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Culinary Nutrition News: Eating Like Our Ancestors

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When a customer walks into your restaurant, you have no idea what they will or will not eat, or even the reasoning behind their food choices, but it is your job to satisfy their needs. The fact of the matter is people's diets are as diverse as the human population itself, and new eating trends are always emerging. Some people choose not to eat red meat, others avoid dairy and still others shun the cooking process all together. Many factors influence what people eat, such as where they live, what is available and religious or ethical beliefs. More recently, we have begun to see history influence today's diets. It seems the new way of eating is actually the old way, reinvented with the frenzy around diets such as Mediterranean and Paleolithic, and the raw-foods movement.

Perhaps it is our basic desire to connect with our roots, but we are not just talking about eating local like our parents and grandparents did out of necessity. For some, we are talking about eating like our knuckle-dragging ancestors. It is true that we should look to the past when trying to succeed in the future, and food is no exception. While we are not our ancestors, and our environments have changed drastically, there is still a lot that can be learned and similarities that can be gathered among the varied diets of those who lived before us. This is not to say any one of these diets holds the key to optimal health today, but it is worth a glance.

Considering the typical American, or Western, diet has fallen under a great deal of scrutiny due to high incidences of obesity and chronic disease, maybe it is time to look to our past for some insight into how to better the future.

Raw-foods diet

What is it?

The raw-foods movement has been around for more than 30 years and has since manifested into a diet excluding animal products and heat-processed grains, and upholding a strict diet of nuts, seeds, sprouted grains, fruits and vegetables, all of which have not been heated past 118°F (this temperature varies among those in the raw-foods community). Most people who follow the raw-foods diet are vegans; however, others may include raw meat, fish/shellfish, eggs and dairy (made from raw milk).

Why?

At the core of the raw-foods movement is the belief that cooking foods creates tissue-damaging toxins and destroys the enzymes that help us digest food and absorb nutrients. This theory also draws from the idea that over time, a lack of enzymes from food is thought to lead to digestive problems, nutrient deficiency, accelerated aging and weight gain. Therefore, proponents of the raw-foods movement believe that consuming uncooked foods aids in weight loss, boosts energy and prevents disease.



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Potential benefits

The health benefits seen from a raw-foods diet can be attributed to its plant-foods foundation. Plant-based diets have been linked to lower the risk of obesity and other chronic diseases. Many experts claim that the benefits seen by this diet (i.e. reduced cholesterol and weight control) can be easily achieved by eating more vegetables, fruits and whole grains, limiting foods high in saturated and trans fats, and using portion control.

Special considerations

Raw foods are not necessarily more nutritious than cooked foods. While cooking can destroy some nutrients, it can make others (like lycopene in tomatoes) more absorbable. Since enzymes are proteins and proteins breakdown when exposed to heat, heating food above 118°F does inactivate plant enzymes. However, those enzymes are denatured when they reach our stomachs due to stomach acids. The bottom line is that our digestive systems have their own enzymes and are continuously

producing them; therefore, they do not need to be obtained from our diets. While a study in *Archives of Internal Medicine* reported that raw-foods-diet followers had significantly lower body mass indices than people who consumed a typical American diet, it also revealed those followers to have lower bone densities, a risk factor for osteoporosis. Strict adherence to a raw-foods diet may cause one to become deficient in a variety of nutrients, including vitamin B-12, vitamin D, calcium, omega-3s, iron and protein.

Mediterranean diet

What is it?

In the 1960s, researcher Ancel Keys organized a study to gather data on diet and disease patterns around the world. The "Seven Countries Study" reported one of the lowest rates of heart disease and some of the longest lifespans were found in the people of Crete, an island in the Mediterranean. Later studies also found that Cretans had much lower rates of cancer and type 2 diabetes. Unlike the ever-evolving Western diet, Cretans have maintained virtually the same eating patterns as that of their early ancestors. This eating pattern was eventually deemed the "Mediterranean diet," based on the age-old dietary traditions of Crete, Greece and southern Italy. The general diet principles include high consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fish, beans, olives, olive oil, nuts and seeds, moderate intake of wine, lean meats and fish, as well as low intake of red meat and processed foods.

Why?

Studies have continued to show that people following a Mediterranean-style eating program tend to live longer and have lower rates of heart disease and some cancers, when compared with other groups following conventional eating plans.

