

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE

HERE'S WHAT I EAT ON AN AVERAGE day: an energy bar, cheddar-flavored rice cakes, a banana, some baked chips, and for dinner, maybe a slice of pizza washed down with diet lemonade. Then if I'm feeling wild, I'll have a slice of fat-free pound cake. This menu horrifies my husband, an amateur gourmet cook. "Why do you eat that fake stuff?" he asks. I give him my usual answers: I don't have time for real meals. I like feeling "light" as opposed to stuffed. It keeps my energy up. But the real reason is that I am always thinking about food. I remind him that I've had a robust appetite since birth—my first word was *more*—and I can't exactly eat brownies nonstop.

He shakes his head. We've had this conversation many times. He grabs my latest discovery, a box of jalapeño "munchies," a low-fat version of pizza rolls from the health food store, and says, "Can you please define a *munchie*?"

I can't. All I know is that if I'm going to eat all day, then grazing on low-fat or low-carb snacks and meals is the only way I know to maintain my weight. But later, after polishing off a bag of cheddar and sour cream baked chips (not a two-ounce portion but a family-size bag), I think about my husband's questions and start wondering about the trade-off for feeling so light. Those chips were the color of a highway safety cone, and why was sugar the third item on the list of ingredients? What if I ate the real-food counterparts to all my low-cal foods—actual ice cream, for instance? Would my thighs expand faster than the

To keep her weight down, JANCEE DUNN lived on a round-the-clock snackfest of chiplike things, frozen "treats," and other foods not found in nature. What would happen, we wondered, if instead of mountains of fake food, she tried reasonable amounts of the real thing? Steak. Cheese. Full-fat ice cream. Would she get ravenous? Tired? Fat? A month after accepting our challenge, Dunn weighs in.

Sun Belt suburbs? Would I feel sluggish from the changes? And if I started eating cheese or cookies or roast beef, would I ever be able to stop?

I wasn't sure. My diet plan has always been about leveraging science and technology to fool my taste buds and Mother Nature, but when *O* asked me to give up my faux foods in favor of the real thing for a month, I thought it might be time to try something different. So I said yes.

WEEK 1

KNOWING THAT THIS WILL BE A RADICAL shift in my diet, I've arranged to talk to a woman who's written a best-selling book about enjoying fabulous food in tiny amounts, as well as two nutrition experts, and Danny Meyer, the

incredibly busy owner of some of New York's consistently top-rated restaurants, who always tries to make time for a homemade lunch.

The first of my unofficial advisers is Mireille Guiliano, president of the Champagne company Clicquot and author of *French Women Don't Get Fat*. The French, Guiliano explains in her book, refuse to think of a meal as a guilt-inducing activity. French women make a ritual of sitting down for a meal—they do not snack or eat on the run. They also don't torture themselves; they take pleasure in wine and cheese and pastries—all kinds of foods that I've deprived myself of—but in moderation.

We meet at Jean Georges restaurant, a glorious, four-star paean to French cuisine in New York City. As a waiter serves Guiliano a jewel-like piece of salmon and a few perfect spears of asparagus, I tell her about my low-cal lifestyle. Like all the experts I'll meet, she's aghast. During our three-hour meal, she drinks a generous glass of Champagne and eats both bread and molten chocolate cake, but, following a key tenet of her book, only three bites of each. "The first bites are the best, anyway," she says. I try her rule, then put my fork down when she does. She's right: If you can just hold off that more-more-more urge for five minutes, you won't bolt down the whole serving. We share our dishes with much exclaiming (dining with her is a festive event), and Guiliano tells me about her passion for cooking with fresh, seasonal ingredients.

For dinner that night, in the spirit of Guiliano, I leave the frozen diet angel hair pasta marinara in my freezer and make my own, using vine-ripe tomatoes and fragrant basil. I imitate Guiliano and eat slowly, putting my fork down frequently. I still devour the whole thing. French women may not get fat, but I'm afraid I might.

WEEK 2

WHAT IS THE ALL-NATURAL EQUIVALENT of my lunchtime peanut butter energy bar? Disturbingly, my next adviser finds it hard to say. "Energy bars are not a whole lot different from candy bars," says Lisa Young, PhD, nutritionist and ▶



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THE REAL THING, BABY!



Our writer comes home to real food for a month—and has, easily, twice the energy she had before.

author of *The Portion Teller: Smartsize Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss*. “You’re better off having peanut butter on a banana.” Easy enough. Young is more forgiving about my cheddar-flavored rice cakes, but I’m going for the real deal. I buy some whole grain crackers and, exercising my newfound freedom, a wedge of Spanish sheep’s milk cheese rather than cheddar (which is what the cheese flavor in faux food invariably is). The toasted-grain texture of the cracker and sharp pungency of the cheese make the rice cakes taste like Styrofoam peanuts.

