

The Joy of Food

It's not Just for Nourishment Any More



Everywhere you look these days, there's food. From the Pinterest boards packed full of luscious-looking photos and recipes, to delicacies from all over the world in your local supermarket, food is not just for nourishment any more. It's also a hobby that people enjoy, and in some cases, explore through hands-on experience. In most cases, this means learning how to cook themselves. In other cases, it might even mean learning how to grow your own food, to save money and to access fresh ingredients that are grown organically.

One obvious issue with the joy of food in the West, however, is that it can lead to excessive consumption. Let's look in the first section at enjoying food mindfully.

MINDFUL VERSUS MINDLESS EATING

To be mindful is to pay attention to something. The opposite is mindless. If you've ever sat down to watch a movie with an entire box or bag of popcorn and then wondered where it all went, you have a pretty good idea of what mindless eating is all about.

Tips for Eating Mindfully

By contrast, mindful eating means paying attention to and savoring every mouthful. This is a great way to not only enjoy your food more, but also to actually slim down. Studies have shown that it takes around twenty minutes for your brain to receive a signal that your stomach is full. If you rush when you are eating, or eat while doing something else, it's easy to cram in far more calories than you wish to. Combined with a lack of exercise, this can lead to weight gain.

The joy of food is all around us, though it can be less than joyful for people who struggle with their weight. However, new thinking about "dieting" can help. If we call it an "eating lifestyle" instead, it seems less restrictive and more within our control.

The traffic light system can also help, because there is no such thing as forbidden foods. Green for go, yellow for caution when it comes to calories, and red for being alert. Eat the yellow and red light foods sparingly. This means you can enjoy whatever foods you like as long as you eat them in moderation.

For example, if you love chocolate, allow yourself one piece of high-quality chocolate each day and sit and savor it, letting it melt in your mouth slowly - enjoying the taste of it and the feel of it in your mouth instead of chewing through it and then wanting more.

Emotional Eating

Another example of mindless eating is emotional eating. At the first sign of stress or a strong emotion, many people self-medicate using food to elevate their mood. This is all too easy to do in the US, where food seems to be everywhere, much of it junk food, convenience food, pre-prepared take-out and delivery.

Junk food can elevate mood temporarily but soon leave you prey to more food cravings and an ever-increasing dependence on food to boost your mood. Emotional eating can be a vicious cycle as people seek more and more "comfort food" and end up more overweight and uncomfortable than before.

Think about it. We don't just use food for nourishment and fuel for the body. We also have emotional connections with it, causing our health to become skewed. Examples of this include:

- People in our society use food as a reward
- Many celebrations like Thanksgiving focus on food rather than family
- Up to one-third of adults have indulged in an eating binge (that is, out-of-control eating) in the last 30 days
- Few people have a clue about calorie counts of the foods they eat
- Most Americans have no idea about portion sizes
- The US has become a nation of snackers
- 68% of the US population is overweight or obese
- 33% of children are overweight or obese

Compare the statistic: 68% are overweight in the US compared with only 9% in Italy, which has one of the greatest cuisines in the world. How is this possible, you might ask? It's a question of habits and attitudes to food, and what is being eaten - now commonly referred to as the Mediterranean diet. This diet is comprised of small portions of lots of different fresh foods, mainly fruits and vegetables, with small portions a couple of times a week of fish, cheese, poultry and red meat.

Their pizza is thin-crust, not deep pan or stuffed, and loaded with vegetables and a small amount of skim milk cheese - not tons of pepperoni with double cheese. Above all, the food is fresh and home cooked, not mass-produced.

One of the most common types of emotional eating is stress eating. When the person is under stress, their response is to reach for food almost mindlessly. Of course, all of us lead fairly stressful lives, so you can just imagine how that person can start packing on the pounds in only a short time if they reach for a donut, candy, soda, or other empty calories every time things get tough at work or school.

Mindful Mealtimes

Most people will agree that they really enjoy food. In particular, a well-prepared meal eaten in a leisurely manner can be one of life's best and even most romantic experiences. Several courses stretching out in a relaxed atmosphere can create an emotional state of happiness, with a focus on savoring the moment as well.

Italians eat at the table as a family almost every night and take about two hours to consume their food and wine. Some nations even have a two-hour lunch break so they can go home and eat with their family and even have a "siesta", a little sleep, so they will be refreshed and be able to work well for the rest of the day.

