a bit of an ear infection, needs tending. Two drops of coconut oil in both ears, and she is good to go. The MCT in the oil has great antimicrobial properties too.



### CANNED TROPIC

Various coconut oil-based products in the market

He then quickly instructs the cook for the lunch preparation—again, all done in a whole of a teaspoon of coconut oil. If it isn't already evident, Punjabi is a strong believer in the therapeutic and rejuvenating powers of coconut oil. "Virgin coconut oil," he corrects.

The humble coconut oil, just 'parachute' for most of us here, widely demonised because of its high content of saturated fat, has made a comeback, and is being widely consumed by health seekers the world over. The growth graph has been steep because the West is playing catch-up with Asian countries, which are also working on the oil's renewed respectability. In 2016, US food retailer Whole Foods called it the current "sweetheart of culinary, beauty, sports, and nutrition circles." 2016 data from SPINS, the Chicago-based consumer advisory on all things organic, showed US coconut oil sales at \$239 million in 2015, up 30 per cent from 2014. The UK coconut market has doubled each year for the last three years. It's been a bit slow in catching up in India as years of bad press is not easily erased, but recently demand is soaring in our country too. "The last two years have seen an increase in over 60 per cent in the demand for virgin oil," says Nilesh Saluke, business development manager at Sattvic Foods. "Consumers today are at a whole new level of being health conscious and their choices will only become more selective with time. The discerning customer is here to stay and products like organic virgin coconut oil provide a promise of purity and quality with a host of health benefits," says Tej Katpitia, CEO of Sri Sri Tattva, which has also come out with their line of organic virgin coconut oil.

Nutritionist and naturopathic physician Bruce Fife, who is credited with the coconut consumption boom in the US, writes in his book *The Coconut Oil Miracle*, "Coconut oil has been linked to benefits for heart function, detoxification, disinfection, weight loss, and much more." What gives coconut oil these unique properties are the fat molecules in it, called Medium Chain Fatty Acids (MCFAs). MCFAs display potential antimicrobial properties, and are capable of killing a variety of disease-causing bacteria, viruses and fungi. They are known to fight infections, dental cavities, pneumonia, ringworm, influenza, measles, herpes, hepatitis C, and even, according to some accounts by Fife, HIV. "I recommend it to every patient of mine," says nutritionist Ishi Khosla. "They can cook in it, or just take a shot of the recommended dosage," she adds.

Mukesh Verma swears by coconut oil for any allergy he has. He had allergy from certain threads, until the doctor recommended a rub of coconut oil on the affected area. He says coconut oil even helped cure his wife's

vaginal infection, after many other medicines failed. Roshni Behal uses it as dental care. “My dentist recommended coconut oil rinse since I am prone to cavities.” It turned out to be a teeth whitener as well. “I had been searching for activated charcoal for a long time, and then I chanced upon coconut oil pulling for whiter teeth,” says Behal. A two-minute mouthwash with coconut oil every night does it for her. Others gargle with it the first thing in the morning. In our polluted cities, this gives a solid shield to protect our respiratory tract. But the most popular benefits of coconut oil are for weight watchers, in its ability to boost metabolism. Increased metabolism ensures more calories burnt. “It helps with better digestion, constipation, and stomach functions. It has helped many of my patients who suffer from thyroid manage their weight better,” says Khosla. It is being recommended by many as a tool to treat obesity and weight management.

Coconut oil performs wonders not just on the body, but on the mind as well: it is considered a superfuel for the brain, with notable beneficial effect on conditions like Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s. In one such believe-it-or-not stories, Fife mentions a case in which a man develops dementia after suffering from a fungal infection that migrated into his brain. “His doctors said the damage was permanent. But his wife refused to accept it, and after research began adding coconut oil in his food,” he says. From being able to communicate only in incoherent babbling, the patient went to speaking clear sentences, and was eventually certified dementia-free by the doctors.

And, of course, the virtues of coconut oil in skincare are sufficiently well advertised. “As Indians, we have always had our mothers and grandmothers sit us down for a hot coconut oil massage,” says Anshika Garg. She still uses it as a moisturiser and as hair conditioner. Shreya Chettri uses it as a make-up remover. “With Korean skincare formulations catching up, we’ve realised the importance of an oil-based cleanser, but I found them all so expensive – until I found my own kind: good old coconut oil,” exclaims Chettri.

But if it’s the best thing since sliced bread, as its proponents make it seem, why did coconut oil get such a bad name and go off the market? Khosla blames it all on industry agenda. “Refined oils, with their trans fat and cholesterol-free properties, pushed these oils out,” she says. “It is the politics of food. All oils used in the traditional Indian households are good, and must be consumed,” says Lashika Bajaj, a nutritionist at Fortis Hospital. “But it is only half information because the research done was only on hydrogenated coconut oil and its ill-effects, and it is virgin coconut oil that is pure gold.”

And it is this virgin coconut oil that has made the comeback. “Scientists have always been aware of the ill-effects of refined oils,” says Khosla. What has helped the popularity of coconut oil recently is the organic revolution that has ensured easy access to virgin coconut oil, the heightened hype to be healthy, and the Internet. All of this has helped bring back to life other ‘daadi ke nuskhe’, like turmeric in milk: what else are turmeric lattes, shots of bitter gourd, aloe vera, amla, jamun or morning doses of tulsi, neem, and nuts.

Getting healthy the all-organic way is surely in. “Medicines may be inevitable sometimes, but the concept of prevention with natural ingredients is catching up,” says Saluke, who is adding more inventory to the Sattvic Foods website. He has recently added coconut flour and coconut sugar on demand. And while there are still skeptics of coconut oil who believe its hype as a wonder fat has is overrated, given the speed with which coconut oil products are flying off the shelves, it’s clear the revolution has acquired a critical mass of adherents and is here to stay. So drink it, cook it, apply it and let the virgin revolution work its wonder on you.