



The Bittered Lifest



Bulletproof coffee might make you smarter, thinner, and more energetic. And it might make Dave Asprey rich

By Gordy Megroz

Photographs by Michael Friberg

Dave Asprey is following his usual morning routine: drinking coffee and doing drugs. It's a Tuesday in March, and Asprey, who is 6 feet 4, with graying brown hair and a stubbly beard, is in his office in the countryside town of Cobble Hill, B.C., 45 minutes north of Victoria. His children play in the house just a few steps away. He reaches into a large armoire full of bottles, carefully gathers about 20 pills, and washes them down with a gulp of water. Then he takes a sip of coffee. The milky brown concoction sloshes in his clear plastic mug like a pint of Guinness.

Asprey, 42, is a self-described biohacker—somebody who uses science and technology to make his or her body function better and more efficiently. There are about 100,000 biohackers worldwide, Asprey estimates, and among them, he's a celebrity. His website, bulletproofexec.com, drew 6 million unique visitors last year. Almost 50,000 people follow him on Twitter, and he has an additional 140,000 fans on Facebook. Since 2009 he's posted blog entries and podcasts about things such as orange-tinted glasses, which he says block out blue-spectrum light, allowing us to sleep so well that we need only six hours or less, and the minimum number of days a man should wait between orgasms, a protocol Asprey found in an ancient Taoist text. (Age minus 7, divided by 4.) But of all his out-there health claims, it's the coffee he's drinking—blended with butter made with milk from grass-fed cows and a medium-chain triglyceride (MCT) oil derived from coconut oil—that's making Asprey most famous.

He calls the mixture Bulletproof coffee. Drink it, the name implies, and you'll feel invincible. "Fats and caffeine help stimulate the brain," Asprey says in his office, taking another sip. The coffee, along with the drug cocktail he's just downed, which includes vitamins K and C as well as aniracetam, a pharmaceutical designed to improve brain function, is intended to provide hours of enlightenment. "There's a sense of cognitive ease, where everything you want to say is at the tip of your tongue," he says. "It's like getting a new computer—you never want to go back to the old one."

A former technology executive, Asprey has spent 15 years experimenting with his diet, sleep, and exercise. He's paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for various medical tests, from brain scans to genome sequencing, and reached some pretty radical conclusions. He's completely dismantled the food pyramid—the 1992 chart that advised people to eat a carbohydrate-rich diet and very few fats—and argues that the proper diet should consist of as much as 70 percent fat. It's similar to the paleo diet, the regimen that forbids any food not →

available to prehistoric man, with some modifications, like allowing white rice. “Your hormones are made of saturated fat, your brain is made of fat, and the membrane of every cell in your body is made of fat,” Asprey says. “When you go on a low-fat diet, you limit the performance of so many key systems in your body that it’s no wonder you have cravings and feel tired.”

On May 15, Asprey plans to open the first Bulletproof cafe and coffee shop, in Santa Monica, Calif., where he’ll serve the coffee along with other fatty foods. He’s also expanded the Bulletproof brand to include supplements, such as his own blend of MCT oil; collagen protein, which he says is important for “counteracting the degenerative effects of aging”; and Unfair Advantage, plastic vials of pyrroloquinoline quinone, a co-enzyme thought to improve mitochondrial function. In December he published a book, *The Bulletproof Diet*, in which he claims that people who follow his high-fat diet can lose a pound a day. His ultimate goal: to someday sell Bulletproof coffee on a Starbucks-like scale.

Asprey hands me a cup, and I take a sip. “Drinkable?” he asks. It’s actually quite good. It’s creamy and leaves a palate-pleasing oil slick on my tongue and lips. “Drinking Bulletproof and taking smart drugs in the morning is epic,” he says. “There’s no better way to start the day.”

At its core, Bulletproof is an e-commerce coffee and supplement retailer, and it’s Asprey’s story of biological redemption that moves product. He travels the globe spreading the Bulletproof gospel and serving up coffee at events as diverse as the CrossFit Games in Carson, Calif., and the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

He also gets the word out on *Bulletproof Radio*, a biohacking podcast downloaded 10.5 million times in 2014. On one of the days I visit Asprey, he’s recording with Maximilian Gotzler, who’s trying to start a biohacking podcast in Germany. Asprey’s desk stands in front of a kitchenette filled with Bulletproof coffee apparatuses—a kettle, a French press, and a blender—and fixings. On top of the refrigerator is an early 1900s photo of a man firing a pistol at another man at close range. The man being shot at wears a bulletproof vest.