It is great to want to get together with family and friends to enjoy a meal, provided it is a healthy one. However, in the US, we tend to overindulge. One study showed that at a Thanksgiving gathering, several people ate more than 1,000 calories in snacks, appetizers and alcohol before they ever even sat down at the table for their dinner. The woman who consumed 1,300 calories to start with ended up eating a total of nearly 5,000 calories in one single meal. Eating 2,000 excess calories equals one pound of weight gain. You have to burn 3,500 to lose one pound.

Fortunately, many menus are starting to list calorie counts. Your favorite fast food and family restaurants should also list them at their website, so you can know before you go. You might be surprised to find that what you believe to be healthy, such as the filet of fish sandwich, or a salad, actually has more calories and fat in it than an entire Happy Meal.

One other way to make the most of eating out if you do plan to visit a restaurant is to order only dishes that you can't make yourself. Pasta and egg dishes are all cheap and easy to make, so look for something different. Divide up your meal into one small portion and have your server give you a doggie bag for the rest. Then parcel it up into TV-style dinners for a treat you can enjoy in the future. By eating mindfully, you can save both calories and cash.

One of the nice things about restaurant meals is trying new recipes. But cooking isn't that hard. Anyone can read a recipe. Let's look at some of the main benefits of cooking at home in the next section.

THE BENEFITS OF COOKING AT HOME

There are many benefits to cooking at home rather than eating out or hitting the speed dial button for the local pizzeria yet again. Here are 10 of the main ones.

1. Saving Money

This is the main reason to cook at home. You're in control of what you shop for and spend. Make the most of store sales and coupons. Practice portion control and cook, make and freeze meals so you always have something on hand in case you need "fast food".

2. Knowing Exactly What's in the Food You're Eating

Cooking yourself from scratch means you always know exactly what's in the food you're eating. If anyone in your family has allergies, this can literally be a lifesaver. If you have health issues like high blood pressure or migraine headaches, steering clear of salt and monosodium glutamate (MSG), a common meat tenderizer and flavor enhancer, can help.

3. A Balanced Diet

Research has shown that people who cook at home tend to consume fewer calories, fewer carbohydrates, less sugar, and less fat than those who don't cook.

4. Being an Educated "Consumer"

Learning more about food, nutrition and calorie counts with the help of healthy recipes and a good food database will help you eat in a healthier manner.

5. Staying Heart Healthy

We are what we eat, so a balanced diet full of nutrients is one of the best ways to stay healthy and slim. Many medical conditions are associated with obesity, including heart disease, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and high blood sugar. High blood sugar can lead to insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes. Type 2 diabetes can lead to a range of serious health issues, including cardiovascular ones. Cooking yourself can help keep you heart-smart.

6. Slow Food, Not Fast Food

Eating more slowly means you will eat less and feel full even on a smaller amount of food. As mentioned earlier, this is because it takes the stomach about 20 minutes to register that it is full. If you're famished, eat one ounce of nuts 30 minutes before dinner (if you're not allergic).

Studies have shown that the fat and fiber will fill you up and make you feel satisfied on 30% less than the amount of food you usually eat.

7. Go for Filling Foods Low in Calories and Cost

Ever notice how stuffed you feel after a restaurant meal in which you started off with soup and a salad? These are cheap foods full of water and fiber. As long as they don't have a cream base and you don't use creamy dressing, you can make healthy homemade soups and salads that will make you feel full by the time you ever get to the entrée.

Or try the Italian style of eating. Have the salad at the end of the meal - it will stop you from continuing to eat high-calorie foods. It will also make you less likely to crave dessert.

8. Controlled Portions

Use a kitchen scale and measuring cups. Look up the caloric and nutritional values of the recipes you make, and divide it up into portions that will suit whatever diet you're on.

9. Food Safety

Foodborne illnesses are everywhere. Keep your kitchen and hands immaculately clean so you and your family can stay safe.

10. Food Freedom

If you're cooking at home, you can make it gluten-free, dairy-free, meat-free - it's up to you!

The more you cook, the more practice you get in, and the better your food will be. Some people are born chefs, but with all the free content online at your fingertips, and digital cookbooks available on Amazon, you can start to cook like a pro in no time.

Another main reason for cooking at home is all the benefits you get when you cook and eat together as a family. Let's look at this in more detail in the next section.

THE BENEFITS OF COOKING AND EATING TOGETHER AS A FAMILY

We are surrounded by people every day, yet it can be hard for some of us to really connect with others. We don't seem to have time, or we might avoid intimacy because we are not sure how others will react to what we have to say, or we are afraid of being judged.