Potential benefits

The Mediterranean diet is comparable to the American Heart Association's suggested diet, which means it promotes heart health. Although the Mediterranean diet contains a large percentage of fat, most of it is in

the form of monounsaturated fat, which does not raise cholesterol levels and, in turn, helps reduce the risk of heart disease. Other possible benefits of following a Mediterranean-style diet include improved weight loss, better control of blood glucose levels, reduced risk of depression, as well as reduced levels of inflammation, a risk factor for heart attack, stroke and Alzheimer's disease.

Special considerations

Increased physical activity and enjoying meals with a social support system are also part of the Mediterranean lifestyle. Considering the American lifestyle has become increasingly sedentary, with meals on-the-go, it is important to engage in regular physical activity as well as sociable, sit-down dining experiences in order to reap any and all possible benefits of this type of eating pattern.

Paleo diet

What is it?

The Paleo diet, also called the "caveman diet," was first popularized by Walter L. Voegtlin, a gastroenterologist whose book *The Stone Age Diet: Based on In-depth Studies of Human Ecology and the Diet of Man* was published in 1975. The diet is based on our nomadic, hunter/gatherer ancestors some 40,000 years ago, before the dawn of agriculture. Essentially a low-carb diet, the Paleo diet consists of wild game, vegetables, fruits, roots and nuts, and excludes grains, dairy and legumes, which are considered late arrivals, appearing about 12,000 years ago.

Why?

At the forefront of the Paleo diet is the belief that modern human genetics has not changed much since the advent of agriculture, and that the optimum diet for modern man is still that of the hunter/gatherer. Supporters of the Paleo diet believe that an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables, along with heavy helpings of lean, wild meats, fish and seafood will improve symptoms of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.



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Potential benefits

The Paleo diet is free of processed foods, refined sugar and added salt. As seen in the previous diets, there is an emphasis on fresh produce and lots of it. The diet also stresses omega-3 rich fish and nuts.

Special considerations

The reality is that our environment is much different than that of our primal ancestors. The meat they ate was generally quite lean and more unsaturated than fat found in meats nowadays. Also, the average human life expectancy was about 20 years, and the life span extended to only about 40 years throughout most of the Stone Age. Due to the high energy demands of Stone Age survival, our Paleolithic ancestors probably took in and burned 4,000 or more calories a day. Furthermore, the very foods excluded in the Paleo diet are considered essential for good health today. Whole grains, low and nonfat dairy, and beans are all inexpensive sources of vital nutrients. Dairy is a great source of calcium and vitamin D, and people who consume it tend to have better bone density and are more likely to maintain a normal weight. Beans are a cheap source of protein and are packed with nutrients such as fiber and grains, and they are a great source of folate, fiber and energy.

You are what you eat

The relationship between man and food is supposed to be a symbiotic one of giving and taking, as well as one of gradual adaptation,

creating tastier food and healthier beings. Take milk for instance. As suggested in the Paleo diet, humans have not always been able to digest milk. In fact, it made people sick until about 5,000 years ago when animal herders in Europe evolved the ability to digest it as adults. Before that, the gene that produced the enzyme lactase switched off in humans shortly after weaning. Since people possessing the new mutation had access to a new, nutritious food, they were able to have more children than those who lacked it. This unique development proved to be advantageous to both milk drinkers and cows, whose numbers, habitat and health greatly improved.

Who really knows if a well-balanced, raw-foods diet, a Mediterranean diet or Paleo diet is the best choice for health. Food is complex, and with all the enzymes and chemical compounds in any given food, it has always been difficult to single out specific nutrients and other components of food that may harm or benefit our health. Pair the complexities of food with the intricacies of our own bodies and well, it's hard to say what the best and worst diet is ultimately for any of us. This is why the nutrition pillars have always been balance, moderation and variety. The one parallel we can draw from these diets of our past is that they all utilized the fresh resources around them. They ate what was available. How we apply lessons from the past to our current dietary practices will decide what affects our future health and the health of our environment.

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About the American Culinary Federation and the Chef & Child Foundation



The American Culinary Federation, Inc., established in 1929, is the premier professional organization for culinarians in North America. With more than 20,000 members in 225 chapters nationwide, ACF is the culinary leader in offering educational resources, training, apprenticeship and accreditation. In addition, ACF operates the most comprehensive certification program for chefs in the United States. ACF is home to ACF Culinary Team USA, the official representative for the United States in major international culinary competitions, and to the Chef & Child Foundation, founded in 1989 to promote proper nutrition in children and to combat childhood obesity. For more information, visit www.acfchefs.org.

About Clemson University



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