

I thought I would be an incredibly complicated case, causing Wilma Kirsten hours of deliberation and deep thought. After all, as a respected nutritional consultant with Harley Street and Oxford practices, she is the one everyone goes to when they need advice on what to eat and how to eat it.

And I was suffering all the symptoms; tiredness, lack of sleep, bloating, general fatigue, mood swings, I knew I wasn't eating properly, but, like going to the gym, I needed someone to kickstart me and show me the way.

I review restaurants for *The Oxford Times*, but you cannot eat out every night of the week – so while I eat very well on occasion, the rest of the time I am rushing about madly, skipping lunch or grabbing a sandwich at my desk and then ferrying children around.

By the time I get home I am too tired to cook for myself, so snack on whatever is close to hand, if at all. A familiar story to many working mums I am sure.

Add to this a rather inconvenient autoimmune condition which means my liver finds it hard to process certain foods and tannins (red wine), I assumed I would present Wilma with a potent cocktail of problems.

Having filled in countless forms about my eating habits, blushing as I wrote them, I expected her to come up with a new regime of supplements and foodstuffs carefully assigned to different days of the week to revitalise me and turned up full of trepidation at her house in East Oxford, where she works a few days a week, skipping lunch to do so, the irony of which was not lost on either of us as my tummy rumbled the entire way through our appointment.

Wilma did not mince her words. She told me that while normally she would assess each and every food group I ate and analyse it, with me there was no point and we had to go right back to the beginning.

She said: "You don't even eat the three main food groups. In fact you do not eat anything at all except bread from what I can see, and no protein at all."

"Cheese?" I offer, hopefully.

"No, only cheese like parmesan offers and real protein. I mean things like fish, chicken or eggs. Your plate should be half fresh fruit and veg, quarter protein and quarter carbohydrates.

"And you do not drink any water at all, so your liver has to reprocess things over and over again because there is nothing to flush out your system.

"As for your liver," she continues, "there is no point even discussing how you could manage that better because, at the moment, we need to concentrate on eating a balanced diet.

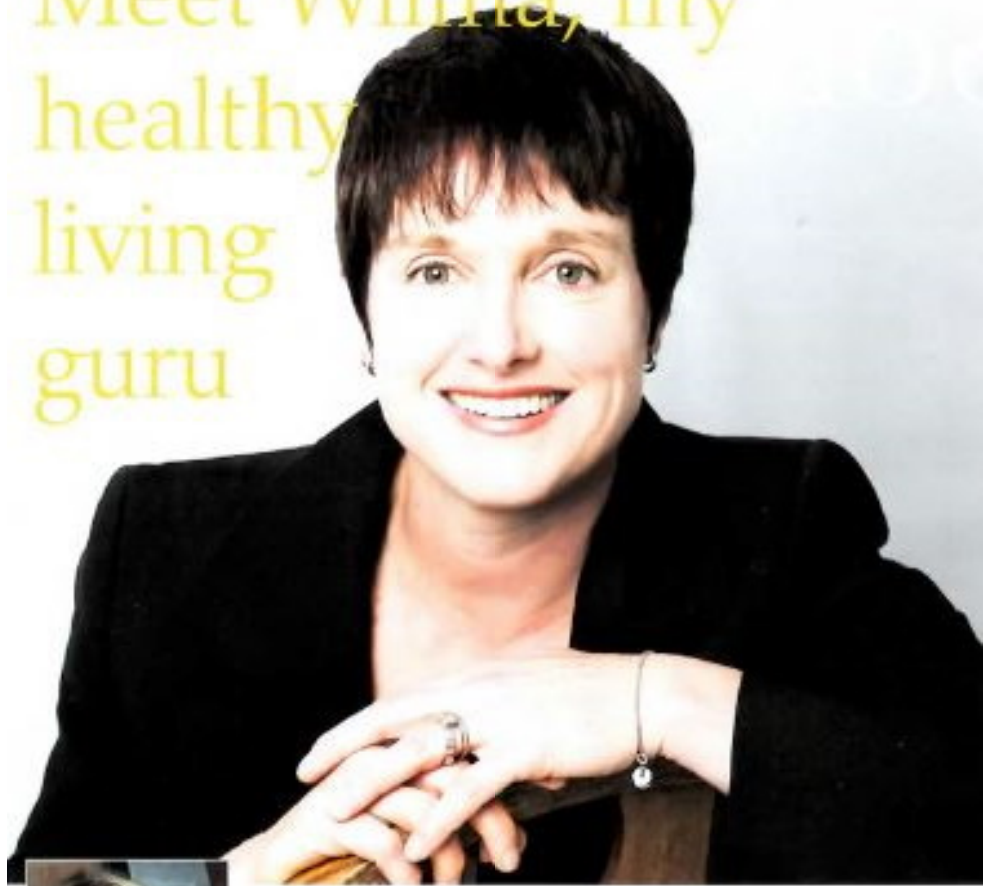
"But there are 44 things I have found that disagree with the cocktail of drugs you are currently taking," she paused for breath, before adding: "No wonder you are tired."

