



Ancient Food Wisdom Meets Modern Science

Integrative nutrition is more than just a balanced diet

By Deborah Kesten

“We have stopped our investigation of healing well short of its potential,” writes Larry Dossey in *Reinventing Medicine*. In the same way, we have limited our investigation of food and nutrition to a singular scientific framework, a reductionist perspective that reduces food to functional fuel and nutrients for our bodies.

Merging ancient food wisdom with modern nutritional science provides the foundation for a broader, integrative approach to food that may ultimately empower the investigation of nutritional science to live up to its potential.

The genesis of Western nutritional science started in France in the 18th century when chemist Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier defined the calorie and continued a century later when German scientist Justus von Leibig isolated proteins, fats, carbohydrates and minerals in food.

For thousands of years prior to these discoveries, major world religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism) and cultural traditions (yogic nutrition, the Japanese Way of Tea, the Vision Quest fast) provided lasting basic beliefs about food that sustained humankind.

A distillation of the nutritional truths from these wisdom traditions reveals that food is more than a mere amalgam of nutrients; it has been used by people for millennia to heal their bodies, calm their minds, connect to the sacred and create community. Viewed from such a vantage point, food holds the power to heal not only our physical health, but also our emotional, spiritual and social well-being. Such an approach is truly integrative.

What is integrative nutrition? It is a holistic approach to food and nutrition that is based on three worldviews about food and diet: Western nutritional science, Eastern healing systems that include nutrition (such as traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurveda and Tibetan medicine), and timeless lifestyle wisdom about food (gleaned from world religions, yogic nutrition, the Mediterranean diet and so on). Ultimately, integrative nutrition is not only about what to eat, but also about how to

eat for optimal health.

Our current food worldview encourages us to look at food with binoculars. One moment we point them at protein, the next at carbohydrates, and then at fat — both in food and on our body. Perceived



Deborah Kesten photo

Deborah Kesten, author of *The Healing Secrets of Food*, will be appearing on two upcoming television shows on PBS: Jeffrey Mishlove's *Thinking Allowed* will air on June 21, and *Healing Quest*, a 13-part PBS show/series about integrative medicine techniques, will air during the fall.

from such a restricted field of vision, we see food solely from a singular, biological perspective of isolated findings. But toss away the binoculars and instead view food through a kaleidoscope of ancient food wisdom, and four facets that reflect our current nutrient-oriented view of food emerge, along with harder-to-measure healing dimensions of food that include its link to emotions, spiritual well-being and community.

The four facets of food are:

- Social: dining with others in a pleasant atmosphere affects well-being
- Psychological: food influences mood, and conversely mood, emotions, thoughts and feelings often affect food choice
- Spiritual: eating with an awareness of the mystery of life in food and connecting with it via mindfulness, appreciation and a loving consciousness may enhance health
- Biological: the nutrients in optimal foods have the power to heal and balance physical health.

The four facets of food reveal that both what and how we eat contribute to health. What we eat (biological nutrition) has been the singular focus of nutritional science, but how we eat also affects health. Ancient food wisdom about how to eat includes “flavoring” meals with feelings (psychological nutrition), mindfulness, appreciation, connection/love (spiritual nutrition) and socializing (social nutrition). Today, science is verifying that all four facets do, indeed, impact health.

Using social nutrition, for example, we find that every wisdom and cultural tradition is replete with food-related social feasts, festivals and rituals, which is quite a contrast to the isolated eating that is typical for many Americans today. One groundbreaking study by R. M. Nissem suggests that rabbits that

when scientists verified this ancient wisdom: carbohydrate-dense foods (such as potatoes) release a naturally occurring hormone called serotonin, which is calming and relaxing. Conversely, low-fat, high-protein foods, such as nonfat yogurt, release another hormone called neuropeptide, which encourages mental alertness.

The three components of spiritual nutrition are mindfulness, gratitude and love. For instance, eating with mindfulness — one path to enlightenment based on Buddhist philosophy — and being present in the moment when eating may actually affect the way food is metabolized and ultimately, health and well-being.

Physician Donald Morse of Temple University had female students meditate for five minutes before eating, then do mental arithmetic for five minutes before eating. When the students meditated, they produced 22 percent more of an enzyme in saliva called alpha-amylase, which metabolizes carbohydrates and B vitamins. The implication? Eating in a mindful, present state of mind enhances absorption of nutrients and in this way, may improve health.

Virtually all wisdom traditions recommend biological nutrition through eating fresh, whole foods. By negating that food is a divine gift, fast food, for instance, is the spiritual antithesis of the fresh-food dietary tenets of the Quran.

Today we know that a diet of inverse eating of fresh, whole foods — fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds, and small, occasional or no servings of lean, unprocessed animal-based foods — reduces the risk of ailments from heart disease and cancer to hypertension and obesity.

For millennia, theologies turned to food to nourish physical, emotional, spiritual and social well-being. Today Western science is verifying what our ancestors discovered about food and nutrition by instinctively and intuitively using their own bodies and minds as “laboratories.”

The four facets of food reconnect us with this timeless food wisdom, while at the same time demystify Western nutritional science concepts. The result: a balanced relationship to food that holds the power to heal and nourish multi-dimensionally. ■

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To learn more about Deborah Kesten's research, visit www.deborahkesten.com.



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ate potentially artery-clogging food while being held with care did not develop plaque-clogged arteries.

Psychological nutrition can be demonstrated by ancient yogis (rishi) who used their own minds/bodies as laboratories to discover which foods kept them calm so they could meditate and practice yoga. The Bhagavad Gita calls these foods *sattvic*; in the West, we describe them as vegetarian.

Flash-forward to the 1970s