

You can't take my food – eating during cancer throat



Recipes, musings and cartoons

Scott Kirkwood, 2024

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Introduction

Scott Kirkwood was an American living in the UK, who in the face of a serious cancer diagnosis, which affected his throat and all that he could eat and drink, decided to keep control of his food and nutrition.

Scott was something of a nerd and quite a writer. He had discovered good food in mid-life and one of his favourite pastimes was cooking interesting and occasionally elaborate meals. He often kept notes of recipes and suggested amendments for the next time he cooked a dish. He became interested in eating locally sourced, seasonal food wherever possible. He hated processed food – partly for the lack of nutrition but also because of the massive profits big industrial food corporations were making off the back of flogging cheap and unhealthy food to people.



The diagnosis of stage 4 oropharyngeal cancer came at New Year 2021. Scott underwent radiotherapy with some additional chemotherapy during March/April that year. His first sets of recipes were developed during summer 2021 as his throat was healing. When the cancer returned late that year, he had an operation that left him unable to eat anything other than liquids. This document describes how he created a nutritious diet to maintain his weight and health as long as possible.

Scott was unlucky to have to endure his cancer, and also that he didn't survive it, but taking control of his food gave him considerable autonomy. It was an interesting project to pursue and gave him a hell of a lot more enjoyment and satisfaction than following standard recommended dietary paths. There were an awful lot of meals in those 3 years until he died in June 2024.

Scott was happy to share his words and recipes with anyone who might find them useful or encouraging. The sections relate to different stages of his cancer and treatment and recipes are interspersed. You will find different sections helpful depending where you, or your loved one, are with your throat.

I have put my words in italics throughout – they are merely to set the scene and fill in a few gaps. I have left Scott’s words unedited – expletives and all. I’m sure he would encourage anyone to experiment and trial things for themselves. His words and ponderings will also give you permission to be angry, to miss ‘normal’ food and meals, but to carve out some autonomy from the situation.

I hope that this document may give you some inspiration; that while you may have to consume recommended liquid meals for some or much of your own journey, there are alternatives that can be tried and enjoyed which deliver as good or better nutrition.

Alison, Scott’s partner



The day I lost it

I was 53 years old before I finally fucked someone off enough to cut my throat ear to ear. A mate told me it's called a Glasgow Smile, often used as a warning in criminal diplomacy. It's not fatal, just a very visible alert to every person you ever meet that you were involved in a staggering fuckup, and you are unquestionably the dumbfuck that caused it.

The trick for a really effective Glasgow Smile (the things you can research on the internet) is a slight outward angle on the cutting implement. You want a little bit of flay action, just a few millimetres, but it widens the scar tissue area so the final result really pops. It helps if you delay treatment a bit, just an hour will do, enough to prevent some ambitious little prick in scrubs super gluing it back together without a mark. You want that scar visible from space.

The dude that gave me my Glasgow Smile didn't have any actual beef with me, he was after the angry pixies in my neck. Fucking pixies, man, nastier than wasps and as psychotically destructive as house cats. Plus, the little shits are persistent like bed bugs, you just can't kill them far enough that they remain fucking dead.

A pixie exterminator tried to Chernobyl the angry pixies out of my neck. She even poisoned my blood as a bonus cocktail, but the fuckers just would not die. They're like pesticide-resistant lice that really want you dead.

How I Imagined Chemo Would Work



How It Actually Works



So eventually Jimmy Blades carved my neck open and hacked the little fuckers out with an ice cream scoop. When his final scoop hit the bucket, he turned things over to Ronnie Needlepoint to peel a flap of skin off my leg and sew things back into a neck shaped flesh blob. Since the whole job took 18 hours, it had that critical time delay needed for a perfect Glasgow Smile. These were skilled craftsmen, they nailed the technique.

The thing about necks is there's a lot of really important stuff in them. It's mostly tubes and cables going up and down, a glorified pipe conduit if you will, where mucking with any of the individual tubes or cables results in terrified thrashing about on the floor for a few minutes followed by a long silence. Ice cream scoops are not an ideal instrument to use on a neck unless the scooper really knows their shit.

But I didn't come here to talk about all that, I came here to talk about The Gambia. Obviously, duh, try to keep up. The Gambia is a lovely country snuggled inside Senegal, effectively a very long riverbank community. I visited friends there several years



Domoda

back. Their national dish, if such things exist, is a spicy peanut stew called domoda. There are a thousand variations and every cook has their own version, it's a rich savoury curry with loads of peanut butter.

I was cooking domoda when my life with food changed forever.

It was a Thursday like any other, absolutely nothing special about it. I had screamed myself awake at 5am that morning like normal, spent two hours sitting in bed with mugs of tea doomscrolling, scooped a bowl of flaked grains, scrubbed my hairy smelly bits with

steel wool in a scalding hot shower and dressed myself like a homeless beggar. I drove to Shrewsbury after breakfast, where new mate Jerry and I had a lively discussion about whether T20 is a sport or a party game like Twister, before he strapped me to a table and used a linear accelerator to fire high-powered radiation through my head. Just your ordinary Thursday in Shropshire. Nothing about it said, “today you lose most of the foods you have ever loved and you will never get them back.”

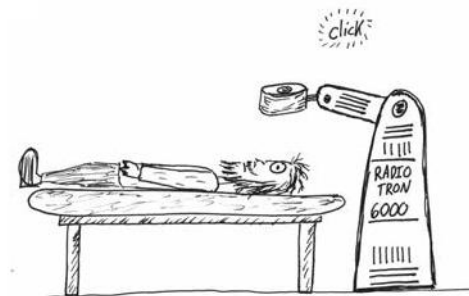
How I Imagined Radiation Would Work

BZZZZZZAAAAAPPPPPP!!!!!!



