

American diet with healthy foods from abroad—we can satisfy our palate and still reduce our chances of developing many diseases.

**Lessons from Finland**

Researchers studying the Finnish diet have found that fiber may be even healthier than we thought. In many ways the diet in Finland is far from ideal: It includes few fruits and vegetables, and plenty of fatty dairy products. The Finns pour cream in their coffee, slather butter on their

# the healthiest diet in the world

**C**HANCES ARE, YOU'VE HEARD RAVE REVIEWS about the health benefits of several diets from around the world. Some evidence suggests that if you load up on veggies and rice the way the Chinese do, you'll reduce your risk for heart disease, diabetes and some types of cancer. Love that fat? You can enjoy it and still have a healthy heart—as long as you stick with olive oil—say champions of the Mediterranean diet. Meanwhile, to counteract the scourges of breast and colon cancer, feast on whole-wheat and dark rye bread, as the Finns do.

But along with the good tidings comes advice that seems downright extravagant: Controversial research from France, for example, touts a diet featuring high-fat cheeses, as well as such delicacies as pâté and foie gras—all washed down with a glass of wine.

With all the information that's coming your way, it's hard to know just what to believe. But nutritionists have begun the crucial task of interpretation. While some of the claims from abroad don't stand up under scrutiny, say the researchers, many of these findings hold valuable lessons for the typical American, who still eats far too much fat in the form of junk food, fatty meats and rich desserts. The overriding advice from the experts: By mixing and matching various cuisines—combining some elements of the

**Is it Mediterranean, French, Finnish or Chinese?  
We'll sort out the news and tell you  
how to make winning choices for your own diet.**

*By Pamela Weintraub*

bread and down whole milk by the glass as well as use it in their cereal.

Given this diet, you'd expect to see high rates of fat-linked problems, such as heart disease and certain cancers. While heart disease is more common in Finland than in other European countries, the Finns have a very low colon-cancer rate. What's more, breast cancer occurs 25 percent less frequently in Finland than in America.

Bandaru Reddy, of the American Health Foundation in Valhalla, New York, attributes the low colon-cancer rate to the Finnish penchant for dark rye bread and whole-wheat cereals. Both foods contain generous amounts of insoluble fiber—the kind that's not absorbed by the body.

Reddy theorizes that this form of fiber may undo some of fat's damage by binding with cancer-promoting substances that are produced when dietary fat is broken down. Other studies suggest that wheat fiber may bind with and remove some estrogen from the body, which may lower breast-cancer risk.

Reddy stresses that his findings are preliminary and should not be taken as license to gorge on fatty fare. But his studies do underscore fiber's benefits. Though he's tested only wheat and rye, Reddy suspects that any foods rich in insoluble fiber, such as corn, celery and barley, may also lower your risk for breast and colon cancers.

### The Orient's health secrets

**B**ut eating a high-fiber diet is only one of the health strategies that have emerged from international diet studies. The nutritional news from China demonstrates the value of a low-fat, largely vegetarian diet. In the most extensive study of its kind, nutritional

biochemist T. Colin Campbell of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, compared the diets of 65 counties in China, where regional eating habits vary greatly. Results: The healthiest diet in China—the one associated with the lowest risk of breast and colon cancers, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease—derives less than 10 percent of its protein from

we should drastically cut back on our consumption of meat and other animal products—especially since they're a major source of iron and other minerals in the United States—few dispute the health value of a low-fat diet, especially when it comes to reducing your cholesterol.

As William Castelli, M.D., director of the Framingham heart study in Massachusetts, says, "Of the 5.3 billion people that live on this earth, 4 billion virtually never have arteriosclerosis or colon cancer. Those 4 billion people live in the rural areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America, and they all have one thing in common: They eat a diet that's very low in saturated fat, about 12 to 15 grams a day, as opposed to the 40 or 50 grams that are eaten in the United States. Yet all I have to do is plunk one of those 4 billion people on an airplane and bring him over here, and he becomes part of our cardiovascular-disease epidemic."



This could be the stuff healthy hearts are made of: wine from France, olive oil from the Mediterranean and fiber-rich foods from all over.

animal sources, such as meat, milk, eggs and cheese. Instead, this diet features mostly plant-derived foods, such as rice, mushrooms, snow peas, bean sprouts and bamboo shoots.