IT’S A LOT MORE DIFFICULT TO give up my diet lemonade, which, I have to admit, I buy by the case. Young says there’s nothing terrible about these drinks—as long as I’m getting enough water—but since my mission this month is to try to live without diet products, she suggests substituting flavored seltzer. “You can tell people to drink water until you’re blue in the face, but they won’t,” she says. “Flavored seltzer has the bubbles. It’s a little more appealing.” I run out and pick up lemon-lime seltzer. It does have a nice zing, but I’m missing the sweetness of my diet drink. I remember that Young also likes sparkling water mixed with juice, so I go back to the store and buy clementine, pomegranate, and cherry juices. They’re a tad pricey, but since I’m just throwing in a few splashes, I figure it’s worth the extra money. A clementine cocktail is better than seltzer alone: bubbly and fresh tasting.

After dinner one night, I make my usual journey outside to get a treat (I’ve never been able to keep desserts in the house). This time I resist the temptation to amble down the block to a local storefront for a large cup of a low-fat pecan praline dairy concoction that isn’t frozen yogurt and isn’t quite ice cream but is the addiction of most of my friends here on the East Coast. Instead I go to a deli and buy something I haven’t had in at least a year: vanilla swiss almond ice cream. I’ve been perfectly happy with the low-fat stuff, which I think is creamy and satisfying. I cautiously dig in.

Cue choir music!

That velvety texture and pure, clear vanilla flavor—it’s heaven in a bowl. Young says there is a place for both high and low



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frozen treats. “I happen to like the low-cal varieties,” she says, “but I don’t buy the jumbo size in a waffle cone with all the toppings, which could easily have 500 to 600 calories.” What alarms her is when I tell her I occasionally have a large-size serving in place of a meal. (What alarms me is that I’ve been telling myself that that particular size with all the toppings has negligible calories.)

“I see that kind of substitution all the time—it’s a big problem with teenagers and adults who have low-cal varieties for lunch and dinner and develop an iron deficiency,” says Young. While I don’t think she means I can use real ice cream to prevent iron deficiency, I suddenly realize that barely any of the diet foods I eat provide any discernible vitamins or minerals. I used to think if I had a multi-vitamin, my nutritional needs were pretty much covered, but here’s a crazy idea: Maybe my nutrients could actually come from my food?

WEEK 3

IT OCCURS TO ME THAT WHEN I WAS continually snacking or eating micro-portions, there was no end to my lunches or dinners, and I never felt actually full. What I used to think of as feeling heavy turns out to be the sensation of being satiated after a well-balanced meal. Now I am free, for once, of the never-ending cycle of a salty snack followed by a sweet one followed by a salty one. The hardest thing, in fact, has been making the effort to prepare my new meals. I complain about it one morning on the phone to my friend Liz. “You’re making a smoothie?” she says. “How do you find the time?” Then it dawns on me: Find the time? Dump yogurt, frozen fruit, and juice into a blender. Turn on blender. Done. This is time consuming only in comparison to scarfing something while standing in front of the pantry.

"Eating should not become just one more item on a list of multitasks," says Danny Meyer, when I catch up with him in his downtown Manhattan office. His schedule is unendingly hectic—he runs eight New York restaurants and is actively involved in Share Our Strength, an antihunger organization supported by people in the culinary industry. The day I talk to him, Meyer sits down with a bowl of vegetable soup and chats with a coworker. "When you eat on the run, it's a missed chance to connect with a human being," he says. The soup is homemade—Meyer is fanatical about that. His restaurants Gramercy Tavern and Blue Smoke make everything from scratch, down to the graham crackers for their Key lime pie. "Because it tastes better, it's better for the environment, and it's better for you," he says. "Food does not exist to save us time."

I don't see myself baking my own crackers—especially ones that would be crushed up for piecrust—but I take his point about trading off speed for satisfaction. Sometimes in the afternoons, I would throw a bag of popcorn in the microwave. It's done in three minutes and contains artificial sweetener, so it's the perfect combination of salty and sweet, though it does have partially hydrogenated soybean oil, which, yes, is a trans fat. (When I confessed this habit to *Young*, she moaned. I believe her exact words were: "Oh, God—horrible.")

So I try air-popped popcorn instead. I borrow an ancient air popper from my dad. It takes a little longer, but the popcorn actually tastes like corn.

