

Eating Healthy in the Off (and On) Season

Elena Kirschner and Christa Sadler

Admittedly, we're not food gurus. Anyone who's traveled with Christa on the river knows she is *the* Sugar Queen. But Elena's been organic gardening for a long time and both of us have been reading and researching this topic for years now, so we thought we'd share some of what we've learned about healthy eating both on and off the river. Here's a great piece of advice to start with:

“Don't eat anything your grandmother wouldn't recognize as food.”

In this day and age, this is getting harder to do. Real food, the kind you prepare, cook and take some time to eat, has almost disappeared in the average American household. Instead we eat packages of food-like products, heated in the microwave, often with lists of ingredients as long as your arm.

Despite the American obsession with eating, and what would appear to be the food industry's obsession with health (Low Fat! High Fiber! No Trans Fat!), diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and certain cancers that may be linked to diet are on the rise. It's a conundrum that the French can eat butter, cream and other fatty evils and yet remain thin and relatively heart disease-free, while we—the diet conscious—are experiencing rising rates of many life-threatening conditions linked inextricably to diet. Some American children are even suffering from both obesity and malnutrition, a problem that comes from being overfed yet undernourished.

So what's up with our diet? Well, for starters, we've taken a lot of the variety out. The vast majority of our diet consists of just four grains: corn, soy, wheat, rice. Those things are used to make an astounding variety of fillers, sweeteners, bulking agents, etc. So all those great grains and grasses that we were adapted to when we first got here are gone from our diet, as are the nutrients they provided. Even the meat we eat is raised on the same grains, and lacks the nutrients it used to have. (Also, corn is not something that cows evolved to eat, and it is really bad for them. In order to avoid the ulcers and stomach problems it causes, cattle are pumped full of antibiotics).

Second, we eat way too much refined sugars and carbohydrates, what we call simple carbs. These taste great, but aggravate the potential for diabetes. Current research suggests that making sure you have proteins and healthy oils with your meals stabilizes blood sugar levels. When you do eat carbs, whole grains and fruit sugars, etc. are absorbed more slowly into the system (lower glycemic index) and contain soluble fibers and other nutrients, so the pancreas can keep up and doesn't freak out trying to pump out insulin. Simple carbs and sugars can also cause energy and mood swings, and there is some compelling evidence that they contribute to depression in susceptible people.

Next, our vegetables, grains and fruit are usually grown crowded, and taken out of the ground to ship before they ripen. When plants are grown and harvested this way, their roots can't absorb the nutrients from the soil that they would get by going deep and having some space. When we remove them from the ground before they ripen, we also curtail that process. The fertilizers we use are largely made from petrochemicals, which provide a very simple mixture of a

few nutrients and ignore all the micronutrients that plants get from sun and soil. So we have effectively taken a lot of the nutrients out of the food we grow.

Since we've taken so many nutrients *out* of our food, we now need to add nutrients *back* to our food only we don't know what nutrients to add. Food is a complex combination of ingredients—large and small, obvious and not—that our best science can't always decipher. So we focus mostly on the easy stuff: iron, calcium, fiber, fat, etc. And as consumers, we let someone else do that figuring. Back in the day, we used to know how to eat, but now someone else has to tell us what's "nutritious." That someone is usually the food production industry (via doctors and chemists), and they have a stake in selling you their products. But nutrition fads come and go. Remember when margarine was supposed to be good for you because butter had *fat* and caused heart disease? Now we find out that the hydrogenated crud in margarine can quite possibly kill you. Thing is, this multi-billion dollar industry *needs* it to work this way so that as the fads change, they just get the chemists to add the ingredients du jour, and voila! Healthy food. Or not.

As boatmen, we're lucky. We have a pretty healthy lifestyle on the river. Lots of exercise, three square meals a day that we have *time* to cook, fresh air and sunshine. But what about in the off-season? Here are a few suggestions for ways to eat healthy both on the river and off, when someone else isn't feeding you.

- ***Shop mostly around the outer edge of the grocery store, not in the middle aisles.*** The outside is where the real food is: the produce, meat and dairy. The middle aisles, the ones that you are steered into as you walk in, have all the packaged, processed, food-like products that make extravagant claims about how healthy they are. Which brings up the second suggestion:
- ***Avoid anything that makes health claims.*** It probably isn't that healthy for you if it's been engineered to be healthy. Real food doesn't have to be engineered.
- ***Get as many fresh greens (the darker the better) in the meal as possible.*** And no, iceberg does not really count as "green." Yes, we have to use that on the river because it keeps longer, but try and get some other types of fresh greens in those salads, or fresh veggie side dishes.
- ***Avoid anything hydrogenated, partially hydrogenated or filled with high fructose corn syrup.*** Aside from the fact that there is corn in HFCS, there's very little else about it that is like real food, and there is really compelling evidence that hydrogenated oils can do your body severe damage over the years. Talk to your company about getting non-hydrogenated peanut butter and other such things. A lot of stores (even Walmart) now have an organic line of food that will be free of those things.
- ***If you must snack, eat something from the outer edge of the store.*** On the river, make your snacks things like nuts, whole grains and fruit. They stay with the body much better than Twizzlers.
- ***Avoid processed sugar and caffeine.*** They dehydrate the body, besides not being great for your blood sugar levels. And if you are prone to mood swings, the caffeine and sugar will not help. Use honey or agave nectar if you are so inclined. Yes, it's sugar, but it's absorbed more slowly and has more nutrients as well, so it keeps your blood sugar more stable throughout the day.

- ***Take your time.*** Eat slowly with friends. Laugh. Talk. Digest. Have a chance to feel full. It takes around 20 minutes for your body to start to feel full, so if you scarf your meal and stuff a huge amount in, you won't know you've eaten too much until you've eaten too much. When you're on the river, don't just eat standing around the kitchen while your folks have a community experience. Share the meal so that your food becomes more than just fuel.
- ***Eating well doesn't mean eating organic all the time,*** but certain things, like peaches and strawberries have a very heavy pesticide load, so if you can eat some organic produce, you'll avoid putting that ick in your body. For a full list of the pesticide load on various produce items, visit www.foodnews.org.
- ***Eat from a local farmer's market whenever possible.*** Foods that are grown in your area are attuned to the environment there, and often contain micronutrients that your body wants because it lives in that environment, too. Besides, it's just nice to talk to the actual people who are growing your food, and they have great advice about recipes and gardening, too.

If you are interested in this subject, we recommend two books, both by Michael Pollan, food guru for our time. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food* are excellent looks at the way we eat in America today, where our food comes from, what's in it and how we can re-learn an appreciation for real food and the communities that food builds in our lives. Hey, if the Sugar Queen can do it, anyone can!

Words: 1463