The pixie exterminator had warned me to expect a sore throat after a few weeks of treatment, but nobody had mentioned my tongue. Every single person at the anti-pixie lab had yakked on about the sore throat, how to soothe it, how bad it would get, and “no, seriously you don’t understand just how bad this is going to get” and I was as prepared for that as you can be, except nobody had mentioned the tongue.

How It Actually Works



I was splorping globs of peanut butter into a pan of onions, squash, peppers and tomatoes when I realised my tongue didn’t fit inside my teeth anymore. It rubbed against every little tooth bump, raising sores all over the tongue. Anything I tried to eat or drink suddenly felt like sandpaper in my mouth and tasted like grey wax putty. I ate some domoda that night, but I didn’t enjoy it at all. By the end of that weekend, I was subsisting on tinned soup.

I won’t lie to anyone and say I embarked on this journey bravely. I faced it with all the courage and dignity of a 5-year-old in the phlebotomy chair. Stereotypes always grind my gears, but the classic

image of a bald emaciated walking corpse with a weary smile and a baggy T-shirt that reads “I beat the angry pixies” grinds hardest. Fuck that. Nobody volunteered bravely for this, nobody raised their hand offering to lay their body down in noble combat against the angry pixies. We aren’t heroes, we didn’t have any fucking choice.

Food changed forever while cooking domoda that night and it has never been the same again. You know when you’re making a sandwich and you remember there’s some crisp lettuce in the fridge, so you throw a few leaves and maybe a couple slices of onion on top before slamming the bread lid down and that satisfying moment when the smunch of it under teeth reverberates through your ears, jaw, teeth and tongue, piling fresh crunchy texture-joy on top of the savoury softness and you shamelessly foodgasm on the kitchen floor? Yeah, gone.



Fuck those fucking pixies.

Domoda

- Onions, garlic, red peppers, chilis, tomatoes
- Any other veg lying around the kitchen, carrot, spinach, potatoes, literally anything
- Squash or sweet potato
- Chopped critter bits if you're into that sort of thing
- Tomato puree or paste
- Half a jar of peanut butter
- Any herb you have hanging around, coriander or parsley work best
- Random curry spices: cumin, coriander seed, garam masala, anything you like
- Maggi sauce or veggie stock paste or even (gasp!) actual stock
- One scotch bonnet pepper (no soft spots, you don't want this fucker bursting open)

Using your best kitchen knife, carefully chop each of the vegetables into perfect pyramid shapes with exactly 1.6cm sides, use a high-precision protractor to ensure you have perfect equilateral angles. OK fuck that Ottolenghi bullshit, if you can't cook food without someone telling you what size to chop the veg, then you probably shouldn't be handling sharp knives unsupervised. Chop shit what size you want and move on with your life.

If you eat critters, capture, kill and dismember whichever critter you have a grudge against that day. Be brutal, make an example out of it for the other critters to see, that way they know not to fuck with you. Pound your chest afterwards to declare what a beastly carnivorous predator you are.

Here's a spoiler alert: that critter isn't going to make the dish taste any better, it's not suddenly going to taste like chicken or lamb or fish, it's going to taste like spicy peanut stew.

Keep any squash, sweet potato and the scotch bonnet aside but sauté the remaining veg in oil until it gets some colour on it. If you're cooking a critter, throw the body parts in and get some colour on those too. Salt everything well, add however much spice you want then throw in the tomato paste and stir it around so it caramelises and deepens in colour. Deglaze it in a dramatic whoosh with stock then splort the peanut butter in and stir until it dissolves into the sauce. Add the squash or sweet potato pieces, then carefully lower the whole scotch bonnet in with a pair of blacksmith tongs and a welding mask. You don't want to smash that pepper up or you could create an inedible pot of hellfire, so take care while stirring.

Simmer for half an hour until the squash is soft and the peanut oil starts to separate and puddle on top of the sauce. Serve over rice or couscous or flatbread or pearl barley or bulgur wheat or whatever starch you prefer. Point and laugh at whichever silly sod scoops the scotch bonnet onto their plate and stuffs it in their mouth without thinking. Look at them, they look so cute rolling around on the floor begging for someone to brain them with a hammer and end the pain.

Ah, the taste of The Gambia.

Eating like an eight-year-old - eating after radiotherapy and chemo

I ate shit when I was eight, complete shit. Don't get me wrong, I ate loads of stuff, I wasn't one of those kids that refuses food, but it was all shit. I was a chubby kid, stuffing candy bars and sweet crap into my head like a sugar-hoover. My favourite breakfast was pancakes with maple syrup, lunch: grilled cheese sandwich with strawberry jam on top, dinner: Kraft macaroni and cheese or maybe fish fingers with oven fries or tater tots. If greens were included they were boiled from frozen or a tin. It was a combination of the times, my location in northern Ohio and a grandmother that embraced TV dinners as the future of feeding a family.

After my former mate Jerry Chernobyl blistered my throat with his wretched linear accelerator for several weeks (how could we stay mates when he did this to my neck?!), there wasn't much I could get down that jagged shrieking tube and into my stomach. Anything spicy was out, anything sharp or crunchy was out, anything other than a soft gentle texture was out, anything not liquid enough to slide down without much tongue or swallowing action was out, pretty much anything I had ever enjoyed or loved or missed or craved was gone. Just gone. Over. Done. Kaput. Nada. Nope. Bupkis. Light switch is off. Computer says no. You lost, get over it.

