



DIETS ON TRIAL

It's that time of year when we reach for the diet books – but which one? We asked nutrition experts to rank some popular plans. Donna Chisholm reports on the results.

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In 2007, best-selling American food writer Michael Pollan distilled the results of nearly a decade of research on healthy eating. His findings formed the first seven words of his 10,000-word essay in the *New York Times Magazine*: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” The brevity of the message was deeply ironic, really, given Pollan has made his name writing books about food.

Of course, there’s more to it than that, but actually not much. By “eat food”, Pollan means the sort of stuff your great-great-grandma would recognise, not the “food-like items” clogging the middle aisles of the supermarket.

It’s a mantra nutritionists have been repeating for many years now, but it’s basically dull and quickly lost in the cacophony of claim and counter-claim from the next new fad-diet book. Deep down, we probably do get it – but that doesn’t stop us searching for an alternative that doesn’t centre on lentils, legumes and more bloody beans.

When the My Food Bag business began in March 2013, for example, sending four or five days’ worth of quality ingredients and nutritionally sound recipes into the homes of Auckland’s time-poor, health-conscious upper middle-classes, it took, for those who could afford it at least, the guesswork out of gastronomy. The recipes, designed by nutritionist and *Masterchef* winner Nadia Lim, were balanced, calorie-counted and complete – including a vegetarian meal every week. With close to \$100 million in annual revenue and a subscriber base of almost 30,000 in New Zealand and Australia, it’s seen spectacularly rapid growth.

Within months of the launch, however, it seemed the non-meat dish had fallen out of favour; in response to client feedback, the frequency of the vegetarian option was cut to once-fortnightly. We might *know* what’s better for us but, in this case, when it came to putting our mouth where our money was, it was pushing shiitake uphill.

Three years on, Lim reckons the pro-veg message is finally getting more traction. In September, the brand launched a vegetarian bag, sales of which she says have “gone nuts – we’re stoked”. Many of the buyers aren’t vegetarians, she says, but simply want to include more meat-free meals in their diet and learn



Best-selling US food writer Michael Pollan.

how to cook them.

But those who eat plants exclusively or, as Pollan urges, “mainly”, are still in a tiny minority, with only around two per cent of New Zealanders identifying as vegetarian. In 2013, we came seventh in the OECD in a survey of countries that ate the most meat.

Part of the problem with our food choices, says world-leading American diet and health expert Dr David Katz, founding director of the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Centre, is that we’re fighting six million years of evolution.

“For most of that time, homo sapiens and our predecessors benefited if we

ate more sugar, more salt, more fat, more calories, more variety,” he tells *North & South* from Connecticut. “Only in very, very recent years, from a geological or evolutionary perspective, has our problem changed from having too little food and too much physical activity to having too little physical activity and too much food. We simply haven’t been able to catch up biologically. We crave sugar, we crave salt, we crave calories, we crave fat and we crave variety. And it used to be good to crave it, because getting it was hard. Now getting it is easy.”

Katz invented the NuVal scoring system now in 2600 supermarkets in

the US, which assigns a score of 1 to 100 based on the nutritional value of the food. “We’ve seen remarkable results – some people losing 100lb [45kg] simply by trading up choices in every aisle.” And the supermarkets don’t mind if sales of junk foods fall. “They’re agnostic as to what the shopper buys, as long as the shopper buys something.”

The New Year is traditionally the time we begin our fight back – again. We buy the latest diet book, rejoin the gym and regard that stalk of broccoli with renewed respect. Or we may simply Google “best diet”. To save you the trouble of trawling the 359 million results that search returns, we asked experts Elaine Rush, professor of nutrition at the Auckland University of Technology, and Sarah Hanrahan, dietitian at the Nutrition Foundation, to run the nutritional ruler over some of the most popular regimens, assessing them, among other things, for health, flexibility and “stickability”.

Two came out tied for first place – the Mediterranean Diet, which you’ll know all about unless you’ve been living under a rock since the mid-1990s, and the less well-known Blue Zones Diet, the product of work by *National Geographic* journalist and researcher Dan Buettner, based on the food and lifestyle traits of the longest-lived people in the world.

In his first book, the *New York Times* best-seller *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who’ve Lived the Longest*, Buettner discussed the lessons we can all learn from five longevity hot spots he’d identified around the world: Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa, Japan; Loma Linda, California (where more than 30 per cent of the population are Seventh Day Adventists, who are encouraged to be vegetarian); Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica; and Ikaria, Greece. All five produced a high rate of centenarians (about five per 10,000) and suffered a fraction of the diseases that kill the rest of us – including cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

Katz says the Blue Zones diets are as notable for their diversity as for what they share. In Loma Linda, they are vegans; in Costa Rica, the diet includes eggs, dairy and meat. In Ikaria and Sardinia, locals practise variations on the theme of Mediterranean diets. In Okinawa, a traditional plant-based,



National Geographic journalist and researcher Dan Buettner.

US researcher Dan Buettner says there are lessons we can all learn from five longevity hot spots he’s identified around the world.

rice-centric diet produces the same results. “In all cases, the theme is the same: real food, not too much, mostly plants.”