In addition to being low in fat, vegetarian diets are rich in fiber, antioxidants and other cancer-fighting chemicals such as indoles, says Campbell. "Our data indicate that you should eat a wide range of nutrients from many different foods, and most of those foods should be fruits, vegetables and grains," he says.

Though not all the experts agree that

### Mediterranean mysteries

**T**here's one place in the world, however, where a fatty diet seems to *prevent* heart disease. On

the hot and verdant island of Crete, coronary disease is virtually unknown, despite the

fact that its inhabitants' traditional diet derives 35 to 40 percent of its calories from fat—a level that rivals Americans' fat consumption. For generations people who live in Crete and other regions of the Mediterranean have used olive oil to cook their vegetables, prepare pasta sauces and coat their bread. In fact, some farmers even drink the stuff straight.

The Mediterranean diet, which is also very low in meat and rich in fruits, vegetables and grains, received a major plug when it was praised recently in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Monounsaturated fat—the kind in olive oil—may reduce the body's level of "bad" cholesterol, explains the article's coauthor Frank M. Sacks, M.D., a cardiovascular-disease researcher at Harvard Medical School. At the same time, monounsaturated fat may boost levels of the "good" cholesterol, which protects the heart.

Sacks confesses he put himself on a Mediterranean diet, with very good results: "Not only did I stay healthy and fit," he asserts, "but I usually wasn't hungry, and I lost 7 pounds."

Other experts can't swallow the fatty diet whole. A few critics charge that Crete's low heart-disease rates may have less to do with olive oil and more to do with a high consumption of fruits and vegetables. Skeptics also point out that the unrefined oil consumed by Greek farmers bears little resemblance to the olive-oil brands on our supermarket shelves. Still others concede olive oil's health value but point out that it's chock-full of calories, which would pack on the pounds for relatively sedentary Americans.

### The French paradox

**T**he most controversial research of all comes from France. That nation has a relatively low rate of cardiovascular disease, even though standard fare includes

wine with meals and a variety of cheeses. What's more, the French feast on rich foods like pâté and foie gras, which are made with fatty duck and goose liver.

Contrary to common belief, these fatty foods may be heart-healthy, says epidemiologist Serge Renaud, director of cardiovascular and nutrition research at the

National Institute of Health and Medical Research in Lyons, France. Calcium in cheese binds with fat, he explains, allowing it to be excreted, rather than absorbed, by the body. As for the duck and goose fats, Renaud says, "They have a compo-

sition closer to olive oil than to butter."

In addition, Renaud's studies suggest that regular wine consumption may help the heart by inhibiting blood clots and the heart attacks they can cause, though apparently the French also experience at least one negative side effect of alcohol: Cirrhosis of the liver is twice as common

in France as it is in America.

But many researchers have their own explanations for France's impressive health record. Marion Nestle, chairwoman of the Nutrition, Food and Hotel Management Department at New York University, attributes France's low heart-disease rate to past eating habits.

Traditionally the French ate more fruits and vegetables and less meat, oil, shortening and milk. Even today they often have un buttered bread with lunch and fresh fruit and cheese for dessert.

"In the '60s," Nestle explains, "the

French consumed perhaps 28 percent of their calories as fat. They've only been eating a fatty diet for about ten years, while the average American has been eating that way for 40 to 50 years. It takes 20 to 30 years for arteries to clog. The French just haven't caught up with us yet."

### On the home front

**S**o which international diet is the healthiest? For now, most experts are reluctant to endorse any one cuisine as ideal. They also warn that the studies are preliminary, and some of the health advantages could be due to factors other than diet, such as exercise or lower stress levels. But that's not to say we should ignore the dietary research from abroad. Taken together, these studies suggest a number of guidelines that make sense for every nationality.