I ate what I could get down. I experimented to find other options, but I found myself up against an increasingly intolerant neck tube. I'm certain like most people, you've had that dream where a person is pouring things through a jam funnel into your mouth and using a long dowel rod to poke it down your throat into your stomach? I mean who hasn't had that dream, duh. Or maybe I started having that dream around that time.

The pixie exterminator had insisted I have a tube inserted for pumping liquid nutrition directly into the stomach during the worst of the treatment. That stupid tube, god how I hated it. A piece of plastic dangling off your tummy from a sticky oozing hole that requires cleaning three times a day. It's like having a new leaky asshole spontaneously erupt from your abdomen. And the god-awful sugar-milk crap they wanted to pump through it was the absolute worst. I won't begin to refer to it as food. Even calling it nutrition is insulting to real food. I was determined to avoid that stuff even if it meant using the dowel rod from my dreams.

To make it work, everything needed to be very soft, small and slippery. I started boiling little macaroni pastas before going even smaller with orzo. Did you know orzo is meant to resemble bird tongues in shape? I worry sometimes about the mental state of chefs in Italy. A baker there once decided that people really crave eating soft fuzzy slippers and invented ciabatta bread, and then a deranged Italian chef thought people really want to eat a big bowl of tongues ripped from songbirds. Christ Giuseppe, grab the reins.



Orzo

Orzo boiled too long and slathered in olive oil was a staple food for me. Sometimes a tin of soup would replace the oil as lubricant. Boiled pearl barley did the job too and let me mix things up a tiny bit. Rice just didn't work for some reason, it always stuck to things in the mouth and on the way down. Only the really rough wild or Camargue rice would work and even then, it was never as good as the pasta or barley grains. Eventually, even these things were too much, and I reluctantly started using the liquid nutrition tube to feed myself.

I dropped fifteen kilos during treatment.

Let me give you my patient-side perspective on this liquid nutrition. The creative geniuses in marketing named it “TwoCal” because it contained two calories per ml. It came in 1L bottles with fittings that matched a small pump and attached to the tube dangling from my belly hole. If decanted into 200ml bottles with a squirt of artificial flavouring, it suddenly became “Ensure”. The packaging and copious advert swag are covered with pictures of active 40-year-olds dressed as healthy 50-year-olds in order to sell this crap to 70-year-olds that can’t feed themselves. Billed as the “most trusted name in medical nutrition,” this swill is nothing but industrial milk by-product, sugar and a multi-vitamin. It is possibly the most reliable and immediately effective laxative ever created. Nothing in the world compares to the horror show of a TwoCal bowel movement. It has the added benefit of generating huge piles of plastic waste. I’m convinced their marketing knobs wanted to challenge Coke and Pepsi for dominance of single-use plastic bobbing around the Pacific garbage island.

I was on this shit as my only source of nutrition for nearly two months before my throat started to recover enough to try a little bit of well-oiled orzo again. For over a month that fucking tube was the only way I could get water into myself to stay hydrated. You can see why I couldn’t remain friends with Jerry Chernobyl.

Food changed from a source of enjoyment to a fueling exercise. “How do I get 500 calories into my body five times a day?” I started by finding what alternatives existed for balanced nutrition liquid. Nearly all nutrition powders were either weight loss or weight gain, but there were two balanced ones available online with mandatory excruciating marketing. I ordered some magic powder from a company called Huel, plant-based, neutral flavour and 100g of it makes a 400-calorie shake. Anything is better than the industrial sugar-milk.

For pure scientific research purposes, I made an exhaustive study of the drinks aisle at the local petrol station, trying everything that wasn't obviously a sugar bomb or caffeine missile.

Here's my analysis:

What the label says	What's in it
Smoothie	Apple juice, tiny bit of fruit or veg pulp, emulsifier
Protein	Industrial milk by-products, sugar, emulsifier
Fruit	Apple juice, tiny bit of other juice, sugar

My diet during this time was boring as hell, but at least it was migrating slowly back to what could honestly be called food.

Recipes for cancer throat

Orzo with stuff on it

Boil some orzo pasta and cover with any of the following sauces. Make the sauces thin and soupy in exactly the way that would enrage an Italian cook.

- **Simple oil sauce:** big pour of olive oil (75-100ml), squeeze of lemon, salt, chopped parsley
- **Simple tom sauce:** big pour of passata, salt, handful of oregano, finely chopped garlic clove
- **Simple shroom sauce:** big pour of cream, big spoon of dried mushroom powder, salt
- **Simple spinach sauce:** big pour of olive oil, big handful cooked spinach pureed to pulp, salt
- **Simple pesto:** big pour of olive oil, big handful fresh basil, chunk of parmesan, whizz to pesto
- **Tired or in a hurry:** open a tin of soup, pour it over the orzo
- **Really tired or horked off at the world:** tin of spaghetti hoops, open and eat while crying

Barley with stuff on it

Boil up some pearl barley, or substitute freekeh or lentils or yellow peas or split peas or just about any grain or pulse so long as they are very small.