In a follow-up volume released in 2015, *The Blue Zones Solution*, Buettner explains how to integrate the diets and lifestyles of the zones into our own lives. “This is a paradigm shift in the way we think about health,” he says, from his Minneapolis base. “For 70 or 80 years, we’ve been told, ‘Do your exercise, eat your vegetables, get out and get moving, get away from the television set’, but we ignore all that. Research shows trying to modify behaviour is a near universal failure. The reason people in the Blue Zones live a long time is that they live

in an environment that subtly nudges them to eat more plants, to eat a little less, to move every hour, to socialise, and in a sense to live out their purpose, and that’s a really important factor.”

But isn’t trying to modify the environments of the rest of the 21st-century world a near-hopeless task as well? Buettner says no, and has the evidence it’s possible. So-called Blue Zones Projects have been introduced in 26 US cities, which give Blue Zones certification to schools, restaurants and food stores which modify their policies and layout in a way that encourages people to increase their plant-food consumption by 25 per cent. Some of the projects have been running for six years, with stunning results. Albert Lea, a city of 17,000 people in Minnesota, reported a 40 per cent drop in healthcare costs, and Spencer in Iowa a 25 per cent drop. Redondo Beach, Hermosa Beach and Manhattan Beach in Los Angeles credited the project with a 50 per cent drop in childhood obesity and a 20 per cent reduction in smoking.

It’s not about tackling kids’ school lunches Jamie Oliver-style, according to Buettner, but changing the environment. “Canteens are very hard to change, but if you put vegetables at the front of the line, as opposed to the end, the amount of vegetables consumed by kids goes up



A 100-year-old man working in a field in the "Blue Zone" of the Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica.

20 per cent." Blue Zones Project schools have removed junk food, sweets and soft drinks. "It's making the whole food environment in a school 30 per cent healthier, but it's not a silver bullet – it's silver buckshot."

Buettner describes himself as mainly vegan, but eats some fish. At 55, he holds three world records in endurance cycling. "Now I do yoga and just cycle to work." Yet even he lost nearly 4kg when he switched to a Blue Zones lifestyle.

He's working on a new book, which includes a meta-analysis of 155 diet surveys done over the past century in all five Blue Zones – a worldwide average of "what the 100-year-olds really ate, because you can't just ask them what they're eating now".

The results have clearly shown, he says, the "incredible power" of beans of all descriptions. "If you look at all five cultures and what they ate on an average day, they have about a cup a day of beans."

People in the Blue Zones often saved meat meals for celebrations and were mainly, but not exclusively, vegetarians. "Blue Zoners weren't absolutists. The

answer is knowing that animal products, meat in particular, are like radiation. We know that eating a lot of it – say two servings a day or more – about triples your chances of diabetes, cancer or heart disease, but eating very little – fewer than five times a month – probably won't hurt you."

Creating an environment that makes it easier to eat more plants might be something as basic as making a new vegetarian friend. "The second-best thing you can do is find a vegetarian recipe – and I'd argue a bean recipe you can make in one pot – that you love." He nominates his Ikarian Stew (see the recipe on page 45).

Moving to a healthier diet, he says, requires four things: the belief it's good for us, the knowledge we like it, the skills to make it, and a social network in which it's easy to make it.

Being time-poor is no excuse. "The Blue Zones diet should give the average person 10 extra years of life expectancy – that's about 90,000 hours over the course of your life."

Plenty of time to plan a few bean stews in the slow cooker.

In a nod to the cuisine of the centenarians of Okinawa, *North & South* invited nutritionists Rush and Hanrahan to discuss their analysis and diet rankings at Auckland's award-winning Japanese restaurant, Masu.

They're both Blue Zones fans. Buettner's work, says Rush, is the best evidence we have that, over the long term, diets like this increase longevity. And it doesn't involve demonising any food or nutrient. Rather, she says, it's all about the "four fs" the Blue Zoners practise: fingers – they don't smoke; feet – they walk; food – mainly plant; and fellowship, which is particularly crucial. It's not about being deprived of food, but enjoying it with others. "Families that eat together have a better diet and it usually means the food has been cooked at home."

At Masu, when the starter edamame beans arrive, they're liberally sprinkled with flaky salt. Should we worry? "No!" says Hanrahan. "We should be saying it tastes great!"

And, Rush points out, they require some effort to eat. "Look at all this



A 100-year-old woman lifts weights each morning in Loma Linda, California.

physical activity and fine motor skills!"

We order two of the five vegetable dishes: the broccoli and eggplant. But the rest of the meal is fish-protein heavy – scampi, tuna and snapper sashimi, crayfish taco and a "spider slider" in a squid-ink brioche. It's not long before Rush declares herself full, saying she finds fish very satiating. Hanrahan and I plough on to a teriyaki chicken skewer. "My satiety switch is made of stronger stuff," says Hanrahan.

While this meal contains more protein than they'd usually eat – their rule is having half the meal in vegetables – it's a treat. "It's different if you're doing it all the time," says Rush.

