



Volume 3

Article 1

July 2016

Eating Healthfully

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Recommended Citation

Zimmerman, Ben G. (2016) "Eating Healthfully," *Journal of Opinions, Ideas, & Essays*: Vol. 3 , Article 1.

Available at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/joie/vol3/iss1/1>

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Eating Healthfully

Abstract

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Keywords

nutrition diet

EATING HEALTHFULLY

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Abstract

Ideas and/or diets for either normal weight maintenance or to lose weight are presented. Works by Michael Pollan, Mark Bittman, and Dr. Robert Atkins are mainly considered. Pollan describes and critiques the method of meat production by corn feeding of cattle in feedlots which has replaced meat produced from grass grazing animals. He lists criteria to use for choosing healthy food and why he became a vegetarian. His do's and don'ts sum up some of his thinking. A dietary scheme of vegan before 6 PM and more typical food afterwards is how Bittman views a plan for both healthy eating and weight reduction. Samples of his recipes for both the vegan and afterward phases are outlined. Dr. Atkins's sugar-restricted diet reported back in the late 1940s and early 1950s was extremely popular. He built a nutritional institute which early on made him a millionaire, but eventually went bankrupt. Bad publicity concerning his death and the realization that abolishing dietary sugar was unhealthful probably were responsible for his downfall. His diet is effective in causing significant weight loss, but in long term is considered unsound. My own reason for seeking a reduction in abdominal fat led to my limiting sugar for about one year. Indeed weight loss was achieved, but not noticeably in the abdominal area. Lastly, a husband and wife, the Bergs of LITTLE BEND HERITAGE FARM located in Minnesota, are producing heritage foods and listed the recipe for a very good one. Their Bean and Ham soup appealed to me. As it was easy to make with excellent results, I included the recipe here.

Introduction

I must admit that nutrition is not my field; however, after I started reading about healthful eating I decided, as a pharmacologist, I might be able to contribute something about this very interesting subject. Having done research on the mechanism of drug action for many years I should be able to add to what is written

about healthful food with some additional perspective.

The food we eat comprises a popular subject that we hear about in many ways. The media, including newspapers, TV, the internet and just about any other means by which we communicate contribute to this interesting subject. Not only is food selection important for our pleasure, satisfaction, and well-being, but eating unhealthful food can lead to serious medical conditions. My coverage of the latter will only relate to one very important consequence of poor diet, i.e. obesity, and will include factors that cause obesity. Because there is a direct relationship between obesity and pathological cardiovascular and hormonal changes, this important relationship will be briefly discussed below.

There are many scientists, journalists, and lay people that contribute scientific publications, books on diets, and newspaper articles covering numerous subjects including what food we eat and factors leading to obesity. In my readings it became apparent that most emphasis is placed on healthful diets as a means of combating overweight and obesity. Little is said about diets for simply maintaining a normal weight. We can assume that most people eat a healthful diet just for that purpose.

My report, because of the enormity of what has been and continues to be published, is limited to a few books and papers by three popular authors that I found of interest, Michael Pollan, Mark Bittman, and Dr. Robert C. Atkins.

Michael Pollan

Pollan is a Professor at the U Berkley, CA and a popular journalist who has contributed much excellent writing including nine books, numerous newspaper articles and thinking to educate the public about food, its history and nutritional aspects, both good and bad, concerning food production. Because I found his work the most interesting and thorough both in detail and scientifically, Pollan's contributions are stressed in my write-up.

In his book, *Omnivore's Dilemma* he has first gone to great lengths to decide the best diet for himself and others. He followed the food chain, particularly for corn, from the farm field where grown, to the supermarket and eventually to a fast food meal. Pollan states that "we played a crucial supporting role in corn's rise to world domination." The amazing versatility of corn as a "ready to eat vegetable, storable grain, source of fiber", and the fact it can be made into a heating fuel, beer or whiskey accounts for why it has had such a powerful political influence. Pollan has a way with words, e.g. he feels that corn has succeeded in "domesticating us" rather than we domesticating it.

I don't dwell on how and why corn became the major source of food for livestock in the US, other than to point out that grazing on prairie grass gave way

to fewer larger farms for our meat production because of the adaptability of corn and the efficiency of its use in this endeavor. Feedlots upon which cattle are now fed a slurry of ground corn with additives of hormones, vitamins and antibiotics has replaced cow's normal grass diet obtained while grazing in a pasture. The current industrial food system, producing in rotation corn and soybeans, is responsible for two thirds of all processed foods we eat. The remarkable massive corn and soybean production of this system directed for meat production not only supersedes the method of meat production up until the 1970s, but has also resulted in far more corn for meat, as well as other products, than before. Needless to say, the increase in profit from this system is enormous.