- **Vaguely Asian:** miso paste, hot water, splash of soy, vinegar, sesame oil, diced spring onion

- **Vaguely Turkish:** sweet paprika, sumac, diced garlic, stock of your choice
- **Vaguely British:** big spoon of Bovril, hot water, large spoonful of personal disappointment
- **Taste of the sea:** spoon of soy and vinegar, big spoon dried seaweed powder, hot water
- **Welsh sea:** giant spoon laver bread, hot water, diced leek
- **Umami bomb:** big spoon of marmite, hot water
- **Other options:** try any of the sauces listed under orzo

Barley water

If you've boiled some barley, you have already made barley water, which isn't super high in nutrition but it's right there and basically free and all you we're going to do was wash it down the sink. Capture some, cool it down and try it. Store it in the fridge after mixing:

- **Lemon barley:** barley water, squeeze of lemon, spoon of sugar
- **Fruity:** barley water, splash of Ribena or any cordial you like
- **Savoury:** couple drops of soy sauce, couple drops vinegar

Sharbat: The oldest soft drink in the world

It has dozens of names depending on what part of the world is making it, but the recipe is the same. Put a few handfuls of any fresh fruit in a jar, add a dessert spoon or two of sugar, fill the jar with boiling water, cap it and swirl to dissolve the sugar, cool it down then put it in the fridge and forget about it for a week or two. Drink neat or water it down, use the fruit in a smoothie when you finish the drink.

This works with absolutely any fruit known to mankind. No need to remove stones, pips, skins or rinds, put it all in there. This includes citrus, just cut it enough to fit the pieces through the neck of the jar. Add herbs or spices if you like. Mix fruits if you want, there are no rules. If you simmer the bottles in boiling water for 20 minutes, you can make it shelf stable and store it in the larder for a fresh fruity blast months later, the flavour intensifies over time.



Professional food science - You don't have to co-operate with NHS dieticians

Scott was 'sent to see the dieticians' at hospital soon after his initial diagnosis. They seemed obsessed with his weight and how much he might lose during and after radiotherapy. They didn't appear to be very good listeners. Scott was a little overweight when diagnosed - around 110kg. His efforts described herein enabled him to only lose a few kg, stabilising at a healthy for his height 100kg.

The dieticians didn't seem to believe that Scott's diet was already pretty healthy, how important food and cooking were to him and how important it was to him to keep some control over what he ate. They spent time asking him about what he ate at each stage and then always suggested increasing the volumes of TwoCal. The idea that there might be an alternative to TwoCal or that someone might be able to get enough nutrition autonomously were not options.

If you want to do things your own way, you do have to put the effort in to make sure you're getting enough calories and essential nutrients every day.

NHS Dieticians: "So, Mr. Idiot, walk me through what you had to eat yesterday."

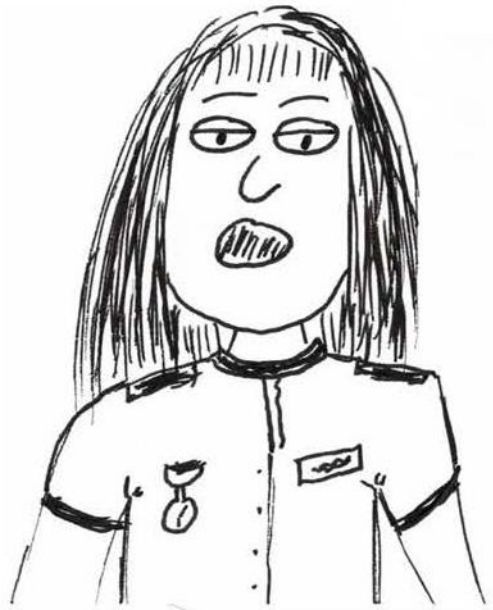
Me: "Um, yeah, ok. Let's see, I had two mugs of tea first thing in the morning and..."

NHS Dieticians: "Any sugar or milk in that tea?"

Me: “No, black tea. Then I had a bowl of cereal flakes at about 7am with...”

NHS Dieticians: “Any sugar or milk on those flakes, Mr Idiot?”

Me: “Um, no sugar or I would have said but I was about to talk about the oat milk when you interrupted unnecessarily. Just let me finish, here, ok? I promise I’ll tell you about everything I ate if you let me speak.”



NHS Dieticians: “It’s just that a lot of people forget that they have milk with their tea and so I have to ask, so those flakes you had full fat milk with those?”

Me: “No, I was trying to say earlier that it was oat milk but you interrupted again. If you’ll just let me finish I can walk you through the whole day and....”

NHS Dieticians: “What about mid-morning, did you have a little snack or something for elevensies?”

Me: “Um, I think we might be done here.”

NHS Dieticians: “Mr. Idiot, we need you to answer these questions because we need to do this review, our protocol list here says so, and so you need to work with us on this, try to stay focused. What did you have for the mid-morning snack you told us about?”

Me: “I didn’t say anything about a mid-morning snack, that was you. I had a bowl of cereal flakes with oat milk for breakfast with a handful of raspberries from the garden and...”

NHS Dieticians: “So, sugar frosted corn flakes with full fat milk and raspberry jam. What did you have for elevensies again?”

Me: “Seriously, I think we’re done here.”

NHS Dieticians: “Mr Idiot, please, we’re trying to help you with your nutrition and diet.”



The dieticians were the most present, the most persistent, the most motivated people I encountered during anti-pixie treatment. The dieticians were highly trained people and I respect them and their work without reservation. Except for the serious reservation that their methods were shit, and they were bound to a set of protocols that forced them to treat me like a 90-year-old dementia patient with a room temperature IQ and the memory of a goldfish. These were excellent individuals doing a great job despite being bound by the tightest set of protocols I have encountered in the NHS. Which is why it pains me so much to say how shit of an overall job these fine people were doing through absolutely no fault of their own.

