EDITOR’S NOTE

Food for thought

When my father was 40, he discovered Adelle Davis. The best-selling author of books such as Let’s Eat Right to Keep Fit and Let’s Get Well and a frequent guest on Johnny Carson’s Tonight Show, Davis evangelized diet as the path to health. Her dietary recommendations included unprocessed foods, large quantities of vitamin supplements, and avoiding simple sugars and saturated fats—all of which were supposed to improve your mental abilities and prevent heart disease and cancer. Breakfast at our house included a pile of vitamin bottles in the middle of the table and the whirring sound of the Osterizer as my father prepared “tiger’s milk,” a concoction that variously contained skimmed milk, orange juice, Brewer’s yeast, bananas and wheat germ. Although it was a forerunner of today’s smoothies, I always thought that only somebody convinced of its health-promoting qualities could enjoy it.

Davis was controversial, sparking criticism from scientific and medical authorities who claimed that her ideas had little support from the reams of studies she quoted and that some of her recommendations, such as high doses of vitamins, were potentially dangerous. “Food faddism” was a charge levelled against her and other diet gurus in the 1960s and ’70s.

Since Davis’ death in 1974, food hasn’t gotten any less controversial, fueled in part by the quixotic opinions of medical science which seems to change its stance on diet almost biannually. Eggs are good, eggs are bad. Butter is good, butter is bad. Our food fads seem to cycle like El Niño. Although oat bran was the secret to saving your arteries? Today’s tiger’s milk is frequently a green slurry chock full of veggies and assurances of weight loss and more energy.

Buried in the stew of confusion is the fundamental truth that diet is important and does affect a person’s health. Too many calories are bad. Too much simple sugar, especially in the form of fructose, contributes to diabetes and weight gain (Adelle Davis is smiling in her grave). And trans fat seems to have earned a position on the list of no-no’s that it’s not likely to lose, especially as politicians call for bans on it.

With some sound dietary principles established and in response to the age-old criticism that doctors and the health care system don’t know or care enough about nutrition, medical schools and health care institutions have inaugurated innovative nutrition classes for medical students and physicians. They also have started exporting nutritious foods to communities that don’t have easy access to them. Preventing diabetes, obesity and heart disease can start at the dinner table, and the medical system needs to sponsor the changes. And the fix is not like cod liver oil—it’s enjoyable. Rather than using books and lectures, these classes and programs teach by feeding, spreading the gospel of veggies and grains.

A lot of what Adelle Davis preached was a bit flakey but she did have more than a kernel of sound nutritional truth in her sermons. I guess I won’t give away my Osterizer.

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