



Eat Real Food or Else - A Cookbook for the 21st Century

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F.A.Q. (INTERVIEW OF LIEN NGUYEN)

Q: Isn't the safest diet to eat a little bit of everything?

L.N.: This is the objection I get most frequently when I indulge in dispensing nutritional advice to those around me. I suspect this is partially motivated by people's reluctance to part with their favorite starch. But there is certainly a lot of wisdom in their remark: excessive focus on any particular ingredient most likely results in ill health because our body, in its infinite complexity, needs a lot more than we can comprehend today and for the foreseeable future.

In practice, though, this reasonable concept doesn't account for the food industry's efforts to make us buy whatever is more profitable for them, regardless of its impact on our health. How do we define "a little bit of everything"? A little something from each aisle of the supermarket?

Without nutritional knowledge, we are easy prey for their marketing and publicity.



Q: Nutritional science changes its mind all the time: first it said that starches were fattening; then it was not the starches, but what you put on them that made you gain weight; and now, it's gone full circle, back to starches as the bad guys. How can we trust the current nutritional science?

L.N.: This is a legitimate criticism. This shuffling back and forth understandably generates the feeling that science is not progressing, but going round and round instead. You'd think that if we can put a man on the moon, we should be able to figure out exactly what food is best for our body.

To science's credit, understanding the human body is many orders of magnitude more complex than rocket science. In addition, among medical disciplines, nutrition has a particularly difficult position: it is impossible to rigorously test nutritional theories with randomized well controlled trials, as you would for a new drug; it is unethical (although not unheard of) to purposefully feed a whole population some given diet with the goal to observe what percentage dies from it. So, what we are left to work with is epidemiology, observing various populations and trying to draw conclusions by linking their health data with their eating habits. This method provides, of course, no proof of causation; it can at best show an association between the facts.

Also, despite appearances, nutritional science is progressing, in part thanks to the availability of new scientific tools. As an example, for a long time there was no easy way to accurately measure a person's insulin level; this impaired the ability to study the effects of sugar and insulin on our metabolism. This is

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not the case anymore: nowadays, insulin is easily monitored, and its nefarious effects have been proven beyond any doubt.



Q: How can you apply the same nutritional advice to growing teenagers and older adults, or people with different genetic backgrounds?

L.N.: Of course, everybody is different. Genetics play an important role in how our body deals with food, but suspiciously, this objection comes up only after people hear something they don't like: we are willing to accept that there are nutritional principles until they don't suit us, and then everybody becomes different! Food is a very emotional issue, connecting us to our childhood, to our mother's love. We make leaps of logic to legitimize what we like to eat.

Obviously, it is impossible to prescribe a diet that applies to everybody and addresses all the situations and pathologies. However, we must admit that there are some mechanisms that apply to the majority of the human race. It is worth becoming familiar with these principles: they offer a starting basis from which people can make informed choices depending on their particular needs.

At the same time, it is clear that people have different metabolisms and react differently to foods: some of us should avoid salt; others should avoid legumes; for others it's onions, or kale, or cabbage, peanuts, milk, strawberries... These ingredients are real dangers for some, but if we avoid everything that is a concern for some part of the population, we are left with nothing to eat. A better strategy is to pay attention to our individual response and only eliminate those ingredients that are a problem.



Q: Isn't this a "low-calorie" diet in disguise?

L.N.: First, let me repeat that this way of eating is a lifetime commitment, not a transitory weight loss diet.

It is true that some people believe that, by eliminating starches, we eat less: after all, our stomach only has room for so much broccoli. Others think that without starches meals are so unappetizing that they are not worth eating.

Regarding whether life without starches is worth living, I hope the recipes presented here speak for themselves.

That we end up eating less calories might be true or not (in our book, the starches are replaced by fats, which, as everyone knows, contain a lot of calories). The truth is, we don't care: as long as you feel satiated and energetic, as long as you are not craving food, are healthy and feel good about your body, what does it matter if you consume more or less calories than before?

But don't take my word for it. Try and taste for yourself!