My dieticians throughout treatment were kind, intelligent and generally lovely people. But at the time, I hated them almost as much as the angry pixies themselves. Only with the clarity of hindsight did I realise it was actually their ridiculous protocols that I hated. If any of you ever read this, please accept a heartfelt apology for my atrocious behaviour during our sessions. Also, please RISE UP AND DEMAND THE NHS DOES BETTER!!!

What the hell was that?! - everything has changed flavour

Scott not only wanted to keep as much control as possible over what he ate but also had an inquisitive nature – he loved researching and experimenting. One challenge was that it was much easier to make sweet liquid foods than savoury but he found many: ‘Umami bombs’! - miso, spinach, soups, noodle broth, seaweed?! He could also occasionally revel in the fact that he could justify eating calorific foods which previously would have been carefully rationed: OMG Reese's! - peanut butter, chocolate, ice cream - I have a milkshake and you don't, choke on it.

The summer and autumn after his radiotherapy he started to re-embrace food and revelled in the harvest from our garden and what was available locally (apples, damsons, blackberries, etc.) Food was very different and what he could taste changed over time. He would suddenly rediscover tastes: OMG Lemons are awesome!! He was eating more fruit than ever: OMG I'm finally a squirrel!! - storing fruit for winter.

Another great find in our area was the automated milkshake machine that a local farm had set up on the outskirts of town (one of a network across their local patch selling milk and flavoured milkshakes, alongside a snack dispenser machine). They changed the flavours weekly and the joy of discovering not just strawberry and chocolate but black cherry, raspberry ripple or salted caramel flavours would lift spirits that day, alongside supplying many calories.

6 litres of carrot soup

Eating at other people's houses was sometimes a strain. Friends and relatives tried to accommodate Scott's dietary needs making runny

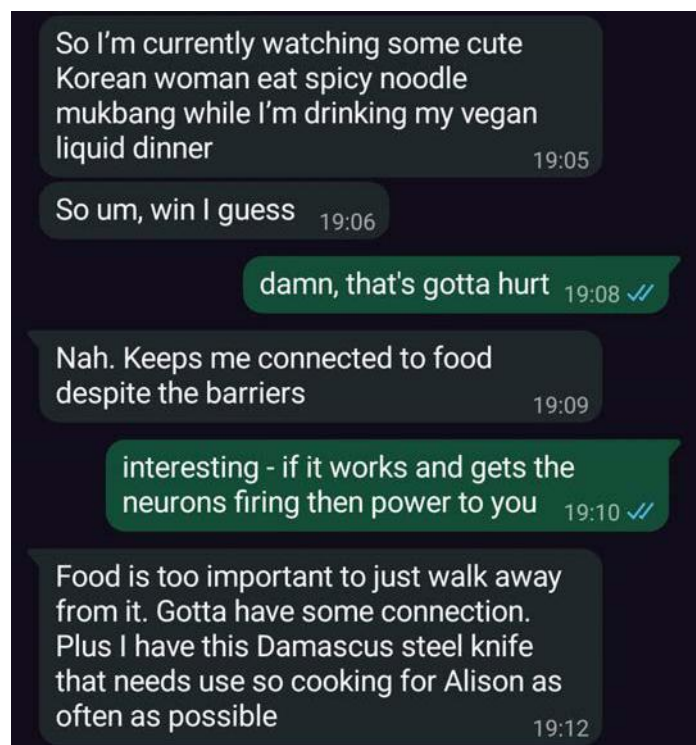
meals like dahl and the strangely ubiquitous carrot soup. Over time Scott tended to say he'd bring his own food - it was easier for everyone. It was similar at the restaurants we occasionally ventured to. I remember a couple of great experiences where waiting staff and chefs offered to liquidise a stew into soup before serving it. But Scott sometimes just preferred to stick to a pint of beer while others ate. He didn't like making a fuss, having to explain or asking if he could bring his own food, but I guess those would be options too.

The forbidden meals

Losing most food was tough, I won't lie. Not as difficult as I thought, but yeah it hurt. Staying engaged with food in other ways probably softened the overall loss. I rarely sit and think about eating, although I do think about foods rather a lot.

I started wondering, if I could eat again, what would I most want? Which was annoying because I had already been asked this by many people and responded dismissively. People would ask, "what do you miss most?" which led me to the reality TV scripted "one forbidden meal" concept.

Any such stray thoughts early in the process were snuffed out fast



Chatting with good friend Ted

because it seemed the wrong way to think about this. What I miss or what I would eat just lead to the harsh reality that it ain't gonna happen. That path has a huge emotional landmine waiting for anyone stupid enough to walk it.

Because beans. A big pot of spicy saucy beans with flatbreads, oh fuck, yes, yes, with a plate of chopped onions, herbs, tomatoes, greens, pickled vegetables, seven different sauces and wedges of lemon or lime to dribble and oh FUCK YES!! THAT!!! It can be Turkish style or Mexican, which are basically the same cuisine except one culture uses lard and the other lamb fat. But the critters and their fatty renderings weren't part of the emotional shrapnel cloud blowing through my torso right then, it was the drippy dippy saucy crunchy chewy wrap of eternal joy that shredded me.

Oh fuck. Beans. I miss beans so fucking much. My cashew and rice flour smoothie was a poor substitute for the bean dream.

Carrying on with food through all the bullshit

It's like I'm eating again - accepting and embracing a new food reality.