They say despite the fact nutritionists have been hammering basically the same message for more than 30 years, much of the public remains befuddled about healthy eating. "We know more and more about less and less. We're drilling down on small details, but losing sight of the whole picture," Rush says. Hanrahan agrees, and says the average home cook shouldn't need to be thinking about magnesium when they're putting dinner together or shopping for food.

Diets hold the promise of what we should be (or how we believe we should be) rather than how we are.

"They should be thinking half a plate of vegetables and good-quality protein. They should never have to get down to nutrient level."

But amid enthusiasm that Blue Zones may be the answer to our nutritional prayers, Auckland University professor of nutrition David Cameron-Smith has a word of warning. Though he agrees with a number of the Blue Zones principles – particularly the need to be part of a supportive group, and that healthy food choices need to become habitual

– he fears Pollard's "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants" mantra is hard to achieve in real life.

"It's an aspirational banner; a nice little catchphrase. Diets hold the promise of what we should be (or how we believe we should be) rather than how we are. It's the same as believing we should be sitting cross-legged on a sun-drenched deck doing yoga and looking fabulous. The sad reality is tired bodies, soggy breakfast cereal and a long commute to work. Diets have the same emotive pull, but the promise will very rarely be realised.

"It's not about being a monk or an avoider. It's about being someone who embraces food for what it is – a fabulous part of your life, a fabulous thing to enjoy. And, of course, the world is full of fabulous food and fabulous opportunities. But we're no longer children and we can't live in a candy store for the rest of our lives."

Rush and Hanrahan agree it's not an easy fix. "We are soaking in caffeine, alcohol and processed foods. Healthier diets are more expensive and fresh foods aren't always available or growing

in our backyard,” says Rush. “We know what to do, but how to do it is the challenge for us all.”

Food writer Lauraine Jacobs is sceptical New Zealanders will embrace the Blue Zones solutions. “I just don’t think New Zealand is ever going to be a really health-conscious place.” She acknowledges, though, the “huge shift” in recent years, with more chefs making vegetables, not meat, the main event on the plate. “They’re not advocating a vegetarian diet but knocking back on the quantity of meat.”

She says attitudes to the status of vegetables in the diet are obvious when you ask friends or workmates what they’re having for dinner tonight. “Unless you strike a vegetarian, the first thing they’ll say is, ‘I’m having fish, or lamb or beef.’ If you ask me, I’m more likely to say, ‘I got this fantastic asparagus up the road and some beetroot and we might have a little bit of steak with it.’”

Katz, a friend of Dan Buettner and an admirer and advocate for his work, says after two decades in the “trench warfare” of competing nutrition advice, he’s concluded some diet proponents are misguided, while others are sheer hucksters taking advantage of the latest preoccupation *du jour*. “Some are absolutely sincere and have just drunk far too deeply of their own Kool Aid. Robert Atkins [founder of the low-carb Atkins diet] was a clear example of that. I think his message was wrong and silly in some fairly obvious ways.”

One of the reasons scientists have such a hard job convincing the public of the right way to go, he says, “is that we never say we absolutely know and it’s a completely done deal. That’s how science works. And it’s hard for that to compete with, ‘I have seen the light. I know what no one else knows. There’s a vast conspiracy among everyone else trying to lead you the wrong way. I am the messiah, follow me.’”

“My advice to people when they hear that kind of absolute, almost religious, conviction is to step away from your credit card and nobody will get hurt.”

The Blue Zones research doesn’t replace what we already know from observational epidemiology, but simply supports it, he says. “It is wonderfully luscious icing on the cake.” Now if only we could have that cake and eat it, too.



A 101-year-old woman from the “Blue Zone” of the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica, where the local diet is rich in eggs, dairy and meat.

Ranking The Diets

So how would you fare on one of these diets? The Nutrition Foundation’s Sarah Hanrahan, who put together these meal plans for the Blue Zones, Mediterranean, dairy- and sugar-free diets, says she hasn’t included calorie counts. The Mediterranean-type diets, she says “are more about food as part of a healthy way of life. Eating this way means you can by and large forget about calorie counting, as long as you eat from modest-sized plates.”

THE BLUE ZONES DIET

The principles: Identifies common themes in the diets of those living in the Blue Zones – areas throughout the world with a higher ratio of centenarians. A community/social focus that helps to bring about change and reinforce it. Focuses on more traditional diets. Mainly plant-based but some areas have more seafood. Limits red meat. Blue Zones centenarians tend to eat meat dishes – usually pork or chicken – only once a week or even less, with meat often considered a celebratory meal. Suggests eating to 80 per cent full. Midday meal is the main one of the day, the evening meal the smallest. **Pluses:** Considers more than food – it’s a way of life. Acknowledges there is no one right way to eat. Affordable and sustainable. Offers many choices and looks beyond weight loss. **But:** Requires cooking skills.

Weight loss: Not a primary goal, but likely to produce it because of low glycaemic-index foods, unprocessed foods and calorie control.

