

SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE:

9. ESCAPE FROM THE WESTERN DIET

Introduction

What Are We Eating?

Having been raised in a farm environment and having been an organic gardener for the past 25 years, I define (real) food as that which nature provides us – vegetables, fruits, nuts, grains, meat, dairy, and eggs. On the other hand, most of what we are eating today is not real food – it is processed food, products of the gigantic food processing industry. For thousands of years, people have been able to figure out what to eat without any expert help, thank you very much. Now there is an endless supply of TV commercials, radio and print advertisements, flyers, and magazines which promote enriched food products, vitamin and nutrient supplements, processed fiber, low-fat/no-fat products, high carbohydrates, low carbohydrates, etc.

Real food has been replaced by nutrients and packages of nutrients, and common sense by confusion. Locally produced food has been replaced by cheaper produce imported principally from the United States, South America, and Asia. Over the past 50 years, we have seen the demise of the household garden as we have succumbed to the lure of cheaper produce and the increasing array of processed, packaged, prepared, or convenient-to-prepare foods. Gardening, food preparation and eating have become inconveniences – we want to be able to eat on the run, at our work desks, or in front of the TV. Cooking has become a neglected (and, in many cases, a lost) art. Processed foods and fast food meet our needs in terms of time and convenience.

I remember in the late 1950s and 1960s, with the advent of space travel, there was discussion about how, for the purposes of long-term travel in space, the astronauts would survive on a meal of pills. This was a curious concept – replacing a normal diet with pills containing all the “essential” nutrients. One can only imagine what such a diet would do to our intestinal health.

How Things Have Changed

The North American diet has been under siege for several decades now. We have seen the production of thousands of new processed or prepared foodstuffs each year. The diet has evolved to meet the image of the North American male – a man on the run, living the American/Canadian dream, no time to stop for good food while there is money to be made. More and more, the nutrition scientists have become involved and have served to reinforce or promote this change.

There have been two main forces behind the constant change in the North American diet:

- (1) the evolution of a multi-billion dollar food marketing machine which seems to thrive on change for the sake of change; and

- (2) the constantly shifting ground of nutritional science, which prides itself on advancing the frontiers of our knowledge of diet and health but which is simply changing its mind a lot because it is a flawed science which knows much less than it cares to admit.¹

Remember some of the more memorable findings of nutrition science which have been debunked? For example:

- animal fat is a deadly substance, the consumption of which should be almost eliminated from our diets;
- margarine is much healthier than butter;
- hydrogenated vegetable oils are healthier for cooking than are animal fats; and
- a low-fat diet will protect against cancer and heart disease; a low-fat diet usually means a high-carbohydrate diet which is not great for weight management or colon health.

Food is not simply packages of nutrients – despite the fact that food science basically studies food chemistry only. We cannot employ the traditional reductionist scientific thinking to food because fresh food is much more than just the sum of its parts. And food, especially wholesome food, is much more than just calories.

Human nutrition is a major concern these days – billions of dollars are being made each day because of the pervasive attitude that we as individuals know little if anything about nutrition. The concern is driven by a number of factors: (i) what many ‘experts’ believe what matters is not the food but the nutrient; (ii) because nutrients are invisible and poorly understood, we need the help of scientists to help us determine what to eat; and (iii) the purpose of eating is to sustain physical health. We seem to have forgotten that people have eaten for a number of reasons other than biological necessity: food is about pleasure, community, family, spirituality, our place in the natural world, and expressing our identity.¹ Historically, eating has been as much about culture as about biological need.