The resulting over-produced corn, referred to as commodity corn, is shipped to and handled by large corporations such as Cargill in Minnesota and ADM (Archer Daniels Midland) in Texas. These two alone buy and dispense near a third of all the corn grown in the US. ADM has more than 33,000 workers and net sales for 2014 was \$81.2 billion. These companies sell this huge amount of commodity corn mainly for meat production; however, the other uses found for the commodity corn include a large supply of high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS).

Between the late 1960s and 70s the process was developed for converting the sugar, glucose, extracted from corn to fructose. Thus, a large portion of the sugar available from the corn slurry diet for livestock ends up as fructose, which is actually sweeter than glucose. Pollan makes the comment that the "human desire for sweetness surpasses even our desire for intoxication."

The phenomenon of having a cow in a feedlot eat and digest corn turning it into meat takes a great effort because cows normally eat pasture-grown grass. A characteristic of the meat generated in cows fed corn is the marbling, increased fat content, of the meat. Marbling produces a more favorable product. The higher fat content of beef from these animals is greater than meat from grass fed cows. It is questionable, however, whether ingestion of this marbled steak is healthful.

The large amount of HFCS derived from commodity corn has found commercial use as a sweetener in many sugar-added products, particularly sodas, snacks and many other breakfast and dinner foods. As aptly put by Pollan, HFCS "has insinuated itself in every corner of the pantry."

The prevalence of sweets favored by children is especially a problem. Because of the increase in juvenile obesity and type 2 diabetes seen during the past several decades, HFCS has been implicated in several serious health issues. Until recently nothing was being done to solve the problem of juvenile obesity and it still gets little attention from manufacturers using HFCS as an ingredient in their products. Nevertheless, we do see the statement on food labels, contains no HFCS alerting consumers that this sweetener has been deleted, at least in some cases.

The relationship between the incidence of type 2 diabetes and obesity is probably the thinking for substituting HFCS with artificial sweeteners such as aspartame. This sugar substitute appears in many foods that previously contained HFCS. Choices of eating food with such a glucose substitute as aspartame or just eating naturally-sweet fruits are the best approaches to help avoiding type 2 diabetes.

A particular vexing problem is the high sugar content of carbonated drinks, mainly sodas. Considering the high percentage of sugar in sodas and the teenage habit of high daily soda drinking, a campaign began to wean kids away from this habit. As this campaign proved effective and soda sales began to fall, new approaches were instituted. The large beverage companies began to introduce strategies to protect their bottom-line profits. Bottled water advertising and sales started to pick up when soda consumption waned. Though the campaign proved successful, frequent drinking of soda beverages persists, though smaller bottles and newly named drinks with less sugar have appeared.

Our attraction to sweets is certainly not limited to children, and Pollan has discussed “supersizing” in the *Omnivore’s Dilemma*. The technique of increasing the size of soda and popcorn containers in movie theaters was conceived of by a clever food guru, David Wallerstein. Wallerstein later suggested to McDonalds to stimulate sales by increasing the size of their French fry containers. After much discussion to convince Mr. Kroc, he relented and larger fry packages and the Big Mac were born. Supersizing was more palatable for customers because they could avoid appearing like gluttons who required seconds. It can be argued whether it is HFCS present in fries and popcorn instead of just the total amount of calories ingested being the culprit of supersizing.

Type 2 diabetes, originally known as adult onset diabetes, is a condition not restricted to adults, but results in obesity in both the young and old. Its cause, mainly from a very high intake of sugars, is complex, but weight gain and usually obesity is the result. Often serious cardiovascular conditions of high blood pressure, strokes, and cardiac failure are brought about. HFCS can also lead to a fatty liver causing metabolic complications, known as the Metabolic Syndrome.

In reading Pollan there are other problems he points out that were new to me. For instance, the cause of the deadly Mad Cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) isn’t completely understood, but *Omnivore’s Dilemma* contains the fact that feeding meat from one cow to another isn’t just an economical way of providing protein, but can also result in mad cow disease. This is deadly to humans.

Vegetarianism is a well-known means of avoiding meat eating, believed by many to be a healthy practice. Pollan has spent much time and effort not only tracing the entire industrial process of the agribusiness use of corn and soybeans

for meat production, but thinking too of animal suffering that no doubt goes along with cattle forced to function and eating in an abnormal environment. Despite Pollan's own meat-eating preference, he made the difficult choice of becoming a vegetarian. Initially he believed this would be temporary; however, he remains a fervent advocate of eating "plants" and not meat.

In addition, he and many other nutritionists strongly advocate avoiding processed foods. Not being acquainted with what these added substances are surely prevents the public understanding their functional role. As pointed out by these well informed individuals, close attention should be paid to the content of additives in foods we eat. Fresh vegetables avoid the additives shown on the labels of packaged food. Elimination of processed foods being itself healthful, can also help with weight loss.

