

In Praise of Good Food

"Let your food be medicine; and let medicine be your food." Hippocrates

There is nothing more life-enhancing, health-promoting, satisfying or enjoyable than a meal which has been thoughtfully, carefully and lovingly prepared with wholesome fresh ingredients, skilfully combined.

All the cultures in the world have evolved their own unique cooking styles based on local ingredients and experience handed down over the centuries, and these traditional diets seem to have common ground, which points to what human beings have found to be conducive to the well-being of our species.

We find that in many countries the bulk of the main meal consists of whole grains - millet, rice, bread, corn, barley - complemented with about half that quantity of legumes (lentils, dried beans and dried peas). These two, when taken together in a ratio of approximately 2:1 (depending on the type of legume) supply all eight essential amino acids which the body cannot produce – an inexpensive and ideal form of vegetable protein.

Legumes have been used all over the world for centuries: evidence of lentils has been found in Egyptian tombs from 2000BC, and beans in Mexico from 7000BC. Soya beans are popular in Japan and China, kidney beans in Mexico, Boston baked beans in America, chickpeas in the Middle East and lentils and mung beans in India.

When imaginatively cooked, they make highly nutritious and delicious dishes: such as rajma from India (kidney beans with cloves and cinnamon) or Japanese miso soup (from the soya bean). Research has shown that legumes protect against cancer, and help maintain a healthy heart and clean coronary arteries. (Dietary Atherosclerosis, Study on Deceased Persons; F. Wilcox BMJ)

Traditional diets, in addition to the grains and legumes, would have fresh vegetables in plentiful amounts – less than the grains but more than the legumes – giving the meal vitality and variety. Green, leafy vegetables have always been especially valued, and would be cooked with yellow, red or orange vegetables such as squash, carrots or peppers.

With the main meal, something raw would usually be served: a green salad, grated cucumber, raw onion or sprouted beans.

In the past, meat, fish, fowl and other animal foods often formed a small portion of the diet, around 5 – 10%. In rural England, meat was quite a luxury until 100 years ago or so, for you would not want to kill your cow who gave you milk, or your chickens who gave you eggs – and poaching could be a hanging offence!

Strictly vegetarian diets include something containing vitamin B12 every one or two days. The body needs minute quantities of this vitamin, which is principally obtained from animal foods: milk, eggs, fish and meat - and is manufactured by many bacteria and yeasts. It is present in certain fermented products such as tempe and tofu (from soya beans), yoghurt and some wines.

In the last century, studies were made of cultures which had not been touched by our modern western diet – where people lived long and healthy lives and where diseases such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease were unknown.

In the 1920s Dr Robert McCarrison observed “a total absence of all diseases during the 7 years I spent in the Hunza Valley” (an isolated valley in NE Pakistan). The Hunzas’ diet consisted of wholegrain foods, legumes, fresh fruit and vegetables, dried fruit, goat’s cheese and goat’s butter, and raw foods. Meat and dairy consumption was low.

In the 1930s Dr Weston Price, a dentist, studied the people of the isolated Loetschental valley in Switzerland, where people ate rye bread and fresh milk, and cheese from their goats and cows. These people had “some of the finest physiques in all of Europe”, very low rates of tooth decay (and no doctor, dentist, police or jail!). In the neighbouring valley, however, similar in every way except for a new road bringing in refined flour, processed foods, white sugar, biscuits and jams, not only were dental cavities much more common, but Dr Price also found tuberculosis, birth defects, lower IQ and personality disturbances.

Today, with food availability and affordability our ancestors could only have dreamed of, and with our much-vaunted medical care, it’s a wonder that we have so many more health problems than rural people living simple lives, working their bodies very hard. Our appetites have become so habituated to tantalizing rich and sweet foods that we have lost touch with the body’s natural intelligence to choose what is nourishing and appropriate.

The body has almost miraculous powers of self-cleansing and healing, given the chance – what we need is not more advanced medicines, which increase the body’s toxicity, or technological triumphs and breakthroughs, but a *return* to more health-giving whole foods, and especially to more good cooking!