

Fact or fiction? Science or gastronomy?  
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*A well-known French scientist reminds us not to believe everything we're told.*

The Twitter feed is the best. Etienne Klein, is the highly regarded director of research at France's Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) and popular radio show producer, so when he posted an image of Proxima Centauri taken using the new James Webb telescope mounted in outer space, the Astro-physical world was in raptures. Proxima Centauri is the nearest star to our sun and a mere 4 light years from our sun, give or take a couple of trillion kilometres.

“Have I understood correctly, M. Klein, that the James Webb is powerful enough to analyse light coming through the atmosphere of rocky planets orbiting stars light years away? Its like observing a grain of sand mounted on a lighthouse in Los Angeles?”

“Light from the first objects of the universe, gravitational waves from the first “monsters” of the expanding universe?”

“In fact, the telescope is seven times more powerful than the Hubble, isn't it? And it will be interesting to see the photos - images - of exoplanets with characteristics similar to our own blue planet.”

“It will see a long way, certainly! How many times more powerful is the resolution? I know that the images are extracted by computers, but will it really see if planets are like our own?”

And so on.

The image is so clear, you can see the unevenness in its surface and glean the convection currents coursing through and from it. Nothing remotely, excuse the pun, like it has been possible or even imaginable until now. You can understand the excitement. You don't have to be an astrophysicist to go: Wow!



Well, from such a highly-regarded scientist, its tempting not to question anything he says. But that's his point: you should question everything, no matter who says it. And to drive that point home, Dr Klein reveals that the celestial image, so convincing as nearest star to our sun, is in fact, erm, a slice of Chorizo. Heat coursing through it indeed.

He makes a good point, but so do his critics, who point out that, in a world where so many lies are being spread - and believed, its not helpful when a respected scientist throws a sausage into the mix, risking damage not just to his own reputation, but to the reputation of all scientists, and of science itself. Dr Klein accepted the criticism and apologised before posting a - genuine - image of a nearby cart-wheel galaxy.

But the Wow! Factor was missing.

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