We are also surrounded by gadgets. We eat in front of the TV, at our computer keyboards, and in the car. We also wolf down the food mindlessly, leaving us prone to overeating and emotional eating because we are stressed and bored.

It's not all that long ago that almost every family sat down together at the kitchen or dining room table every night for dinner. Studies have shown that families who eat together, stay together. Mealtimes are about more than just the food. They are about connecting, caring, sharing.

Research have shown that only around 60% of American families eat together four to five nights per week. If your family is one of the many which doesn't, here are a few reasons to reverse that trend.

Better Behavior

Research has shown that children who eat dinner with their family each night are less likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol or use drugs. Staying connected with teens as they mature into young adults can be tricky, but if they are with you each night at dinner, you don't have to wonder what they're getting up to behind your back.

Better Nutrition

Studies have shown that children who eat at the table with their families tend to eat a wider variety of fruits and vegetables and are a lot less picky. They consume more nutritious foods and have a more positive attitude towards healthy foods.

An Easier Introduction to New Foods

Some children can be very fussy, so introducing new foods when they are young in a structured way can take the battle out of mealtimes. Plan to serve each new food every day for about a week. Be sure it is well cooked and in small pieces so no one will have any trouble chewing and swallowing it.

Put the food on their plate on the first night and say they can eat as much of it as they like. Do the same every night for the rest of the week. Studies have shown that this method actually works better than the "reward" method of letting them be excused from the table, or getting dessert, once they've finished their spinach.

Eating a Rainbow

It's hard to remember all the ins and outs of nutrition for the kids, but experts suggest that one of the best ways to do this is to "eat a rainbow" - that is, select a range of fruits and vegetables to

cover all the colors of the rainbow. Each color shows they have different phytochemicals and therefore different nutrients. Try interesting combinations of fruits and vegetables and present them attractively. Make it a game for the children to eat a rainbow every day.

Red for tomatoes, radishes, strawberries, raspberries and apples, for example, offers you five different options to combine with other items for dinner, snacks or dessert. Orange for sweet potatoes, carrots, oranges, cantaloupe and so on will make the plates attractive and all your family members less likely to be picky.

Portion Control

Portion control is good for a number of reasons. The first is it can help you budget your food better. It can also prevent anyone in the house from overeating. In addition, it educates everyone as to what a portion looks like, so they won't be tempted to overeat if they go to a restaurant.

If your child is a poor eater, a portion plate can help motivate them to clean their plate.

Cleaning your plate is something we're taught to do when we're very young because our parent want us to eat our veggies and so on, but it can be a bad thing when we go out to eat or start cooking ourselves and ordering take-away. Studies show that plates are about 20% larger in diameter now than they were 20 years ago, leading to more calories consumed per meal.

Therefore, if anyone in the house is struggling with their weight, consider using smaller plates and not piling the food on them, but keeping all the food on one level.

Better Grades

Studies have shown that students who eat with their families regularly each week tend to get much better grades than students who don't.

Stress Relief

It may sound odd to say this given the fact that family meal times can be so busy, but connecting with others can help you relax. Plus, you don't have to do it all yourself. Encouraging everyone to contribute with the cooking, and with the cleaning up, will usually mean lots of fun and an appreciation of teamwork.

For younger children, you can keep them busy by having them pack up the school lunches or snack bags for the next day while you clean up.

Good Table Manners

You want your children to be welcome and at ease in any social situation. Good table manners and knowing how to behave at the table will mean they will be much better behaved at restaurants, family dinners and so on.

Less Fear of Foods

See something interesting in the supermarket? Learn more about it, find a recipe, and try it. You'll be surprised at how delicious those weird-looking hand grenades (fresh artichokes) can be.

Calorie Control through Substitutions

You can have your cake and eat it too. One of the most popular trends these days is the "recipe makeover", in which you try to create low-calorie, healthier versions of your family favorites.

Along these lines are substitutions - using other ingredients that will retain flavor, texture and moisture, for instance, without packing on the pounds. One common swap is unsweetened apple sauce for oil or butter, or olive oil instead of butter. The latter are both high in calories and fat, but olive oil has no cholesterol because it is not derived from an animal.

Now that you've discovered the many wonders of cooking yourself at home and eating your meals together as a family, let's look at the benefits of growing your own food.