Summing up Pollan's advice:

1. When available, purchase and use meat from grass-grazing cows. This grade of meat is clearly marked on the package. Though more expensive, this is worthwhile and a good place to start eating healthfully. Aside from feeding corn and soybeans to cows in feedlots which is unhealthy in itself, these cattle are fed in addition to corn, vitamins, antibiotics, and hormones. Antibiotics can enhance development of antibiotic resistant bacterial strains and having vitamins and hormones in their diet is expensive and can also lead to undesirable effects on the cattle.
2. Feeding cows in feedlots is totally unsanitary and cruel.
3. By forcing the need to raise corn and soybeans exclusively, farmers are segregating fields just for those crops and reducing availability for other vegetables. It also has a detrimental environmental effect.
4. Several does and don'ts – Don't eat food that cannot eventually rot and don't eat after you are full. Don't eat food that is meant to be eaten in cars. What he is saying is food with preservatives is unhealthful as is eating too much. Fast foods, most often eaten in a parked or running car, is usually fried and sometimes cooked inadequately to kill harmful bacteria.

Mark Bittman

Mark Bittman is a prolific writer who has covered all aspects of food and related subjects. He has published a number of books and many articles on these subjects. His books have also contributed interesting recipes and various methods of cooking. References to some of his work are included below.

Most recently he published an eating method intended for weight loss in overweight individuals or anyone who wishes to just maintain normal weight,

using a programmed diet, VB6 (vegan before 6). This diet amounts to eating a vegan diet until 6 PM and then afterwards imposing any healthful food he normally eats, but not the vegan diet. Vegans eat a variety of foods, but not anything derived from animals. He is not a dedicated vegan because he feels that to help the eating enjoyment of folks on VB6, he permits possibly snacking between meals. For instance, they might nibble on fruit, a handful of nuts and sometimes roasting last night's left-over veggies. This allows those starting on VB6 to gradually transition to the vegan phase. However, he says this snacking habit will eventually not be necessary since the VB6 diet, with time, becomes so enjoyable itself. To me, straying from the before 6 diet isn't a good idea even if done only occasionally. I would prefer trying to keep the amount of food during the day or evening below the threshold at which the person becomes hungry in order to prevent snacking.

I have included two of Bittman's recipes shown below, just as examples for lunch and dinner. His dinner recipes are meant for the meals after 6 PM so he includes a few with fish and cheese. I've neglected breakfast. Being a cook myself, I judge most of his recipes in the book to be very appealing and imaginative, but more labor intensive than I'd be willing to use routinely.

Recipes

(Bittman lunch)

Chickpea Ratatouille

Ingredients:

1 lb eggplant (smaller are better), peeled if you like, cut into large chunks. 3/4 lb zucchini, large chunks. 1 lb Roma tomatoes, cored and chopped or one 28 oz can, drained. One onion, sliced, five garlic cloves, halved. 1 tsb salt, plus more to taste, black pepper to taste. 4 Tbs olive oil. 3 cups cooked or canned chickpeas, drained. 1 Tbs chopped fresh thyme or rosemary, or 1/2 cup chopped basil or parsley.

1. Heat oven to 425 degrees. Combine all ingredients except oil, chickpeas and herbs in roasting pan. Drizzle with the oil and toss to combine.

2. Transfer to oven and roast, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are lightly browned and tender and some water has released from tomatoes to create a sauce, 30-40 min. Add chickpeas, stir and return to oven until the beans heat through, 5-10 min. Add herbs and stir. Taste, and adjust seasoning, serve hot or at room temperature.

For dinner he permits anything from your own recipes or, as cited in VB6, a variety of flavorful dishes with chicken, fish or pasta as the main ingredient.

(Bittman Dinner)

Baked Ziti with Vegetables and Cheese

Ingredients:

2 tsp salt or to taste. 4 Tbs olive oil. 1 sliced sm onion, 2 lge fennel bulbs (about 1 and 1/2 lbs halved & sliced). 1 Tbs minced garlic. 1 tsp red chile flakes. 1 28 ounce can tomatoes, chopped, with the juice. Black pepper to taste. 8 ounces whole wheat ziti or any other pasta. 4 ounces grated mozzarella cheese. 4 ounces ricotta. 1 cup grated parmesan cheese.

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil and add 1 tsp salt and 1 Tbs oil.

2. Heat the oven to 400 degrees and grease a 9 by 9 in. pan.

3. Put the remaining 3 Tbs oil in a large skillet over medium heat. When hot, add the onion, sprinkle the 1/2 tsp salt, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion is translucent, 3 to 5 min. Add the fennel, garlic, and red chili flakes, and cook until the fennel softens, another 3 to 5 min. Add the tomatoes and remaining 1/2 tsp salt and the pepper and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to a gentle bubble and cook, stirring occasionally, until the sauce thickens slightly, about 5 min.