At last someone had told me how it was and there was no hiding from the truth.

Like those terrible reality shows where fat people have to record what they eat and are filmed eating three Domino's pizzas and a family tub of ice cream as a prelude before supper, I was up against the wall with my hands up and I felt enormous gratitude towards Wilma for taking the time to speak plainly and no skirt around the truth. She told it to me straight.

I needed to get hold of my diet and do

Meet Wilma, my healthy living guru



Her favourite coffee and bagels bit the dust after Katherine MacAlister's erratic diet was given a major shake-up by nutritionist Wilma Kirsten

something about it. I did not have an eating disorder but bad habits had become the norm.

So if I did want to think about my liver where should I start?"

Well, processing things like cheese and dairy make it worse," she told me.

"What, all dairy?"

"Yes," she said patiently. "Like yoghurt and smoothies and cereal and tea and coffee?"

"Yes, and considering you drink up to ten cups a day, that is ten spoonfuls of sugar you could cut out straight away."

"What am I going to eat then?" I asked in horror. "That's what I live on".

"I know," she said calmly.

So there we were. I had to have a radical rethink. Taking pity on me, Wilma advised me to eat fruit for breakfast, then a salad or soup for lunch, to eat nuts or an avocado standing up in teh kitchen if needs be when I got hungry, or handfuls of raisins, and in the evenings eat a balanced meal, while drinking water and herbal tea.

And I took it all to heart. There was no point making all that effort to go and see her and not see it through.

Thereafter every day I eschewed my usual bagel and latte, eating a banana and orange instead. At mid-morning I would snack on nuts and raising and at lunch a cup of thick home-made soup replaced my sandwich, with a of peanuts.

I stopped eating toast when I got home. The occasional pitta was used for the ravenous and rushed occasions, and yes I did eat avocados standing up in my kitchen.

It also meant planning my supper rather than sinking into an armchair despondently at 10pm and eating beans on toast. Protein made a reappearance – omelettes, tuna nicoise, pulses, smoked haddock, chicken stir-fries.

I lost 6lb in a week, and went back to my ideal weight almost immediately. It worked. And while losing weight had not been my intention, getting rid of bread, sugar and cheese gave my body time to readjust.

As for the water, I gave it a good go and gradually got used to the idea. It does not come naturally to me.

I am not Rosie Huntington-Whiteley who drinks four litres a day – she must spend half her life in the loo – but I got significantly better.

And I looked good – clear skin, a glow, energy. Wilma certainly knew what she was talking about.

As for now, several months after my meeting with Wilma, things have slipped a bit. My children are back at school now so the racing around has started again, but it's better, much better, and now I know my body's limitations.

How I thought it could get by on what I fed it before I will never know.