GROWING YOUR OWN FOOD

If you have any land around your house, it might be time to start planning and planting a garden. If you live in an apartment but your town or city has garden allotments, it might also be time to consider growing your own food.

Advantages of Growing Your Own Food

Growing your own vegetables is as old as time itself. Most of us have gotten away from it in the modern world, but with food prices on the rise in supermarkets and all sorts of foodborne illnesses spreading due to the poor practices of the food "industry", growing your own food is one that will save you money in the long run and help you and your family stay healthier as well.

In addition to saving money, there is a great feeling of accomplishment in growing and feeding your family with fresh garden-grown vegetables. There's nothing quite like the taste either. The

produce in supermarkets these days travels an average of 1,500 miles to reach your store displays, and are covered with pesticides, dyes to make them look more attractive, oil to make them look shinier, and more. When you grow it yourself, what you see and taste is what you get.

Gardening is a fun and interesting hobby as well. There's always something to do or learn. Best of all, it can be a real family affair, with everyone working together as a team. Young children will love digging around in the dirt. Older kids will love a "fair" at the end of each season. See who has grown or picked the biggest X in the garden that season and award ribbons and prizes. Explore a range of recipes for each of the items you grow.

Storing Your Harvest

If you get a really good harvest, chances are you might have a good deal left over that you can't eat yourselves. In this case, you have several choices. The old-fashioned way of laying up stores of food for winter was the canning process using those adorable little bell jars.

Nowadays you can also "flash-freeze" many vegetables. Pick them at the peak of freshness and store them in zippered freezer bags. Then just take out what you need.

Other vegetables like potatoes and onions will keep well in a cool, dry place. Some people place them in what is termed a root cellar to preserve them until the next harvest comes along.

Depending on what you grow, you could have several harvests a year. You can even sow and grow winter harvests once you learn how, provided you don't live in an area where the cold weather gets really extreme.

Going Organic

Speaking of extreme, you can avoid the extremely high price of buying organic vegetables by growing them yourself and using natural pesticides to keep bugs away. You might have to pay \$15 for only a few organic tomatoes, compared with \$2 for a pack of seeds. Even the regular tomatoes are \$1 per pound when they are in season, and up to \$4 when they aren't. At the supermarket, a can of crushed tomatoes usually costs around \$1.49. Just think how much money you could save with just one tomato plant and a bit of tender loving care.

Apartment Gardening

Live in an apartment? There's no need to miss out on the joys of your own garden. You just have to make the most of the space you are living in. For example, you can buy a mushroom kit that will give you many pounds of mushrooms for far less money than the \$4 per pound they

average in the supermarket. An herb garden can save you a small fortune and add all new interest to the meals you cook.

Allotments

In most cities, there are garden allotments in designated green areas. You would usually rent the space and be given a key. In some cases, you will have to buy your own tools. In others, you will be given a key to a tool shed. Experienced gardeners can tell you what to plant and when.

You should soon see some wonderful harvests. Even better, you might be able to barter some of your vegetables for some of theirs. Swap your carrots for their peas or potatoes. It can be a fun way to pass the time and socialize, and everyone in the family can help. Just make sure the children are old enough, well-behaved, and supervised.

A Good Workout

In addition to all the fun, saving money, and delicious taste of your own food, you will be out in the fresh air if you garden outdoors, and will be getting a workout too. Gardening can burn off about 400 calories per hour depending on the chore. Plus, if you add more vegetables to your diet, you will feel fuller longer due to the water and fiber in the vegetables.

What to Grow

What about fruit, we hear you ask. It can be trickier, because the fruit trees have to establish themselves before they start bearing fruit. The fruit will also be more delicate and subject to the various weather conditions each year. Sturdy trees include apple, pear and plum. You can also get citrus trees in any home improvement store.

No matter what you choose to grow, the important thing is to understand the soil you have and your options for giving the plant the right kind of nutrients and water to get a good crop. Check with a local plant nursery - chances are they can test a sample of your soil and give you good advice about what you need. You might also visit a local farm to learn more about what's best to grow in your area throughout the year.

If you've been wondering what new and interesting hobbies to try, or looking for activities you can do as a family, consider growing your own food and see what joy it can bring to every meal.

In the modern world, we have unprecedented access to foods from every corner of the globe. Food can be a joy for everyone if you control your eating and make the most of fresh, natural ingredients. If you've been struggling to lose weight, or wishing you could be closer as a family,

start enjoying more home cooked meals and see what a difference it can make to your overall wellbeing.

To your best life!