A DAY’S MEAL PLAN:

Breakfast: Porridge made from rolled oats, topped with nuts and fresh fruit/berries.

Lunch: 2 slices wholegrain bread with ½ avocado and/or some homemade hummus (chickpeas, lemon juice, garlic, tahini, olive oil, salt, pepper). Lentil and cauliflower soup (olive oil, onion, garlic, ginger, curry powder, red lentils, cauliflower, vegetable broth, salt, pepper). Generous bowl of salad (lettuces, tomatoes, cucumber, celery, olives, feta cheese, drizzle of olive oil), ingredients in descending order of volume.

Dinner: Salmon marinated with miso paste or soy sauce. Three handfuls of salad made from baked kumara, black bean, capsicum, red onion, greens such as spinach, celery. Dressing: olive oil, lime juice, ground cumin and coriander, salt, pepper.

Drinks: Water, herbal teas, green tea, tea, coffee, red wine.

Snacks (if needed): Fresh fruit/berries, handful of nuts, Greek yoghurt, wholegrain crackers/bread with nut butter, last night’s leftovers.

Overall: Perfect for long-term eating, with plenty of flexibility.

★ 1st=



Above: Sarah Hanrahan (left) and Elaine Rush tuck into edamame beans at Masu, without worrying about the salt.

THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET

The principles: Based on mostly plant-based foods (fruit and vegetables), olive oil, wholegrain bread, beans and legumes, nuts and seeds. Different regional specialties include meat, chicken, vegetable and fish dishes, the choice depending on what is local and seasonal. Small portions of yoghurt, cheese (low-fat dairy) and eggs. Moderate wine intake explicitly included.

Pluses: Appropriate for the whole family, and encourages plenty of vegetables and healthy fats. Like Blue Zones, encourages the enjoyment of food and meal-times as a social activity, encourages wholegrains and establishes a healthy eating pattern that can be followed for life. No calorie counting. Evidence shows it can reduce the risks of heart disease and cancer. Includes treats, but not as an everyday option.

But: Need to keep an eye on portion size to avoid going overboard on calories.



The Greeks know how to eat – and enjoy life.



A centenarian woman dancing with a "young boy" on her birthday, Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica.

NINE LIVES

Okay, so you won't be moving to Okinawa or Sardinia any time soon, but you can learn from the lessons of the long-lived in the Blue Zones.

Here are author Dan Buettner's nine ingredients of longevity that we can all include in our daily lives.

- **Move naturally.** You don't need to join a gym or run a marathon. The Blue Zone oldies engaged in regular, low-intensity physical activity as part of their daily routine.
- **Stop eating** when you're 80 per cent full. Many of us eat till we're full (or over-stuffed). Okinawans stop as soon as they no longer feel hungry. None of the centenarians in Buettner's book had ever been on a diet.
- **Avoid meat** and processed foods. Most of the Blue Zone centenarians ate limited meat – they had little access to it. Beans were a cornerstone of their diets and they ate what they produced in their gardens. Some ate fish.
- **Drink red wine** in moderation. Consistency and moderation are key. In Okinawa, it's a daily glass of sake with friends; in Sardinia, a glass of

dark red wine with each meal and whenever friends meet.

- **Have a sense of purpose.** Okinawans call it *ikigai*, Nicoyans call it *plan de vida* – essentially, "Why I wake up in the morning". Craft a personal mission statement – it may be something as simple as seeing that your children or grandchildren grow up well.
- **Take time** to relieve stress. Meditate, relax, minimise time spent with television, radio, internet.
- **Belong.** Healthy centenarians everywhere, says Buettner, have faith. They belong to strong religious communities – it doesn't seem to matter which one.
- **Make family** a priority. The most successful centenarians in the Blue Zones built their lives around their family core with an emphasis on togetherness.
- **The right tribe.** Make your inner circle consist of the people who reinforce the good habits. The Framingham Heart study, which followed more than 12,000 people for more than 30 years, found subjects were more likely to become obese when their friends did.

Avoid meat and processed foods. The Blue Zone centenarians ate limited meat – they had little access to it.

A DAY'S MEAL PLAN:

Breakfast: Greek (unsweetened) yoghurt served with chopped fruit/berries, chopped nuts and sunflower seeds. Wholegrain bread with avocado or olive oil.

Lunch: Vegetable lentil soup topped with parmesan cheese. Wholegrain bread and hummus.

Dinner: Fish/chicken/lamb, baked kumara and pumpkin, green salad (capsicum, tomatoes, lettuce, feta, parsley and basil served with olive oil, garlic and lemon juice vinaigrette). Fruit for dessert (raw or cooked).

Drinks: Water, herbal teas, tea, coffee, wine.

Snacks (if needed): Fresh fruit/berries, handful of nuts, Greek yoghurt, wholegrain crackers/bread with nut butter, last night's leftovers.

Weight loss: Won't achieve weight loss following this diet alone – you'll need to include exercise and limit portion size.

Overall: A healthy, affordable way of eating for the whole family, with plenty of variety and flexibility.

