THE CONVERSATION

What Happens to Your Gut if You Eat the $2,000 New York Pizza Topped With Gold?

A restaurant in the New York financial district is offering customers a pizza priced at US$2,000 (£1,623). It is topped with caviar, stilton cheese and gold leaf, with each bite costing around US$50.

New York is usually the kind of place that sets trends, but pizzerias elsewhere have actually been making pizzas sparkle for a while. A takeaway pizza chain in London started offering £500 pizzas a year ago, this time with added lobster, caviar and truffle oil; while a Glasgow restaurant attracted attention by selling a gold leaf pizza on eBay.

Gold on food goes back a good deal further than that, however. The renowned Italian chef, Gualtiero Marchesi, has been topping his signature dish, risotto alla milanese, with a single leaf of gold for decades. And that too is recent when you reflect that the kitchens of the wealthy were sprinkling the precious metal on feast cuisine during medieval times.

There is a medieval liqueur still consumed today with gold flakes in it known as Goldwasser. Gold leaf is also used on chocolates and even has an E number (E175). Whatever else has changed over the years, swallowing gold has always been considered the highest form of decadence. But what happens when we put gold into the body? And are there any other metals we'd be better off shaving on to pizzas instead?
Gold is an inert metal and is therefore not degraded by the acid in our stomachs. It will travel the length of the intestinal system unchanged, passing out in your poo. Depending on the sewage treatment system, it will eventually be returned to the land or washed out to sea ready to be recycled again. It casts panning for gold in an entirely new light.

Other metals are generally not used for ostentatious displays of edible wealth, but one exception is silver. Silver can be beaten into a leaf similar to gold and is also approved for use as an additive (E174) – so long as it is pure and in its non-ionic form, which is the one that can't be absorbed by the body.