“I used to weigh 300 pounds,” Asprey tells Gotzler. “I worked out six days a week, and I cut my calories to around 1,800 calories per day for almost two years. And I was still fat. I’m eating salads and my friends

are eating onion rings, and they’re still thin. I said, ‘This isn’t working.’”

At the same time, Asprey’s career was exploding. He’d helped found one of the first global cloud-computing companies, Exodus Communications, in Santa Clara, Calif., in 1998. “But I was getting really bad brain fog,” he says. “My energy levels were really bad. And I was a jerk.”

“I can’t imagine you being a jerk,” Gotzler says.

“It’s true,” Asprey replies. “I was a jerk.”

After he made a nasty comment to one of his mentors, Asprey decided it was time to make some changes. In 2005 a company he was working for called Speedera Networks was acquired, and Asprey walked away with \$6 million. He poured some of

that money into tests and medical consulting and settled on a combination of “smart” drugs, a high-saturated-fat diet, and a host of vitamins and supplements.

By 2009, Asprey was eating up to 4,500 calories a day, mostly in the form of grass-fed meat, butter, fish, and coconut oil. He eliminated “Kryptonite foods” like fruit and poultry, which he claims cause inflammation and spikes in insulin levels and contribute to weight gain. He lost so many pounds that for the first time in his life, he had six-pack abs.

That diet included buttery coffee. In 2004, Asprey had traveled to Nepal and Tibet to trek the Himalayas. “I felt like crap from the altitude,” he says. “Then I tried yak-butter tea.” Asprey says the



Asprey inside his sensory deprivation tank, where he floats in salt water

popular local drink transformed him, making him feel almost superhuman. “I know it was the tea. And I couldn’t stop drinking it.” When he returned to the U.S., he tried to reproduce what he’d been served. Nothing worked. “It tasted like crap,” he says. He shifted to experimenting with coffee, which he’d long since given up because it made him feel sick. Doing some research, he wondered if that was because he’d been drinking poor-quality brews. “Most coffee contains mold,” he says. “And mold is toxic.” Asprey found some low-mold beans from Guatemala and blended them with the coconut oil and grass-fed butter, which is higher in omega-3 fatty acid than regular butter or cream. It was delicious. Bulletproof coffee was born. Asprey envisioned the beverage as a 450-calorie breakfast alternative that would suppress hunger and provide mental clarity.

In December 2010, while working as vice president for cloud security at Trend Micro in Pasadena, Calif., he posted the recipe and what he said were the brew’s health benefits on his website. It got little attention. In December 2011 he began selling low-mold beans on the site. Again, there was limited interest. He spoke on a “Hack Your Brain” panel at the South by Southwest technology festival in 2012. Asprey would work at Trend Micro during the day and write blog posts at night. He says his sleep-hacking techniques let him survive on five hours of shut-eye a night for two years. He can’t say exactly when, but at some point, his fatty coffee jumped from a niche interest of the tech scene to the latest Hollywood superfood.

“It sounded odd,” says Rick Rubin, the co-founder of Def Jam Records, “but when I tasted it, I really liked it. And it has enough calories to keep me satisfied for hours.” Actor Jeremy Piven, surfer Laird Hamilton, and a few members of the Los Angeles Lakers talked up the beverage. Actor Brandon Routh, best known for playing Superman, says it improves his memory and mood. “It makes for better working relationships among cast and crew,” he says. On *The Tonight Show*, Jimmy Fallon gushed about Bulletproof coffee with actress Shailene Woodley. “It will change your life,” she said. (“I gained 55 pounds,” Fallon joked.)

In 2013, with the word-of-mouth building, Asprey left his job to run Bulletproof full time. He says that sales of coffee, supplements, and his various gear grew a little more than 100 percent last year—although he won’t say to what total—that he’s raised \$2 million from angel investors, and that the company now has more than 20 employees. “Every one of the celebrities who has publicly endorsed it found out about it from someone besides me, usually another celebrity who felt the cognitive

and performance benefits,” Asprey says. “High-performance people spend time with other high-performance people, and we talk about what works with each other.”