★ **1st=**

WEIGHT WATCHERS

The principles: Points or calorie counting, with points allotted with a different weighting for healthier options – fruit and vegetables attract zero points. All food is allowed, long-term focus. Since December, members have received personalised activity goals and access to a new fitness/activity app.

Pluses: Works with family food



Our diets are not an easy fix, say Hanrahan and Rush, above, with writer Donna Chisholm (right).

– nothing special required and no food is forbidden, so there's plenty of choice. Weightings encourage healthier eating pattern.

But: Can be too expensive for some of the people who need to lose weight the most.

Weight loss: Evidence that the support of a group helps achieve weight-loss goals ahead of those trying to go it alone. Realistic goals – slow and steady weight loss, rather than a dramatic change.

A DAY'S MEAL PLAN

(for minimum daily allowance of 30 SmartPoints):

Breakfast: Poached egg and ham: 6 SmartPoints, 179 calories. Poached egg, half 65g wholemeal English muffin (toasted) with 1 Tbsp tomato chutney. Top with 30g 97 per cent fat-free sliced ham, and egg. Sprinkle with fresh chives.

Lunch: Warm quinoa and roasted vegetable salad: 10 SmartPoints, 387 calories, per serve. Uses small beetroot, kumara, red onion, broccoli florets, quinoa,

olive oil, lemon juice, fresh coriander, reduced-fat feta.

Dinner: Grilled steak, haloumi, vegetable stacks: 8 SmartPoints, 309 calories, per serve. Uses 125g lean beef per serve, kumara, parsley, garlic, lemon rind and



The low-carb, high-fat diet: meat, fish, eggs, vegetables, fruit, nuts, seeds, high-fat dairy, fats and healthy oils.

juice, zucchini, capsicum, Portobello mushrooms and 25g haloumi per serve.

Drinks: Skim-milk cappuccino: 3 SmartPoints. (A 150ml glass of red wine is 4 SmartPoints, a black tea or coffee 0.)

Snack 1: Fruit salad with apple and star anise syrup: 1 SmartPoint, 95 calories, per serve. Includes grapes, papaya, pineapple, star anise, cardamom pods, apple juice.

Snack 2: 12g nuts: 2 SmartPoints.

Overall: Proven track record and provides tools for sustainable change.

★ **3rd=**

THE LOW-CARB, HIGH-FAT DIET

The principles: Eat meat, fish, eggs, vegetables, fruit, nuts, seeds, high-fat dairy, fats, healthy oils. Don't eat sugar, wheat, pasta, seed oils, trans fats, highly processed foods, "diet" and low-fat products. Strict 4:1 ratio of fats to proteins and carbohydrates. Wine allowed.



THE SKINNY ON SNACKING

There you are, tucking into your mid-morning hummus and carrot sticks in the belief you're increasing your metabolic rate (thereby burning more calories), reducing hunger and stabilising your blood-sugar levels – when you stumble upon a newspaper article suggesting you've got it all wrong: that snacking will make you even more hungry and it interferes with the body's ability to burn fat.

The science sounds... well, sound. As Professor Stephen Atkin explained, when head of diabetes and metabolism at Hull York Medical School, the insulin released by our bodies upon eating will keep us going for around three hours, after which our bodies start using energy from our fat stores. So, if we can hold out for four to five hours between meals, we burn more fat. "In my view, the ideal would be not to snack at all. It's normal to feel hungry between meals."

Another UK expert, Naveed Sattar, professor of metabolic medicine at Glasgow University, says snacking puts organs such as the liver and pancreas under greater stress, as blood sugar and fat levels stay higher throughout the day, in turn increasing stress on blood vessels and, perhaps, the heart.

Some scientific studies on "between-meal eating episodes" support the notion of "three square meals", finding no difference between eating fewer or more frequent meals (calorie for calorie) on several key factors: weight loss, fat loss, appetite control and measurements of hormones that signal hunger and satiety.

Such studies contradict the

conclusions of a 2007 review of snacking science for the European Food Information Council, which found that eating more often doesn't burn more calories but can still have a beneficial effect on body weight – by making people less likely to gorge at mealtimes and allowing more opportunities through the day to compensate for any calorie deficits or excesses. The review also says healthy snacking produces a lower level of blood cholesterol and spreads the absorption of nutrients more evenly throughout the day.

No wonder a 2013 article in the UK's *Nutrition Bulletin* calls for more research to reach consensus about the optimum number and composition of meals and snacks for bodyweight control, health and wellbeing.

AUT Professor of Nutrition Elaine Rush and Nutrition Foundation dietitian Sarah Hanrahan back snacks – such as fruit and nuts – for balancing blood-sugar levels. (Rush also enjoys a special low-GI muesli bar being developed by AUT.)

If you do snack, combining elements from more than one food group (such as those carrot sticks and hummus, fruit and yoghurt, cheese and crackers) ensures you consume a wider variety of nutrients. Snacks that have high water content or that are high in fibre and protein result in stronger satiety signals and therefore lengthen the time between meals.