**Go beyond oat bran.** All the international diets underscore the importance of fiber. What's more, Finnish studies remind us that the much-touted oat bran isn't the

## [ What you can learn from ... ]

COUNTRY OR REGION	DISEASE-FIGHTING FOODS	HEALTH BENEFITS
RURAL CHINA	Many plant-derived foods like brown rice, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, bean sprouts, mung beans, onions, garlic, snow peas, watercress and peppers	Lower risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, appendicitis, colon cancer, breast cancer and leukemia
THE MEDITERRANEAN	Olive oil, pasta and plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables	Lower cholesterol and lower risk for cardiovascular disease
FINLAND	Dark rye bread and whole-wheat cereals	Lower risk for colon cancer and breast cancer
FRANCE	Wine, fresh fruits, cheese, pâté and foie gras	Lower risk for cardiovascular disease



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## total health SPECIAL REPORT

only type of fiber that can keep us healthy. While oat bran is rich in soluble fiber, which is absorbed by the body and helps to lower cholesterol, foods with *insoluble* fibers may reduce the risk for colon and breast cancers, in addition to playing their well-established role in preventing constipation and hemorrhoids.

American Health Foundation epidemiologist Ernst Wynder advises people to take in at least 20 to 30 grams of fiber per day from a variety of foods to fill up on both forms of the nutrient. (Americans currently average 10 to 15 grams per day.) Good sources include legumes and whole-grain cereals, breads, pasta and rice, as well as fruits and vegetables.

With a little planning you can easily boost your fiber intake. When snacking, choose fruit or high-fiber, low-fat snacks such as Finn Crisp or Ry Krisp crackers and rice cakes. You can get your daily fiber quota by having ½ cup of bran cereal for breakfast (10 grams); two slices of

whole-wheat bread (5 grams) and an apple (5 grams) for lunch; and ½ cup of kidney beans (8 grams) and a ½ cup of cooked broccoli (2 grams) for dinner.

One note of caution: It's best to increase your fiber intake gradually, since these foods can leave you feeling gassy and bloated if you're not used to them.

**Eat healthy fats.** While the high-fat Mediterranean diet is controversial, we can learn at least one lesson from the Greeks and Italians. "Since you're going to have some fat in your diet," says Fred Mattson, M.D., a former cholesterol researcher at the University of California, "replace saturated fats with monounsaturates, such as olive oil or canola oil, as much as you can." (Federal guidelines specify that we should eat no more than 10 grams of saturated fat per day.)

Harvard's Sacks recommends using olive oil in cooking and frying instead of butter, margarine or vegetable shortening, or combining it with vinegar to make

salad dressing. "If the taste of regular olive oil is too harsh," he suggests, "buy a light olive oil or canola oil instead."

Other healthy substitutions: Flavor bean and lentil soups with a splash of extra-virgin olive oil, rather than cooking them with ham or beef; replace your butter dish with a cruet of olive oil for drizzling on bread, vegetables and pasta.