Eating Habits and Disease

Four of the top ten causes of death in North America today are chronic diseases with well-established links to diet: coronary heart disease; diabetes; stroke; and cancer. These so-called diseases of civilization were far less common a century ago, and they remain rare in places where people do not eat the way we North Americans do. The chronic diseases which now kill us can be traced directly to the industrialization of our food base: the rise of highly processed foods and refined grains; the use of chemicals to raise plants and animals in large monocultures; the super-abundance of cheap calories in sugar and fat produced by modern agriculture; and the narrowing of the biological diversity of the human diet to a tiny handful of staple crops, especially wheat, corn and soy. We now take this western diet for granted: abundant processed foods and meat; lots of added sugar and fat; but not lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Changing Our Diet, Improving Our Health

In his remarkable book,¹ Michael Pollan evaluates our North American diet, what he refers to as the ‘western diet.’ The cover jacket of the book starts off:

¹ Pollan, M. 2008. *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*. The Penguin Press, New York, NY.

“Food. There is plenty of it around, and we all love to eat it. So why should anyone need to defend it? Because most of what we are consuming today is not food, and how we’re consuming it – in the car, in front of the TV, and increasingly alone – is not really eating. Instead of food, we are consuming “edible foodlike substances...””

Pollan claims that we have gravitated from eating the products of nature to eating the products of food science. We have seen an increase in the number of food stuffs claiming to be healthy for us, with this vitamin, that nutrient, or this amount of fiber added. Pollan’s conclusion – such claims are the first clue we should key in on because, in all probability, such food stuffs are not ‘healthy.’ Pollan presents a compelling argument that the emphasis in the ‘western diet’ is nutrients rather than food, and that the simplicity and culture of eating have been replaced by confusion.

In the last section of his book, ² Pollan has identified a number of rules of thumb (“*personal eating policies*”) for what we should be eating. His mantra is what he terms “...*seven simple but liberating words: Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.*” His advice? Lose the nutrient-by-nutrient approach (what he refers to as ‘nutritionism’) in favour of returning to the “...*traditions and ecology of real, well-grown, and unprocessed food.*” Let’s turn back the clock a bit and (re)learn from our elders and our grandparents.

Pollan uses a number of pages in his book to discussions of the relationships between food and human health. He recommends that we stop thinking of health in terms of just physical health:

“When most of us think about food and health, we think in fairly narrow nutritionist terms – about our personal physical health and how the ingestion of this particular nutrient or rejection of that affects it. But I no longer think it’s possible to separate our bodily health from the health of the environment from which we eat or the environment in which we eat or, for that matter, from the health of our general outlook about food (and health). If my explorations of the food chain have taught me anything, it’s that it is a food chain, and all the links in it are in fact linked: the health of the soil to the health of the plants and animals we eat to the health of the food culture in which we eat them to the health of the eater, in body as well as mind....Food consists not just in piles of chemicals; it also comprises a set of social and ecological relationships, reaching back to the land and outward to other people.”

To eat well today, we need to invest more time, effort, and resources into providing for the sustenance of our families and ourselves.

Eat Food – Food Defined

Taking the place of real food in grocery stores has been an unending stream (thousands of new products each year) of food-like substitutes which are produced to make money for the parent companies and not much more. The use of the term ‘nutrition’ seems to be nothing more than a marketing ploy. Ordinary, real food is still out there, still being grown locally, and still available locally. This is the food on which we need to focus.

(1) Don’t eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food. Imagine strolling down the aisle of a supermarket with your great-grandmother or grandmother.

² Getting Over Nutritionism. Section III in: Pollan, M. 2008. In defense of food. An eater’s manifesto. The Penguin Press, New York, NY. Pp. 137-201.

Most of your time will have to be spent answering her questions about what she is seeing. Have fun – there are hundreds if not thousands of food stuffs in the supermarket which she will not identify as actual foods. In fact, you may be just as confused if you read the lists of all the ingredients in these products. Should we be eating such complicated food products? Pollan says, “No.” Never mind the various chemical additives and the soy and corn derivatives which they contain – what about the artificial colours, artificial flavours, added salt, and synthetic sweeteners?