It worked best when he was able to focus on what he could still eat and what tastes he enjoyed. It wasn't always the flavours you would think would work that did. He tried to just let go of the things that didn't work and not agonise over them too much. He didn't always succeed.

Involuntarily vegan - why the hell not?

One of the reasons Scott didn't want to eat TwoCal all the time was his

view that it was likely made from the most intensive type of dairy farming, maybe using the dregs of the production cycle. Corporate thinking would be that those people having to survive on TwoCal wouldn't be asking too many questions about methods of production and animal welfare. Neither of us had ever been vegan but we were thoughtful consumers and I haven't eaten meat for decades. When Scott found his new diet was largely vegetarian and often vegan he embraced it. Obviously, the milkshakes involved cows but there were pictures of the actual cows on the farm's dispenser machine, so that was OK by him.

Food is mine!! - keeping control even when they don't want to give it

When you are seriously ill there is so little you can keep control over it can be very satisfying to stick two fingers up at what the experts recommend and go your own way. Things became even more challenging after the cancer returned and Scott had a tracheostomy operation. When you can only consume things using the power of gravity to get them down your reconstructed throat you need to become even more imaginative.

This was where the magic Nutribullet was absolutely essential. The cups and jugs it comes with have measuring scales on their sides which helps with quantities. Scott also invested in some massive glass storage jars. I'm sure plastic or Tupperware, etc., would work as well but he had a pre-existing obsession with Kilner jars of all sizes so that's the way he went when storing all the ingredients for his next set of recipes.

Amateur food science - you can do better yourself, even after a tracheostomy

I mentioned my Glasgow Smile earlier, so I don't really need to get into too many details, but obviously Jerry Chernobyl hadn't killed the pixies and Johnny Blades was called in. After the throat slashing, even eating barley and orzo was impossible. I had no swallow function, no lower teeth, no tongue and therefore none of the equipment required for eating stuff.

Existing on liquids only is tough, especially if you won't drink the industrial sugar milk. It's a lot of stuff to guzzle down your pie pipe every day, and most of it tastes like the grey starchy liquid that it is. For some months I didn't even bother trying to engage with it as food, it's just fuel. The total nutrition powder allowed me to feed my body with minimal emotional involvement. I think it was a mix of boredom and contempt for the shameless marketing fuckery of the company that caused me to start making my own.

Even on bumblefuck packaging the label can sometimes still be useful. It told me my magic Huel powder was made from oat flour, pea protein, tapioca starch and flax seed. There's a few more things to it, but that's the basic recipe. Being a bit of a spreadsheet nerd, I splatted out the full nutrition figures for the ingredients and worked the volumes in my spreadsheet until the total nutrition matched the commercial nutrition powder, a crude reverse engineering of their recipe.

One quick visit to the hippie shop for ingredients, and kerblam there I am drinking my own homebrew balanced nutrition drinks. It didn't taste any different, it was just satisfying to be involved in the act of preparing food once again. I've always loved cooking and consider

myself to be good at it, so those angry pixies not only stole one of life's great pleasures but a lifetime hobby as well. Have I mentioned how much I hate those fucking pixies?

My early ingredients for my homebrew nutrition powder (that I called Muel) were all sourced from my local hippie shop, entirely staffed by very nice people dressed in hemp clothing. As a result, my first batch was more expensive than the Huel powder. A bit of additional experimentation and bulk buying brought that down and eventually I was making this stuff for much less than buying it in. Plus, it gave me time in the kitchen, so win-win. Here's a few brief thoughts about the ingredients and how to make them economical.

Oat flour

Exactly what it says on the bag, oats milled into flour. The problem is that oat flour is about four times the cost of plain old rolled or porridge oats and comes in annoyingly small bags. By this time, I owned a nuclear-powered blender, so I experimented making my own oat flour. I found that porridge oats would whizz up smaller and finer than rolled or jumbo oats. It was super easy to do, just chuck them in a dry blender jar and let it rip for thirty seconds. It still won't be as fine as oats from a commercial mill, but a little bit of sediment in my shakes didn't cause me any fuss. If I added a banana or some fruit, that helps keep it all in suspension in the drink like a commercial emulsifier, as well as adding actual food to the result.

Pea protein, rice protein, hemp protein

These are processed powders that have extracted the protein from the base ingredient and are technically called protein isolate. The roid monsters from your local gym use whey protein to help swell their muscles, and these are quite simply the veggie alternative.

Plus, all whey protein seems to come in a brightly coloured can with pictures of gargantuan mutant arm muscles, flames and other obscenely masculine imagery. The hippie shop carried all three veggie versions or a mixture simply labelled vegan protein powder. I checked the label in case it was actually ground up vegans, but it wasn't. The problem is that a small bag of about 100g of the stuff is priced at about £5. A search of hippie supply websites revealed 1.5kg sacks for much more realistic prices.

Tapioca starch

I don't know why we can't just call it cassava root, but tapioca is more fun to say I suppose. Drought resistant, naturally pest resistant, weather tolerant and easily cultivated in marginal soil, it's the third largest source of calories in tropical countries. This stuff is not as obscure as you might think. Tapioca is useful to nutrition powder or any liquid diet because it is pure complex carbohydrate and fuck all else. Very low in fat, protein and simple sugars, tapioca starch is perfect for bulking out foods with good carbs. This stuff is readily available at the hippie shop for a quite reasonable price, so I had no reason to go searching for bulk supplies.