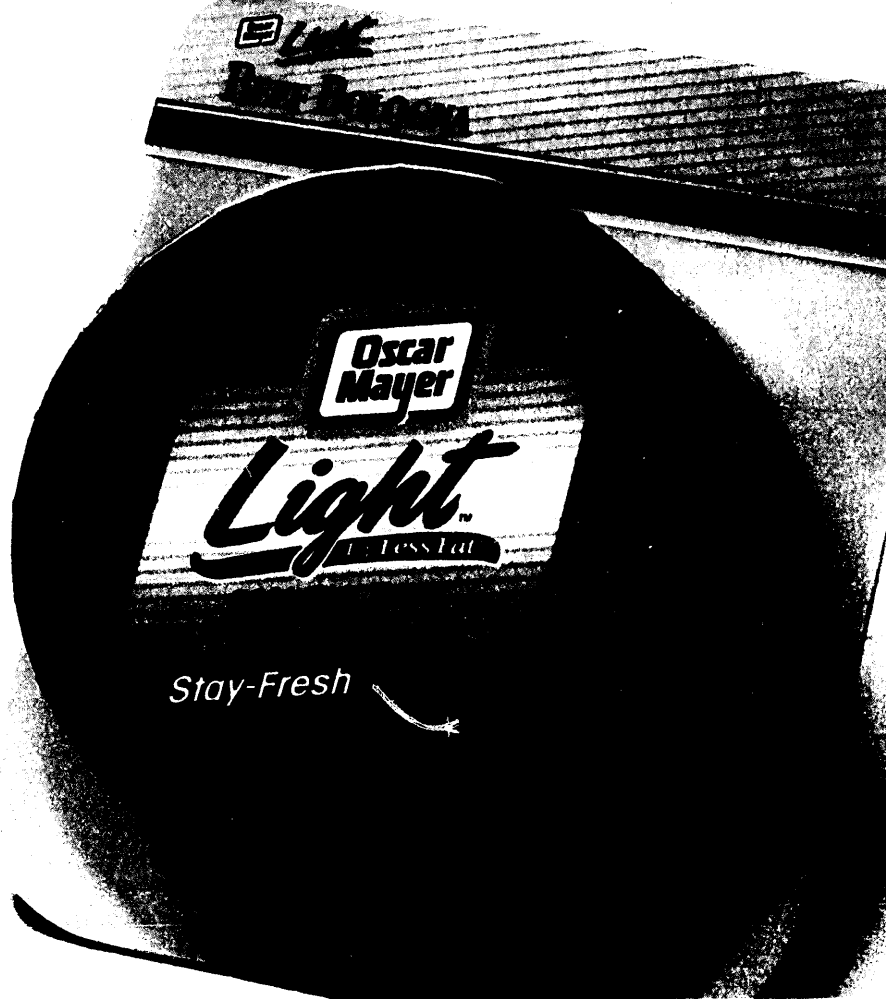
You can also cut back on unhealthy fats by choosing nonfat or reduced-fat foods. Most stores now stock slimmed-down versions of cheeses, milk, salad dressings, crackers and many meats. For dessert, take a cue from the French. Fresh fruits and cheese, such as grapes and goat cheese, pears and blue cheese, or apples and Cheddar, provide lower-fat alternatives to rich cakes and pies. "We have a saying in France," says Renaud. "Never finish a meal without eating a piece of fruit."

**Slimp on meat.** Another way to reduce saturated fat is to limit animal protein, such as cheese, milk, eggs and meat. Most

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Americans eat more than enough protein. At the same time, many of us should consume more fruits and vegetables. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's new food-guide pyramid suggests eating two to four servings of fruit and three to five servings of vegetables a day to get plenty of cancer-fighting nutrients.

To lower your consumption of animal protein, plan some meatless meals, such as Chinese soups and main dishes emphasizing tofu, fresh vegetables and rice; pasta with vegetable sauces (try making a sauce with fresh tomatoes and steamed eggplant, zucchini, peppers and onions); and Mexican dishes, like corn tamales, burritos and vegetarian tacos.

William Connor, M.D., a professor in the Division of Clinical Nutrition at the Oregon Health Sciences University in Portland and coauthor of *The New American Diet System*, recommends using meat, fish, poultry and cheese as condiments instead of as the main dish. "Use these foods

to spice up dishes based on vegetables, grains, beans or pasta," he says. A couple of tasty examples: spaghetti and marinara sauce topped with 2 tablespoons of Parmesan or other shredded cheese; a rice salad made with a few chunks of chicken or turkey, steamed peas, carrots, string beans and a low-fat vinaigrette dressing.

When you're preparing sandwiches, use less meat and more vegetables, such as bean sprouts, shredded lettuce and carrots, and chopped tomatoes and peppers, says Connor. Try stuffing a pita with chick-peas, lettuce, tomatoes and low-fat yogurt or salad dressing.

**hubs for your heart's sake?** Studies indicate that moderate consumption of wine and other alcoholic beverages—defined as no more than one drink per day for women and two or fewer for men—may indeed help reduce your heart-disease risk. (See "When a Drink Can Help Your Health," November McCall's.) But experts stop short of advising nondrinkers

to start using alcohol as a health strategy. "Alcohol contains empty calories, which lack nutritional value," says Margo Denke, M.D., a cholesterol researcher and assistant professor of internal medicine at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, "and alcohol can lead to health problems if taken in excess."

To get the maximum benefits from your diet, she suggests sampling a variety of international cuisines. "They're all fine," Denke says, "as long as you watch your calorie intake and body weight."

And Cornell's Campbell cautions against viewing any one food or beverage, such as rye bread, olive oil or wine, as the cure-all for our dietary deficits or excesses. As he says, "Americans have got to begin looking at the big picture, as revealed by all the research around the world, and make sensible changes in their diets." ■

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