And bear in mind, one study found that if a snack was regarded as healthy, the participants ate 35 per cent more of it than snacks regarded as unhealthy.

STACEY ANYAN

Focuses on natural, unprocessed foods. Typical mix of 50 per cent energy from healthy fats, 25 per cent carbs and 25 per cent protein.

Pluses: Encourages plenty of whole foods and lots of vegetables, and allows for high-quality grains and legumes.

But: High saturated fat intake is associated with higher cardiovascular risk. Unnecessary restriction on highly nutritious foods, such as wholegrains. Difficult to get the exact amount of carbohydrate right – there can be individual variation.

Weight loss: Plenty of evidence that reduced carb intake is good for weight loss.

A DAY'S MEAL PLAN:

Breakfast: Eggs and vegetables, fried in coconut oil. Fry frozen vege mix (carrots, cauliflower, broccoli, beans), and add 3 or 4 eggs and spices. Add spinach.

Lunch: Asian lettuce wrap. Contains 120g minced chicken breast cooked with red onion, garlic, ginger, carrot, spices, soy sauce, rice vinegar, black bean sauce, honey. Shredded cabbage slaw mix.

Dinner: Lamb chops, roasted tomatoes and cauliflower mash. Includes 1-2 lamb chops depending on size, milk for mash, half head of cauliflower, olive oil, basil pesto. Steamed asparagus and broccoli.

Drinks: Water, coffee (with cream), tea, small amount wine.

Snacks: Nuts, fruit, vegetables, small amounts dark chocolate.

Overall: Emphasising whole foods and healthy fats is a good option, but evidence still supports reducing saturated fat. Could be difficult as a family diet to get the carb ratios right.

★ 3rd=

THE SUGAR-FREE DIET

The principles: Eliminates foods that contain added sugar. The most extreme forms also restrict fruit and vegetables that contain natural sugars.

Pros: Moves away from processed/sweetened foods and promotes cooking whole foods from scratch.

Improved blood-sugar control. Plenty of information available on how to be a sugar-free cook.

But: More cooking skills and time required. Focusing on only one nutrient/food can simply open the door to a different way of eating badly. Recommended substitutes such as honey, maple syrup and rice malt syrup are very similar to sugar and are broken down in your body in the same way as sugar.

Weight loss: Likely because of reduced calories.

A DAY'S MEAL PLAN:

Breakfast: Poached eggs on wholegrain toast and/or Weet-Bix with milk.

Lunch: Vegetable lentil soup topped with parmesan cheese. Wholegrain bread and hummus.

Dinner: Sausage, walnut and beetroot hash with Greek (unsweetened) yoghurt and salad.

Drinks: Water, herbal teas, green tea, coffee, smoothies.

Snacks: Berries, vegetables, seeds and nuts. Plain popcorn, vegetable chips, nuts, toasted chickpeas, nut butter on wholegrain toast. (Based on recipes from Sarah Wilson's book *I Quit Sugar*.)

Overall: Because going sugar-free forces you to eat less highly processed food, you may well move to a healthier diet with more whole foods and vegetables.

★ 5th

THE PALEO DIET

The principles: Based on the diets of our hunter-gatherer ancestors – no or limited grains, dairy, sugar or highly processed foods. Wide variations in application.

Pros: Moves away from processed foods and focuses on cooking whole foods from scratch. Encourages vegetables, fruits, seeds and nuts.

But: Includes larger portions of meat and processed meat than current dietary guidelines recommend. Most extreme versions have no dairy or grains, when there's plenty of evidence to suggest these can be high-value foods we are well adapted to digest. May exclude legumes, despite them



The Paleo Diet — meat readily available now tends to be from commercially farmed animals and may contain more unhealthy fats than the wild animals the hunter-gatherers would have chased and eaten.

being linked to health benefits. Large amount of meat can be relatively expensive, although there are plenty of ideas available for using cheaper cuts. However, meat readily available now tends to be from commercially farmed animals and may contain more unhealthy fats than the wild animals the hunter-gatherers would have chased and eaten.

Weight loss: Has been associated with weight loss and lower calorie intake.

A DAY'S MEAL PLAN:

Breakfast: 3 eggs, poached; spinach, wilted, 100g; 1 tomato, halved and seared in pan; kumara, ¾ cup sautéed (use precooked and reheat for speed).

Lunch: Shredded chicken, 120g; mixed greens, 2 cups; cucumber slices, ½ cup; 2 tomatoes. Other salad vegetables as desired, eg sliced radish etc. Root vegetable salad (cooked kumara, beetroot, carrots, etc), 1 cup. Olive oil

and lemon juice dressing, fresh chopped herbs to flavour.

Snack: Small handful mixed fresh nuts, about 2 Tbsp. Piece of seasonal fruit. Carrot and celery sticks.

Dinner: 200g fresh fish, foiled and baked in oven or pan fried in a little butter. Ratatouille: classic dish with courgettes, eggplant, tomatoes, capsicum, onion, etc. Roasted pumpkin pieces. Side salad with olive oil and vinegar dressing.