It seems that the modern food processing industry is not really targeting nutritious food, but simply increased consumption of their products. The processed foods attract us by playing to our weaknesses – our preferences for sweetness, saltiness, and fat, things we cannot access readily in nature. Processed foods are much more energy-dense than most whole foods, contain much less water, fiber, and micro-nutrients, and contain much more sugar, fat and salt.

- (2) **Avoid food products containing ingredients which are either (a) unfamiliar, (b) unpronounceable, (c) more than five in number, or that include (d) high-fructose corn syrup.** All of these are reliable markers for food products which have been highly processed to the point at which they may not be what they are represented to be. Consider the humble loaf of white bread – looks like bread, smells like bread, tastes like bread, must be bread, right? The list of 40-50 different ingredients makes one think. Grandma’s bread consisted of flour, yeast, water and a pinch of salt. And tasted so much better.

Frequently, food science’s efforts to make traditional foods more nutritious turn them into much more complicated products which are not necessarily any more nutritious. Making dairy products low fat requires removing varying amounts of the fat. To keep the body and creamy texture of the dairy products requires all sorts of additives. Low-fat or skim milk requires the addition of powdered milk which contains oxidized cholesterol, but this is a harmful form of cholesterol. To compensate for this, there can be a further addition of antioxidants. What has happened to the simple, one-ingredient whole food?

- (3) **Avoid food products which make health claims.** If a food product makes a health claim on the package, one can assume that the product is highly processed. Normally, it is only the larger food companies which have the financial resources to secure US or Canadian government-approved health claims for their products. These claims are not trustworthy – they are founded on the shaky and superficial science of nutritionism. The companies can promote their claims pretty much any way they desire. Bogus health claims and food science have made supermarkets especially difficult places to shop for real food.
- (4) **Shop the peripheries of the supermarket and stay out of the middle of the store.** Processed food products dominate the center aisles of the grocery stores while the fresh foods (e.g., dairy, product, meat, and fish) line the walls. Focus on keeping to the edges of the supermarket and increase your chances of walking out of the store with real food in your cart.
- (5) **Get out of the supermarket whenever possible.** Rely extensively on local farmers’ markets – no elaborately processed food products, no energy-consumptive packaging, no long lists of multi-syllabic, unpronounceable names of ingredients, no baseless health claims, and no food imported from other countries or continents. The surest way to escape

the western diet is to stop frequenting its domain – the supermarket, the convenience store, and the fast-food outlets.

A wall of ignorance exists between consumers and producers, particularly food processors. The industrial food chain is long and complicated. The food chain for the farmers' markets is short and informative. Talk to the farmers who are trying to sell you their produces – understand what they have to deal with to produce the fresh vegetables and fruits you desire. As Bollan says, *“Food reclaims its story, and some of its nobility, when the person who grew it hands it to you.”* *“Shake the hand that feeds you.”*

Mostly Plants – What to Eat

Our diets must be built around whole foods rather than processed food products. But not all whole foods are created equal – for example, some are better than others, some store better than others, and some last longer than others.