4. Meanwhile, cook the pasta halfway through, start checking after 3 min. It should be getting tender, but still be quite chalky inside. Drain, reserving about a cup of the cooking water. Toss the pasta with the sauce, mozzarella, and ricotta. Add enough cooking water to make the mixture quite moist, but not soggy.

5. Spoon the mixture into the prepared pan. (You can make the recipe to this point up to a day in advance; cover and refrigerate, then bring it back to room temperature before proceeding). Sprinkle with the parmesan and bake until the top is browned and the sauce has thickened, 20 to 30 min. Let sit for 5 min before serving.

Summing up Bittman's advice

I don't doubt that if one carefully follows VB6, particularly the before 6 PM part, there is a good chance that the individual would obtain some weight reduction. Whether VB6 alone would be as effective as Bittman has confidently maintained, e.g. to reverse obesity, is questionable. Though he does mention the need for some form of exercise, it is apparently not required with his diet. In his broad coverage of writings, not only does he admit he is an avid runner (doing daily runs), but also shows a picture of himself in which it is apparent he is in excellent physical condition. My conclusion when taking everything into account is that exercise would be required for the maximal effectiveness of VB6.

Dr. Robert Atkins

Dr. Atkins, even as a young man, was overweight and decided to do something about it. He conceived of the “Atkins Diet” to provide himself with a means of healthful eating. He felt he could use a low sugar diet reported by A.W. Pennington (1953) at DuPont to treat his own obesity. This started him off in his career as a nutritionist, eventually building an empire devoted to the successful use of a low carbohydrate high fat-protein diet for weight loss. His many articles and books on the subject and the effectiveness of his diet, he exploited to make a highly profitable health care company. It eventually went bankrupt and is now under a new owner. Although there is no denying the effectiveness of his diet in causing weight loss, it also created controversy about its long term effectiveness and possible deleterious effect upon long term use. Avoiding or greatly reducing sugar in food is difficult to achieve considering its widespread presence and our love of sweets. A near absence of sugar in the diet affects the body’s source of quick energy and lack of dietary fiber.

I had a reason for trying the use of a low sugar diet. It occurred to me that possibly the Atkin’s approach of avoiding sugar, but not to the extent of causing excessive hunger, could serve to reduce abdominal fat. I was not overweight, but did have more belt-line fat to my liking. I tried to keep all sugar-laden foods to a minimum, especially bread, cake, cookies, and when I thought of it, pasta. My wife found it humorous that I could treat myself to very small portions of food, especially ones containing sugar.

This rather modified Atkin’s diet lasted about a year and was successful in weight loss of about 10 lbs. But to my disappointment the diet didn’t have the desired effect on my abdominal fat. I don’t think that I decreased any notches in my belts either. Unfortunately, I didn’t measure my belt length before and after the diet. If I were to have been more scientific about it, I might have explored an accurate method of gauging the abdominal or total body fat. Alas, I was not willing to spend time do so, but really just gave the project a subjective look see.

In the course of my continued reading of this massive subject, there always were additional items that captured my interest. I came across a website (www.littlebendheritagefarm.com/) for the Berg’s farm, The Little Bend Heritage Farm and their statement, “You may ask yourself why we call our farm a heritage farm, well one reason is we raise Bourbon Red Heritage turkeys, but the main reason is we practice Heritage living”. You might describe what they do as to take a green approach to living, and their description really appealed to me. One recipe they listed was for a Bean and Ham Soup, which they described as very hearty. The ham they used was usually left-overs from holiday or other meals. I made the soup and followed their recipe closely. It was so good that I included it here and thought others would like to make it.

As a good place to conclude Healthful Eating, I close with the Bergs' recipe as a good example of their heritage or I might say healthful eating and living.

Bean and Ham Soup

Yield: 6 Quarts

Ingredients:

1. 1 pound great Northern beans sorted and rinsed
2. 1 cup chopped onion
3. 1 cup chopped carrots
4. 3 cups chopped ham (cooked)
5. 1 tablespoon chives
6. 1 teaspoon garlic salt
7. 1 teaspoon Greek seasoning
8. 1/2 a tablespoon dried parsley
9. 1/2 a tablespoon dried celery flakes
10. 1 teaspoon dried cilantro
11. 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
12. 2 tablespoons of A-1 sauce
13. 2 cups chicken broth
14. 2 tablespoons liquid smoke

Instructions:

Cook the Northern beans on low until they are semi soft then add the other ingredients and simmer on low until beans are thoroughly cooked. Serve with crackers or bread.

Notes:

This is a quick and easy but very hearty soup to make. We love to make this on the cold winter days and we usually make it after we have cooked a big ham for the holidays. It can be frozen and reheated for later making it a favorite easy to fix meal with our busy schedules.

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