Dessert: ½-1 cup of berries.

Drinks: Herbal teas, minimal coffee. No soft drinks or fruit juices. Alcohol in moderation, but not beer (contains gluten). (Meal plan by Auckland paleo nutritionist Julianne Taylor, as recommended by founder Professor Loren Cordain.)

Overall: With an emphasis on whole foods and plenty of vegetables, Paleo can be a healthy diet. However, eliminates whole food groups which are replaced with more expensive protein.

★ 6th

JUICING - HEALTHY OR JUST TRENDY?

“Finally, Auckland welcomes a dedicated juice bar” announced an online article in October. It’s competing with several new inner-city businesses offering bespoke, cold-pressed juices, for which you’ll see little change from \$10 for a 250ml serving.

Like many trends that reach our shores, however, juicing is already passé overseas. In New York, where the juice bar craze attracted investment from the likes of Starbucks and spurred fanatics to go on Manhattan “juice crawls”, “peak juice” has been reached.

Foodie gospel has it that cold-pressed juice – which involves the application of extreme pressure to crush the juice out of the pulp – is better for you. Proponents say the spinning blades of traditional

centrifugal juicers, which mash fruit and vegetables up against a fine mesh with a metal blade, destroy the nutrients by exposing them to heat and oxygen.

But much in the same way frozen yoghurt’s health claims have been overstated (local chain Yoghurt Story was charged last December by the Commerce Commission for making false claims about the product’s health benefits), this seems to be another case of the sales pitch skipping lightly over the science.

Experts say the temperatures in centrifugal juicers don’t get high enough to significantly alter the plants’ chemicals and vitamins, and the assumption that cold-pressing results in

more nutrients is just that: an assumption. Even if cold-pressed juice does contain more nutrients, it’s not known whether those nutrients are better absorbed by our bodies. To add to the uncertainty, micronutrients behave in different ways. The lycopene found in tomatoes, for instance, changes into a form that is better absorbed by our bodies when heated or cooked.

Large amounts of nutrients don’t equate to more benefits. Fresh orange juice contains more vitamin C than that made from frozen concentrate. But even a 355ml serve of the frozen variety contains more than the recommended daily amount of vitamin C, and there are (as yet) no proven benefits of consuming more vitamin C than is recommended. Also, the naturally occurring fibre present in cold-pressed juice varieties – touted as another advantage – might actually prevent certain nutrients from being absorbed.

Elaine Rush, professor of nutrition at AUT, says aside from being “a saviour for people with bad teeth who can’t chew”, drinking juice “takes away the natural physiological response to chewing. It’s very easy to overindulge with things that go straight down.”

Nutrition Foundation dietitian Sarah Hanrahan adds: “If we’re chewing less, it’s another step to eating more quickly and perhaps not enjoying it as much because it stays in the mouth for a shorter time.”

Stripped of the fibre-rich satiety factor of whole fruits and vegetables (you can only eat so many apples in one sitting), juice can be surprisingly high in calories. Dan Buettner, author of *The Blue Zones*, likens juice consumption to the quick calorific hit of fizzy drinks. “The glycemic index on that is as bad as Coke. For eight ounces, there are 14 grams of sugar. People get suckered into thinking, ‘Oh, I’m drinking this juice.’ Skip the juicing. Eat the fruit. Or eat the vegetable.”

STACEY ANYAN



THE ZONE DIET

The principles: Eating a certain ratio of macronutrients per meal limits inflammation, controls blood-sugar levels and results in a healthier weight. Daily diet consists of three meals and two snacks, each containing 30 per cent fat (low saturated and omega 6), 30 per cent protein, 40 per cent carbohydrates (low GI, fruit and vegetables mostly). Females 1200 calories a day, male 1500 calories. Egg yolks, red meat and processed foods are limited.

Pluses: Doesn’t require special food, and emphasises whole foods and healthy fats. Encourages plenty of vegetables and fruit, and has a lower carb intake, which is good for weight loss but not ridiculously low. Meals aren’t complex.

But: It’s very proscribed, with not a lot of room for personal preferences – indeed, you have to be something of a mathematician to work out the ratios – and meals have to be eaten at specified times. Leaves out wholegrains, and there’s controversy around the science supporting the Zone claims.

Weight loss: Restriction in calorie intake would result in weight loss.

A DAY’S MEAL PLAN

(for an average larger female or smaller male):

Breakfast: 2 cups fresh fruit salad, 1 cup low-fat cottage cheese, 6 tsp slivered almonds or chopped nuts.

Snack: 30g low-fat cheese like Edam, ½ cup grapes.

Lunch: 100g chicken breast, cooked, no skin, chopped; ¼ cup chickpeas or kidney beans; ½ capsicum, chopped; 1 cup sliced green beans, blanched; 1 tomato, chopped. Toss salad with 4 tsp olive oil and vinegar dressing. 1 pear.

Snack: ½ cup fresh pineapple, 40g ham.

Dinner: 170g salmon; steamed mixed vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower, green beans, capsicum, courgettes, carrots, 2 cups; 4 tsp toasted almonds mixed with vegetables.