- (1) **Eat mostly plants, especially leaves.** Our biological dependence on plants goes back a long way and is deeply engrained in who we are. A diet rich in vegetables and fruits reduces the risk of dying from all the diseases which can result from the western diet. The antioxidants, the omega-3s, the fiber, and still other plant components are all in the *‘good for you’* column of our dietary balance sheet. And, eating a plant-based diet will generally mean ingesting fewer calories. The healthfulness of a food cannot be separated from the health of the food chain; i.e., the health of the soil, plant, animal, and consumer are all connected. This seems to be a foreign concept for the food processing industry.
- (2) **You are what what you eat eats too.** The diet of the animals we consume has a bearing on the nutritional quality and healthfulness of the food itself, whether it be milk, meat, or eggs. One of the major goals of the industrial food chain is to produce vast quantities of cheap animal protein. This goal has changed the diet of most of our food animals from plants to seeds, because animals grow faster and produce more milk and eggs on a high-energy diet of grain. Some of our food animals, however, such as cattle and sheep, are ruminants which have evolved eating grass. If these animals eat too much grain, they become sick and require antibiotics. For most of our food animals, a diet of grass means much healthier fats in their meat, milk, and eggs, as well as measurably greater levels of vitamins and antioxidants.
- (3) **If you have the space, buy a freezer.** Freezing, unlike canning, does not significantly diminish the nutritional value of produce. A freezer will encourage buying produce in bulk from farmers' markets and freezing for the winter.
- (4) **Eat like an omnivore.** The diversity of food products available in the supermarket is deceiving because most of these products are made from the same handful of plants and from the seeds of these plants (e.g., corn, soy, and wheat). Eating a wider variety of foods (e.g., many different species of plants) translates into a greater diversity of crops grown on the local farms. If these crops are grown organically, there is no use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Greater biological diversity = healthier soils = healthier plants and animals = healthier consumers.
- (5) **Eat well-grown food from healthy soils.** More and more scientific evidence is being accumulated which points to soils rich in organic matter producing more nutritious food –

measurably higher levels of antioxidants, flavonoids, vitamins, and other nutrients in organically-grown produce. It is best to look for organically-grown foods locally to avoid the long traveling times which do reduce food quality substantially in transport.

- (6) **Eat wild foods when you can.** Some of the healthiest tradition diets around the world frequently include the utilization of wild greens. The fields and forests around us feature edible plants containing higher levels of various phyto-chemicals than do the domesticated plants we cultivate. The wild plants use these chemicals to defend themselves against insects pests and disease, a characteristic which has been bred out of the domesticated versions of the plants. Wild greens tend to include more omega-3 fatty acids than do domesticated plants.

Because of their diversified diet of plants, wild meats tend to have less saturated fats and more omega-3 fatty acids than does domesticated meat. There has been a slow increase in the number of bison farms in western Canada – bison is advertized as a much leaner meat than is beef. Wild fish also tend to have higher levels of omega-3s than to farmed fish. While farmed fish (especially salmon) is readily available in retail outlets in the larger urban areas, wild salmon are becoming increasingly scarce, and wild ungulate meat is available only to hunters. We are fortunate in British Columbia in that we have healthy populations of several of the game species (e.g., moose and deer).

- (7) **Be the kind of person who takes supplements.** People who take supplements tend to be more health conscious, better educated, and more affluent. We also know, however, that most of the supplements on the market do not appear to live up to their manufacturers claims. Pollan's point is that we should be the kind of person who chooses to take supplements, but don't spend our money on taking them. In theory, a healthy, plant-based and green diet should supply all the micronutrients one needs.

- (8) **Eat more like the French, or the Italians, or the Japanese, or the Indians, or the Greeks...**People who subsist on a traditional diet are generally healthier than those of us who eat a contemporary western diet. The logic here is that if these traditional food cultures were no good, the cultures (e.g., Greek, Italian, French, or Asian) would not have survived. The traditional food cultures evolved over a long period of time when industrial agriculture and processed foods were not part of the landscape. Human needs were reconciled with what nature could provide in these particular geographic and climatic locations. Particular cuisines evolved based on the plant species available, the climate, the herbs and spices available, and the creativity of the cooks. A culture's cuisine expressed its identity and highlights the differences with other cultures. The specific combinations of foods and the methods of preparation comprise a deep reservoir of accumulated wisdom and diet, health, and place.