WEEK 4

IT'S LUNCHTIME, AND IN PLACE OF my beloved jalapeño cheese snacks, I make a simple quesadilla with a spoonful of salsa verde—it's warm, satisfying, and easy. Then I tackle my afternoon sugar hankering. Normally, I'd roll out my sugar-free, fat-free instant chocolate pudding and eat probably three of its four servings. As an alternative, I decide to make a recipe for chocolate rice pudding from Guiliano's book. Soon the most heavenly aroma fills my apartment. The pudding has to simmer 20 minutes to

thicken, in sharp contrast to the store-bought kind, which firms up in 120 seconds. I savor every delectable spoonful, and I'm pleasantly satisfied after one small bowl. I'm reminded of what Guiliano said over our lunch: "When you cook at home, you learn what you are putting in your body."

At lunch the following day, I make a tuna salad with real mayo and trade my usual bag of baked potato chips for oven fries with olive oil and sea salt. It feels indulgent to have fries (even though a serving has only a few more calories than a medium-size apple), but they taste like what they are—fresh-cut potatoes. What's even more appealing is that they have no trans fats and didn't give me heartburn afterward, which is always the case with the chips. I start to think that maybe something that requires postserving antacids is not that good for me.

A few nights later, I'm overtaken by my craving for after-dinner sweets. I'd ordinarily scurry to the deli to get sugar-free chocolate chip cookies like a junkie in need of a fix, but this time I manage to resist the urge. Their sweetness comes from isomalt, a sugar alcohol, says Michael Jacobson, PhD, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer advocacy group. Sugar alcohols—including maltitol, mannitol, and sorbitol—have fewer calories than sugar and don't raise your blood sugar as quickly as the real thing. But there is a downside. "The Atkins diet generated an enormous number of foods made with sugar alcohol, and my concern about them is that

they can cause explosive diarrhea," he says darkly. I haven't had that response to the cookies, thankfully, but I learn they can also cause gas and bloating in some people, so instead of the cookies I choose a bar of dark chocolate. It delivers such a lusciously intense flavor that I'm able to stop after a few squares rather than eat the whole bar. That has to be a first for me.

THIS NEWFOUND MODERATION has been one of the most surprising aspects of my little experiment. When I gave myself permission after years of denial to eat ice cream and cheese and chocolate, I went a little bonkers. A few nights after my meal with Guiliano, I topped a bowl of strawberries with a mound of real whipped cream the size of a softball. But after about a week, my appetite naturally scaled back when I discovered that feeling Thanksgiving-stuffed every day isn't a pleasant sensation.

And now for the big question: How much weight did I gain? A mere pound and a half. (Admittedly, I have a pretty active lifestyle—I live in New York City and walk everywhere, and I hit the gym five days a week.) More interesting to me is that I have, easily, double the amount of energy I had before. Because I'm not always ravenous, I sleep better. And though I gained a small amount of weight, my stomach is actually flatter because my digestion has improved; dehydrated potatoes and extruded corn aren't exactly high fiber.

However much I enjoyed the month-long real-food jamboree, I know I'll have to make some changes going forward. Ice cream will be a treat, not a daily occurrence. A pound and a half isn't much of a weight gain, but over the course of a year, it would add up. Still, I'll never go back to the way I used to eat. I have become so much more attuned to the freshness, color, and variety in food. And what I thought was a light feeling was actually a lack of energy. Now after I eat, I think, *Wow, I feel satisfied*, instead of *Wow, the bag is empty*.

Sometimes I backslide and have a diet lemonade, an old friend that I can't quite get rid of. *CONTINUED ON PAGE 232*

Get FRESH

Bringing home the bacon, frying it up in a pan—no problem. Swinging by the supermarket to stock up on fresh fruits, vegetables, and more—not always so easy. May we suggest an online grocery service? This month *oprah.com* lists six sites that deliver right to your door. We've also gathered ways to spice up your meals outside the house: On page 230, Francine Maroukian offers a beginner's guide to six cuisines—from Vietnamese to Ethiopian—with advice on the best dishes to order and what you need to know to make the most of your meal. Panir makhni, anyone?

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But I take comfort that even my advisers aren't perfect. Young likes barbecued soy crisps, Meyer admits to energy bars, and Jacobson, "throwing caution to the wind," uses spray margarine on his air-popped popcorn. But now I live by Young's rule: "The more processed the food," she says, "the less frequently you should have it."

Meyer agrees. "It never delivers the pleasure or flavor of the real thing," he says. "I don't want to be the pope of health here, but I want to be around for a long time, because I love life." He laughs. "And part of what I most love about life is eating." Amen to that. ●

Jancee Dunn is a writer in Brooklyn. Her memoir about a career in celebrity journalism will be published next summer.

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