Dessert: 1 large orange, or 1 glass wine with meal.

Drinks: Allows drinks with no sugar. Tea, coffee, herbal tea.



GETHY

Suggests limiting caffeine to 1-2 cups a day. Milk allowed, light blue or trim recommended. No fruit juices or soft drinks.

(Meal plan by Julianne Taylor, based on guidelines by Zone founder Dr Barry Sears.)

Overall: Less likely to be sustained long-term because it’s too prescriptive, which means you’ll need to get the “user’s manual” out every day. You need to be well organised and always thinking about and planning your meals.

★ 7th

THE 5:2 DIET

The principles: Intermittent fasting. Followers argue that eating less occasionally is easier than cutting every day, and more accurately reflects how our ancestors ate. Eat normally five days a week (approximately 2000 calories for women, 2400 for men) and severely restrict intake (500/600 calories) two days a week.

Pros: No specific food groups banned. Relatively simple to follow.

But: No evidence of long-term effectiveness and not appropriate for family eating. Doesn’t address causes of weight issues. Focus is on energy intake.

Weight loss: Will reduce weight through energy restriction, as long as there’s no “binge eating” on the other days.

A FASTING DAY’S MEAL PLAN:

Breakfast: Spinach omelette (1 medium egg, 60g spinach). 92 calories.

Lunch: Fruity prawn cocktail (prawns, apple, celery grapes, fat-free fromage frais). 130 calories.

Dinner: Moroccan root tagine with couscous (tagine includes carrot, courgette, leek,

chickpeas). 238 calories.

Drinks: Water, black coffee, tea.

Snack: 1-2 mandarins.

37 or 74 calories.

Overall: There is evidence that periodic fasting has health benefits, but that’s usually in the context of an overall healthy eating pattern. Doesn’t address this, however, only calorie intake.

★ 8th

THE DAIRY-FREE DIET

The principles: Remove dairy-based foods.

Pros: Useful for genuine intolerance, allergies. There are now good non-dairy substitutes, such as calcium-fortified almond and soy milk.

But: Eliminates a food group that has nutritional benefits and alternatives can be expensive.

Doesn’t address unhealthy eating patterns. No evidence of any benefit for those without allergies.

Weight loss: Not primarily a weight-loss diet, but cutting out higher-calorie dairy options such as cream and high-fat cheese could reduce weight.

A DAY’S MEAL PLAN:

Breakfast: Porridge made from rolled oats and water, topped with nuts and fresh fruit/berries.

Lunch: Wholegrain sandwiches with variety of fillings – egg, hummus, salad, avocado. Fruit.

Dinner: Baked fish, baked kumara and pumpkin, green salad (capsicum, tomatoes, lettuce, parsley and basil served with olive oil, garlic and lemon juice vinaigrette).

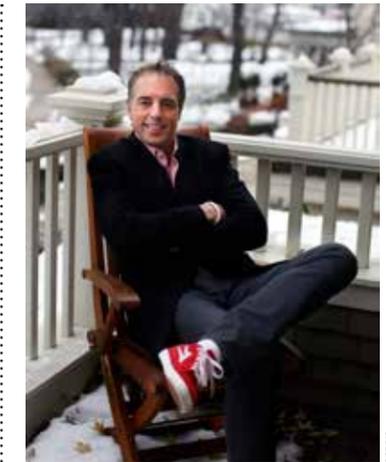
Dessert: Fruit, raw or cooked.

Drinks: Water, herbal teas, green tea, coffee, non-dairy milks (soy, almond, rice).

Snacks: Berries, vegetables, seeds and nuts. Plain popcorn, vegetable chips, nuts, toasted chickpeas, nut butter on wholegrain toast. (Meal plan by nutritionist Sarah Hanrahan.)

Overall: Appropriate for those with problems digesting dairy products or who have an allergy/intolerance. Otherwise unnecessary.

★ 9th



CONRIS

Ikarian Stew

Dan Buettner (above) believes it’s important to find plant-based recipes you love and nominates this stew as a good place to start.

Ingredients

- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large red onion, finely chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 fennel bulb
- 1 cup black eyed peas (with dried peas, bring to a boil, boil for 1 minute, remove from heat, cover and let sit for an hour. Drain, rinse, and use.)
- 1 large, firm, ripe tomato, finely chopped
- 2 tsp tomato paste, diluted in ¼ cup water
- 2 bay leaves
- salt to taste
- 1 bunch dill, finely chopped

Directions

1. Heat half the olive oil over medium heat and cook the onion, garlic and fennel bulb, stirring occasionally, until soft (about 12 minutes). Add the black-eyed peas and toss to coat in the oil.

2. Add the tomato, tomato paste and enough water to cover the beans by about an inch. Add the bay leaves. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer until the black-eyed peas are about half-cooked. (Check after 40 minutes, but it may take over an hour.)

3. Add the chopped dill and season with salt.

4. Continue cooking until the black-eyed peas are tender. Remove, pour in remaining olive oil and serve. +