Flax seeds

Also called linseed, flax is used in all sorts of stuff. Linseed oil is used in food as well as a natural finish on wood, the seeds themselves are a great source of nutrition, and the fibres from the plant are what makes the fabric we call linen. I buy the milled seeds since they are tough to mill from whole seeds at home. Flax seed is loaded with unsaturated fat, protein and fibre and a shit-ton of calories in a small package.

Sunflower oil

Start eating an all-liquid diet that doesn't rely on milk by-product and you will very soon find your diet lacks the fats your body needs. Some people strive for the low-fat lifestyle, but truth is we need fats in our diet, just not KFC levels of fat and certainly not the mega bombs of saturated fats in many packaged foods. Sunflower oil is an easy way to add pure unsaturated fat into the recipe of my nutrition mix. I do not add it to the base powder when mixing that up, as it doesn't divide well and could encourage microcritters to start growing in the stored powder. I add sunflower oil when mixing up a drink from my powder.

Coconut oil

This is the other half of the fat world, it has the saturated fats that we need (yes, yes we do) and many of the weird little fatty acids our bodies need in small amounts. If you hear people yakking about something called medium chain triglycerides, just think coconut oil instead. Most MCT supplements are either extracts from coconut oil or simply overpriced raw coconut oil in a fancy package. Like the sunflower oil, I add this when making a shake or smoothie and not to the base powder mix.

Rice flour, buckwheat flour, amaranth flour, spelt flour, wheat flour, etc.

All can be used in a liquid diet, although the nutritional content varies widely across the grain world. Rice flour has some protein to it but almost no fat, oat flour has some fat and some protein, amaranth flour has a surprising share of everything. Mix it up, find what works for you. I have used any and all of these regularly as ingredients in

my Muel or just as regular additions to smoothies and shakes depending on what my diet is needing that day.

Salt

This is the other gotcha in a liquid diet. Most people eat too much salt in the modern diet, and so the idea of being low on salt is somewhat foreign to our thinking. The reality is for most of the past billion years, any critter not living in the sea has struggled to get enough salt. It was one of the most critical supplies and widely traded food product in any civilisation for millennia. Only in the past century, and specifically with the advent of packaged prepared foods, has salt become a problem for anyone. Your body needs it, and a liquid diet can often be short unless you add salt. I figured that out when I started having bad leg cramps, and my GP immediately asked about my salt intake. One thing to bear in mind is that Salt and Sodium are not actually interchangeable terms, 1g of salt has 0.4g of sodium in it. Be careful when reading labels of other ingredients or your calculation on salt intake will be wildly inaccurate. I add salt to my base powder or sometimes directly to a smoothie when needed.

Vitamins, minerals, micronutrients

Look deep into the ingredients list of commercial nutrition powder and you find a huge list of unreadable words. Since the commercial powders aim to be a complete nutritional product that needs no addition, they balance all the vitamins and other fiddly stuff for you. I don't know about you, but I rarely find myself wondering if I've had enough thiamine or magnesium in a day. At first, I would grind up some unfancy multivitamins into my Muel powder trying to achieve the same thing. Nowadays, I just grind one up and throw it in my morning smoothie to make sure the fiddly stuff gets covered. I'm sure a nutritionist (one that can actually communicate openly, not

one handcuffed by NHS protocol) would tell me there is much more science to it, but this method works for me very well.

Muel – homebrew nutrition powder

- 1kg porridge oats whizzed into a powder
- 700g pea or rice protein isolate powder
- 500g tapioca starch
- 425g milled flax seed
- 5g salt

The precise amounts and proportions to completely mimic commercial powders are a tiny bit skewed here. My original spreadsheets had worked the proportions down to precision levels and then the reality of buying ingredients and mixing them together took over. Other than the protein powder, those proportions are dictated by the size of packages I was buying. This is basically one full bag of each from my local hippie shop. It was nearly on target for what I wanted to make and meant I wasn't needing to store little bits of leftover in the larder. I'm all about a streamlined supply chain, so just buying one bag of each and pouring them all together was easier. I pour them all into a clean food bucket and mix them with a whisk. Job done: 400 calories per 100g of powder of balanced fat, carbs, protein, fibre and salt.

I found early that mixing commercial Huel with oat milk or rice milk made a creamier and overall tastier end result. The problem these plant milks are expensive and always come in those annoying tetrapacks that are theoretically recyclable except that almost no recycler actually does. In my locality, the recycle centre has a special skip where you put all those containers

believing they will be lovingly reused in an endless loop of green naturalness. Except that they get “recycled” straight into the furnace instead. Only the fact that the furnace powers a generator to make electricity allows them to use the word “recycle” legally. Depending where you live, the same is probably true of almost all plastic you put into the recycle bin.

Oat milk

- 100g porridge oats
- Water
- Pinch of salt

Put the oats into your blender jar, fill up with water and let it soak for a bit, anywhere from 10 minutes to overnight, you're in charge not the oats. Whizz it on high for a minute. If you want a more consistent result, let it sit another ten minutes then whizz it again. Pour the resulting gooey liquid through a sieve and distribute into 4 clean 1L bottles. Top them all up with water, and shake well before using

Rice milk

If you use rice milk for other things, then do the same as above but substitute rice flour for oats. Personally, I found that it was just easier to add rice flour directly to a smoothie while whizzing that up, avoiding the intermediate slog of making it into rice milk.