- (9) **Regard non-traditional foods with skepticism.** The importance of innovation is preached throughout our western society. A good example is cell phones – how many models has each of us gone through in the last two years? When it comes to food novelties, however, one should exercise a fair dose of caution, perhaps downright skepticism. In all probability, such innovation is simply a marketing ploy to lure us into eating the products of the food processing industry.
- (10) **Don't look for the magic bullet in the traditional diet.** Dietary patterns tend to be more than the sum of the foods which comprise them, much the same as real foods are more

than the sum of their nutrient parts. It seems that proponents of the western diet are prone to reductionist thinking when it comes to traditional diets as well. Millions of dollars and countless efforts have been expended to find the ‘magic bullet’ in the various traditional diets: e.g., olive oil, garlic or nuts in the Mediterranean diet; red wine, olive oil, foie gras in French cuisine; fish in the Asian diet). Surely there must be one ‘X-factor’ in each culture which explains why people living on a particular traditional diet live healthier and longer than we westerners do. So far, no one ‘X-factor’ or ‘silver bullet’ has emerged for each culture. If this magic solution could be identified, then processed foods could be re-engineered to contain more of it.

- (11) **Have a glass of wine with dinner.** In some cultures, we have observed that people who drink alcohol moderately and regularly tend to live longer and healthier. Alcohol of any kind appears to reduce the risk of heart disease, and the polyphenols in red wine appear to have unique protective characteristics. The consumption of alcohol, particularly in dietary terms will be a subject of on-going research but one cannot deny the centuries of traditional belief and anecdotal evidence in long-lived cultures in Europe and Asia. In North America, alcohol consumption is certainly impacted by a number of cultural factors – cuisine seems to be far down the list.

Not Too Much – How to Eat

A food culture features the set of manners, eating habits, and unspoken rules which together govern a people’s relationship to food and eating. **How** a culture eats is just as important to health and well-being as **what** a culture eats. Western nutritionists pay far too much attention to the chemistry of food than they do to the sociology or ecology of food consumption.

- (1) **Pay more, eat less.** The western food system is devoted to quantity and price of food rather than to quality. Turning out huge amounts of processed food stuffs in attractive packaging at a lesser price is what the food processing machine does very well. And this approach fits in well with our fast-paced lifestyles which are highly dependent upon convenience.

Food which tastes better and is more nutritious is more expensive because, in large part, because it has been grown with greater care and less intensively. Not everyone in society can afford to eat the higher-quality food – this is a societal deficiency which is being addressed at the community level in different areas in British Columbia. But, those of us who can afford to eat the higher-quality food should do so, not only for our personal health but for the health also of the food growers.

The better quality of food one eats, the less of it one needs to consume in order to feel satisfied. Choose quality over quantity, food experience over mere calories. Try to reduce (or eliminate completely) the consumption of sugar, salt, snack foods, fast foods, pre-prepared foods, fruit and vegetable juices (other than freshly prepared juices)...the list goes on and on. Such a regimen is particularly important for our children’s diet.

- (2) **Eat meals.** More and more of our food intake is through snacking, eating fast food in our cars and pick-ups or in front of the TV – we have serious food addictions and some very bad habits in our western diet. Eating is something we tend to want to do as fast as we can while doing something else. We have convinced ourselves that we have no time for the preparation of an actual meal (never mind a balance meal) so we spend our money on a fast

food or processed food industry which is heavily dependent on external inputs of fossil-fuel energy, is not concerned with your health and well-being, is not really aware of the nutritional quality of its products, and does not concern itself with its environmental footprint (has anyone else heard the story that a Big Mac really costs about \$200 in terms of its environmental footprint?).

