

## Eat like a peasant, feel like a king

Start with a miso soup, a classically simple Japanese recipe. For an appetizer try a small plate of pasta. On to the main course: grilled salmon with steamed Chinese cabbage on the side. End with a Greek salad, sprinkled with olive oil, and New Zealand kiwi for dessert.

An eclectic menu to be sure. But it could contain some of the world's healthiest dishes. Miso soup, according to rennet Japanese research, may help prevent cancer, as may cabbage. Salmon, olive oil, and the garlic in your pesto can all help fight heart disease. Even the kiwi is rich in fiber, potassium, and, vitamin C. In the last few years nutritionists have been studying such international superfoods =dishes from around the world that may hold the key to healthy eating. They are building on research that began in the '40s and '50s when researchers realized that a country's diet is intimately connected to the health of its people.

Since then, an explosion of medical studies has produced a flood of information on diverse human diets. But the globe-trotting researchers have done more than discover the best features of every country's cuisine. They have also demonstrated broad nutritional principles that apply to people all over the world. And their clearest finding is a sobering one.

In many countries they've found that the healthiest diet is simple and inexpensive, precisely the diet that people abandon as they become rich. Japanese immigrating from high carbohydrate pacific to high-fat America have a higher risk of heart disease the more westernized their diets becomes. The same pattern holds for developing nations that emerge from poverty into prosperity. As a country's food becomes richer, the scourges of poverty (infectious disease and malnutrition) are replaced by the diseases of civilization (arteriosclerosis, certain cancers, obesity).

The simple ideal diet —often called the "peasant diet"— is the traditional cuisine of relatively poor agrarian countries such as Mexico and China. Its usually based on a grain (rice, wheat, corn), fruits and vegetables, small amounts of meat, fish eggs or dairy products and a legume.

The advantages are obvious, low fat and high fiber with most calories coming in the grains and legumes. A low-fat, high-fiber diet is a preventive diet for heart disease, certain cancers, hypertension, adult onset diabetes, obesity, says Dr. Wayne Peters, director of the Lipid Consultation Service at MassachusHs General Hospital.

### Early Diet : Nuts and Plants

According to Peters, We evolved eating a low-fat diet, and that be what our genetic composition is really designed to handle. Studies of one of the world's most primitive diets-and one of the healthiest ones-back him up. In southern Africa's Kalahari Desert, some tribes still eat as early humans did, hunting and gathering.

"Hunting and gathering may not have been such a bad way of life," says Richard Lee, an anthropologist at the University of Toronto who has studied the !Kung tribe since the 1960s. "The main element of the !Kung diet is the mongongo, an abundant nut eaten in large quantities. They routinely collect and eat more than 105 edible plant species. Meat is secondary."

Another student of the !Kung, Steward Truswell, a professor of human nutrition at Australia's University of Sydney, says their eating schedule is really continual "snacking" (the gathering) punctuated by occasional feasts after a successful hunt. They are nutritionally healthy, the only shortfall being fairly low caloric intake.

Few people, though, would choose a !Kung diet—or even a simple peasant diet from western Europe (which is now much less common there). In an affluent society, it takes willpower to keep fat intake down to the recommended maximum: 30% of total calories. (The average American gets more than 40% of his or her calories from fat.) When a country reaches a certain level of affluence, as the U.S. and Japan, grain and beans give way to beef and butter.

In India, for example, many middle-income people are now gaining weight on a rich diet—even though the poor half of the population still can't afford enough to eat As the middle class has become more affluent, they've been able to indulge, and Indian doctors are reportedly seeing more obesity, hypertension, and heart disease. Very

recently, though, Indians have gone for the diets and aerobics classes that are popular among the rest of the world's elite.

If it's just too difficult to stay with a really low-fat "peasant" diet, the alternative is to rehabilitate high-calorie dishes. Cut down on overall fat intake and substitute, in the words of one researcher, "nice fats for nasty fats." Americans have already been following this advice. In the past 20 years, the consumption of "nasty" saturated fats has declined, while we've taken in more of the polyunsaturated fats, such as corn and safflower oils, that can help lower blood cholesterol. This change may help explain the simultaneous 20% to 30% drop in heart disease in the U.S.

## Olive Oil

An even better strategy for changing our fat intake may come from studying diets in the Mediterranean—Spain, Greece, and southern Italy. With some regional variation, people in these cultures eat small amounts of meat and dairy products and get almost all of their fat in the form of olive oil, says physiologist Ancel Keys, professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health and leader in international dietary studies.

Keys has noted that farmers sometimes quaff a glass of oil before leaving for the fields in the morning. Elsewhere in the Mediterranean, bread is dipped in olive oil. Salads are tossed with it. Everything's cooked in it.

Though people in some of these countries eat nearly as much total fat as Americans, they are singularly healthy, with very little heart disease. Now laboratory studies of olive oil help explain why. Unlike most other vegetable oils common in the West, olive oil consists mainly of "monounsaturated" fats. Recent research indicates that monounsaturated do a better job of preventing heart disease than the more widely touted polyunsaturates.

As Americans become ever more concerned with healthy eating, we're likely to pay more and more attention to world cuisines. The polyglot among nations, we've started to seek out ethnic flavors from everywhere. "Foreign" ingredients, from seaweed and bean curd to tortillas and salsa are now readily available in large supermarkets. And Mexican and Asian restaurants have become more widespread than any other eateries except ice cream parlors, hamburger stands, and pizzerias, according to the National Restaurant Association.

But the trick to finding healthy food, wherever it comes from, is to look carefully at each dish. No single cuisine is all good or all bad. Each has something to teach us.