

Traditional Diets: Wisdom Worth Preserving

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Received: August 16, 2016; Published: August 19, 2016

Awareness of traditional diets may advance contemporary nutritional science [1]. Traditional diets are patterns of eating inspired by the rich culinary histories of cuisines around the globe; highlighting seasonal and regional produce, hearty recipes, and the pleasures of the table. Nevertheless, these traditional ways of eating seem to be getting lost while contemporary diet-related recommendations continue to drift away from their wisdom. Grant funding, academic publications, conferences and popular media accounts related to diet commonly reflect an underlying presupposition that the epidemiological method has the greatest scientific validity as well as the most potential for elucidating human nutrition requirements. What can we learn from traditional diets?

The gold-standard Mediterranean diet is perhaps the most well-known traditional eating pattern, but emerging research affirms that many of the most well-cherished traditional diets have something to teach us about health and nutrition as highlighted in Table 1.

Geographical region	Description	Highlights
Mediterranean	High in fibre and unsaturated fats, rich in polyphenol sources. Includes both animal and vegetarian foods.	Prevention of DRCD Importance of social aspect of eating
Okinawa	High in vegetables and seafood, low in dairy, grains, and sugars.	Longevity Low levels of DRCD
Arab	Higher in animal-origin foods than most of the other traditional diets. Focus on slow cooking and preservation of foods based on cooking techniques.	Adaptability to local food production Oral tradition of recipe preservation Communal eating
Mexican	Mostly plant-based, with a variety of seasonal vegetables, tropical fruits and alternative protein sources including pulses and insects.	Local food production Dietary variety
South Asian	Mostly plant-based, with pulses and rice as the staples.	Accessibility Sustainability (being mostly plant-based)
DRCD: diet-related chronic diseases.		

Table 1: Traditional diets and their highlights for health and sustainability.

While at first it may be difficult to identify common characteristics across these diets, upon more detailed exploration we see emerging similarities such as low processing of foods, slow cooking, preference for local seasonal produce, high regard for non-animal sources of protein, and dietary variety. From each traditional diet there is always something worth rescuing. For example, the importance of communal eating from the Arab diet, where social bonds are strengthened over food. The “alternative” protein sources (insects) [2] of the traditional Mexican diet, which may play an important role in the future as meat production becomes more difficult. Close examination of the traditional Japanese diet proves that, although very different from Western diets, Japanese cuisine embodies all the principles of nourishing traditional food ways. It is rich in fat-soluble vitamins from seafood and organ meats and in minerals from fish broth, and contains plenty of lacto-fermented foods.

Across cultures and time, food has not only been a source of energy. Traditional diets are also about maintaining health, treating disease, avoiding waste, looking after the environment, and celebrating memorable events; all through food. Adaptation to various life stages is a natural process in most traditional diets, with adjustments made for periods of gestation, growth, and any existing health condition. Knowledge of the role of food and its alterations was transmitted from one generation to the next. Today, people are more disconnected with how food is grown and cooked than ever before. Children do not always know where their food comes from, young adults do not always develop cooking skills, and as we become busier with everyday life, we rely on time-saving strategies to feed ourselves.

Our distance from the kitchen and traditional ways of eating has come at a cost. We are no longer able to grasp our bodies' cues for hunger and satiety. We are eating out of habit and comfort. Over the past few decades, changes in global dietary patterns tending towards a more Westernized diet, have led to major changes in the health status of the world's population [3]. Diet-related chronic diseases keep increasing and have become the main cause of death for most countries. Along with the damage we create to ourselves, we are damaging our environment by holding on to non-sustainable food production practices. The degradation of land, carbon emissions, water shortages and cross contamination are only some of the consequences we are responsible for due to growing agriculture and other forms of food processing.

The message behind this editorial is not to turn against process, but rather to integrate what was known before with what we know now. The food industry, aided by nutritional science, has achieved extraordinary success. In terms of the time and effort required for the acquisition of food, this basic commodity is more available than ever before.

Traditional diets [4] have allowed people of every race and every climate to be healthy. With varying degrees of combinations, they are however generally compiled of whole natural foods—meat with its fat, organ meats, whole milk products, fish, insects, whole grains, tubers, vegetables and fruit—as opposed to contemporary creations made with white sugar, refined flour and chemically altered vegetable oils. Eating does not need to be complicated. The recipes, food combinations, and cultural traditions of traditional diets act as a guide for how to lead a healthy lifestyle. By embracing traditional diets, we can rediscover the joy of eating.

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Volume 4 Issue 5 August 2016

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