Not many doctors are on board with Asprey’s ideas about nutrition. “It sounds like another fad diet,” says Dr. Walter Willet, chairman of the department of nutrition at Harvard Medical School. “It’s low in refined sugars and carbs, and that’s good. Studies have shown that coffee is good for you, too. But loading up with butter and red meat is not a good idea. That raises the bad form of cholesterol.”

Asprey argues otherwise. In his book, he cites a 2014 study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* that said saturated fat doesn’t appear to be associated with coronary disease risk. But he’s up against the medical establishment. “That

“The thing is, we’re both trying to help people. But one of us is dangerously wrong”

study has been shredded,” says Christopher Gardner, a professor and diet expert at the Stanford University School of Medicine. “The analysis failed to explain what else was different about the diets of the high-saturated-fat consumers.” Gardner also points out that just because a high-fat diet worked for Asprey doesn’t mean it will work for others. “If I gave this diet to 100 people and tested their weight, blood-glucose levels, and LDL cholesterol, some would benefit, some would be neutral, and some would get worse,” he says.

Although he has no medical training, Asprey likes to argue with doctors. In 2011 he took to his blog and said a carbohydrate-heavy diet promoted by Dr. Dean Ornish had helped kill Steve Jobs, whom Asprey suspected of following the regimen. Ornish commented on the post, telling Asprey he was being unfair. (Ornish says he advised Jobs to have surgery, but Jobs insisted on trying just the diet first.) “The thing is, we’re both trying to help people,” Asprey says. “But one of us is dangerously wrong.”

Asprey gives his kids, a 7-year-old girl and a 5-year-old boy, half a shot of espresso

with butter and MCT oil each morning. “Kids’ brains are developing, and the fat helps their cells grow,” he says. “The amount of caffeine they’re drinking is negligible. It’s mostly a vehicle for getting fat into them first thing in the morning.”

For dinner one night in March, Asprey prepares a typical Bulletproof meal for his clan. He blanches cauliflower and puts it in a blender with a giant glob of butter. Then he smears pork fat on hunks of grass-fed lamb, raised on a farm nearby. When the lamb comes out of the oven, I cut in and take a bite. It’s moist and salty, and I can’t help but crave more. Foods like this will be available at the coffee shop, which will serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Most visits will be expensive outings: A 12-ounce bag of Bulletproof coffee sells for \$18.95, more than twice the price of a bag of Starbucks. A small cup will cost \$4.25. “Our coffee goes through extensive lab testing to make sure it doesn’t contain toxins,” Asprey says. “You’re paying for quality—something that won’t make you feel bad.”

Nutrition experts basically dismiss that idea. Yes, coffee can contain mold, but that mold isn’t likely to produce mycotoxins at a dangerous level. That said, Asprey is selling quality coffee. Even if molds in coffee don’t have a huge effect on health, they do affect taste. “They make coffee bitter,” says Joe DeRupo, a spokesman for the National Coffee Association. “And he uses a reputable roaster out of Portland, Oregon,” says Spencer Turer, vice president of Coffee Analysts, a quality-control group. “The coffee is good.”

The cafe will be equipped with circadian-rhythm-friendly lighting, so customers who hang out for long stretches will feel more awake during the day and sleep better at night; electrically grounded chairs and tables, intended to dissipate inflammatory static charge; and vibration platforms—square, vibrating plates people can stand on to “stimulate lymphatic flow and raise energy levels.” The first shop is strategically placed in Santa Monica, Asprey says, because “Hollywood loves us.” He’s studying other markets for expansion. “I just want to get them in the door and have them try it. If they feel better, then maybe they’ll want to try more.”

In his kitchen, I ask Asprey if he’s at all worried that telling people to eat so much fat will hurt them in the long run. “Not in the slightest,” he says, as he blends broccoli, olives, and walnuts into a pesto-like dish. “When I first started trying it, I was concerned. I was, like, all of the data I have says that this butter diet should be safe, and I have years of my own bloodwork, so I’m gonna do this for a while and track all this stuff. And if I start to die, I’ll know it’s not working. But instead I got healthier.” **E**