Smoothie recipes – moving from basics and learning to adapt

Scott set up a row of large glass jars next to the Nutribullet so making a smoothie for each meal was easy. Each jar had a scoop in it. He started with eight including both his own Muel and bought in Huel. This table explains what each item was good for.

Ingredient jars	What it's good for
Muel	Total nutrition powder, has sediment if used without fruit
Pea Protein	Just pure raw protein
Cashew pieces	Fats and protein, calorie dense
Oat flour	Carbs and fibre, thickener
Rice flour	Carbs and a bit of protein
Tapioca flour	Nothing but carbs
Flax seed	Fats, protein, fibre
Huel	Nutrition powder, holds consistency on its own

The basic instructions were the same for all the recipes:

1 scoop equals about 50g of any of the powders, eyeball the measures, it's good enough. I add water up to a few cm below the top of the jug. Unless otherwise indicated, use the tall Nutribullet jug. Adding some water before the powder and then more water to fill at the end will reduce powder clumping to the walls of the jug. Don't let it sit unblended once ingredients are in the jug.

Vitamins, minerals, micronutrients

Basic bog standard (400 calories)

- 100g Huel

Basic fruit (450-500 calories)

- 100g Muel
- Handful of any fruit or big heaping spoon of jam or marmalade

Better banana or fruit (500 calories)

- 50g Muel
- 25g Pea protein
- 25g Rice flour
- Pinch of salt
- Tip of a spoon of coconut oil
- Banana or fruit

Creamy cashew (750 calories)

- Small jug
- 50g Huel
- 40g Rice flour
- Pinch of salt
- 75g Cashews

*Blend cashews and rice flour with small amount of water until smooth, then add the rest and more water.

Better banana or fruit (500 calories)

- 50g Huel
- 25g Pea protein
- 25g Tapioca flour
- 75g Peanut butter
- Pinch of salt

Sorbet shake (450 calories)

- Small jug
- 50g Huel
- 10g Pea protein
- 25g Rice flour
- 100g Sorbet
- Splash of sunflower oil

Milkshake (500 calories)

- Small jug
- 50g Huel
- 10g Pea protein
- 25g Tapioca flour
- 100g Booja Booja vegan ice cream
- Splash of sunflower oil

Spinach and miso (450 calories)

- 50g Muel
- 25g Pea protein
- 25g Tapioca flour
- Heaped teaspoon of miso paste
- 100g spinach (cooked or frozen)
- Big splash sunflower oil
- Big pinch of salt

*Use small amount of hot water to dissolve the miso first, and to thaw the spinach if using frozen.

Adapted smoothie recipes

Scott later adapted that first set of recipes. He needed thinner liquids to go down his throat easily. He had also learned more about flavours, what he enjoyed most and what seemed to work best. He omitted the jar of oat flour which wasn't getting used much. He also removed salt from the recipes as his paracetamol was providing sufficient sodium.

These are updated recipes because I need thinner consistency now for my throat. I've found a few new ingredients and made some improved recipes. Always add water until the jug is slightly above the max fill line before final whizzing to ensure easy swallowing.

Basically, reduce the amount of powdered stuff to make a thinner consistency. Sunflower oil helps reduce separation, but some stirring may still be needed. Aim for a consistency of milk or just slightly thicker. I need to drink this and have most of it gravity feed its way down. Anything that comes out thick or gloopy will need watering down.

Basic bog standard (200 calories)

- 50g Huel

Basic fruit (300-350 calories)

- 25g Muel
- 25g Pea protein
- Handful of any fruit, jam or marmalade
- Big glug of sunflower oil (15ml)

Creamy cashew (750 calories)

- 75g Cashews whizzed to cream with water
- 20g Pea protein
- 20g Rice flour
- Glug of sunflower oil (10ml)

Banana peanut butter (625 calories)

- Banana
- 75g Peanut butter
- 25g Pea protein
- Small glug sunflower oil

Banana, cashew, coconut (880 calories)

- 50g cashews whizzed to cream
- Banana
- 25g Pea protein
- 100ml Coconut milk (warmed and stirred)
- 200ml Oat milk
- Big glug sunflower oil (15ml)

Sorbet shake (450 calories)

- 20g Huel
- 10g Pea protein
- 100g Sorbet
- Splash of sunflower oil (5ml)

Extended milkshake (300)

- 250ml Whole Moo milkshake
- 200ml Oat milk

*Optional chocolate oat milk adds 50 cal

Chocolate banana (550 calories)

- Banana
- 300ml Chocolate oat milk
- 25g Muel/Huel
- 25g Protein powder
- Glug of sunflower oil

Scott continued to enjoy the local milkshakes which supplied 400 calories per bottle in their many flavours.

Postscript

Sadly Scott's cancer returned a third time in 2023 and he was told there were no further treatment options. He lived for a further 18 months. For the first seven months or so of that time he was still eating his own food using the recipes above. In fact, I'm sure one of the reasons he survived much longer than most of the doctors thought he would was his attention to nutrition.

In the later stages his throat started leaking liquids(!) and he had to revert to being tube fed through his stomach – usually litre containers of his hated industrial milk goo, pumped in overnight. He did contemplate filling empty goo containers with his own mixtures but when you're dependent purely on the plastic tubing into your stomach the consequences of blockages were too awful to contemplate.

There was thus another major readjustment to food and nutrition that he had to cope with. He didn't document that. There wasn't much to it - he knew how vital it was to keep everything hygienic and that's what he focused on. He did buck the system from time to time by injecting an occasional beer or IrnBru into his feeding tube – he wouldn't have been Scott if he hadn't.