- (3) **Do all your eating at a table.** A TV tray or a desk is not a table. If dining alone, focus on the meal in front of you, not on the TV news, or the incessant re-runs on TV. If dining with a partner or family, dine with everyone seated at the table, not in the living room or in the den or in the bedroom.
- (4) **Don't get your fuel from the same place your car does.** One good thing about paying for gas at the pump is that one doesn't have to head inside the station and, while there, succumb to the colourful displays of snack foods, chocolate bars, soft drinks, juices – those highly-processed, heavily-sweetened, non-perishable 'comfort foods' which are very addictive.
- (5) **Try not to eat alone.** So much food marketing is designed to encourage us to eat in front of the TV or in our automobiles – when we eat alone we tend to eat more, especially when we can head for the nearest drive-through or have food delivered. The point was made above – we have reduced the eating process to a mechanical, mindless, joyless experience focused on re-fueling our bodies. Sharing a meal with someone elevates eating from this type of experience to one focused on family and community, and from mere consumption to an act of culture.
- (6) **Consult your gut.** As in so many aspects of modern life, the culture of food has become a culture of the eye and the 'I.' Most of us now allow external stimuli, particularly visual cues, to dictate what and how much we actually consume. Portion and container size, for example, plays a large role in how much we eat. There is an overwhelming concern in our society – have you had enough to eat? Personal satiety seems to over-ride most other aspects of our food culture.

Apparently it takes about twenty minutes before the brain receives the message that the tummy is full. When was the last time we spent twenty minutes or more on a meal? We are normally finished our eating by the time we begin to feel full. In our western diet, we tend not to leave the table until we feel full – if this happens in ten minutes then we can conclude that we have overeaten. Remember when we were kids – if we didn't eat all our dinner we weren't allowed to have dessert. For some people, eating is the reward for happy times, and the solution for the bad times, such as sickness, sadness, tiredness, etc.

We need to learn to eat more slowly and pay more attention to what our senses are telling us – only then will we be able to re-train ourselves to react to our body's clues for eating as opposed to those clues marketers hope we adopt.

- (7) **Eat slowly.** To eat slowly is to eat with a fuller knowledge of all that is involved in bringing food out of the earth and to the table. Eating slowly also means to eat deliberately and purposefully, and not feel compelled to eat. Much of our carelessness in eating comes from the ease with which the industrial eater can simply forget all that is at stake, both for himself and for the world. Becoming re-acquainted with how food is grown and prepared can provide a useful reminder.

(8) **Cook, and if you can, plant a garden.** In North America, we have forgotten how to take part in the intricate and endlessly interesting processes of providing for our sustenance. We have bought into the attitude that food is nothing more than fuel. No longer do we see food as a form of communion with other people as well as with other species and with nature. The work of growing food contributes to our health long before we sit down to eat it, and there is something particularly fitting about enlisting our bodies in their own sustenance.

There are the obvious physical benefits to gardening but I have found the most satisfying aspects of gardening are the emotional and spiritual benefits. Especially the communing with natural biological processes. Tending a garden reminds us of the long-standing evolutionary bargain we have struck with these ingenious domestic plants, how cleverly they insert themselves into our lives, repaying the care and space we give them with the gift of good food. It is very satisfying to be tuned into the life cycles of these plants and being able to recognize, through changes in colour, shape, smell, texture, or taste, the moment when they are ready for harvest.

The good cook absorbs all the sensory information from the garden produce (scent, colour, taste) and then decides what to do with the variety of vegetables and fruits in the harvest basket. The culture of the kitchen now takes over – this culture is embodied in those enduring traditions called cuisines, any one of which contains more wisdom about diet and health than can be found in any nutrition journal or journalism. The food is fresh, still alive and ready to be prepared and served in the meal.

In the eye of the cook and gardener, the fresh food is a web of relationships among a great many living beings, some of them human, some not, but each of them dependent upon one another, all of them ultimately rooted in soil and nourished by sunlight.

Conclusion

It is fitting to finish this praise of Michael Pollan's book by using a quote from the end of Section III:

"I'm thinking of the relationship between the plants and the soil, between the grower and the plants and animals he or she tends, between the cook and the growers who supply the ingredients, and between the cook and the people who will soon come to the table to enjoy the meal. It is a large community to nourish and be nourished by. The cook in the kitchen preparing a meal from plants and animals at the end of this shortest of food chains has a great many things to worry about, but 'health' is simply not one of them, because it is given."

Amen.

Compiled and synthesized by:

Daniel Lousier, PhD
June 20, 2010