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how hedonism and health  
can coexist quite happily."  
—Arthur Agatston, M.D., creator  
of the South Beach Diet

# CULINARY INTELLIGENCE

THE ART OF EATING HEALTHY (AND REALLY WELL)

PETER KAMINSKY

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# Culinary Intelligence

The Art of Eating Healthy (and Really Well)

Peter Kaminsky



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On the trip home the sun came out. Steam rose from the blacktop, bound to reassemble itself as yet another rain cloud. We stopped at a roadside watermelon stand and were greeted by the smell of fresh sawdust and the sight of sweet Navasota stripers iced down and ready to be served by the slice.

—RODNEY CROWELL,  
*Chinaberry Sidewalks*

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Some people are born with perfect pitch. I'm not one of them, but I have something akin to it that when it comes to food. I was born with a taste in my mouth, in much the same way that a songwriter is born with a tune in his head. Taste and its kissing cousin, aroma, affect me so powerfully. When my downstairs neighbor browns onions, the sweet and sharp scents rise up through the stairwell of our Brooklyn brownstone, carrying with them memories of my grandmother's brisket, my mother's smothered chicken, or a street vendor's sausage sandwiches at the Feast of San Gennaro.

In the DNA lottery, I inherited a very acute palate and an equally sensitive sniffer. Just a pinch of tarragon hits me like the blast of a steam room. A couple of drops of sesame oil focuses my attention the way the scent of a trembling pheasant agitates a bird dog. I'm not saying that I can tell you what kind of oak dropped the acorns that fed the pig who ended up on my plate as a slice of Spanish ham. But I could never confuse the flesh of such a noble hog with the bland waterlogged ham from a factory-raised pig.

This obsession with taste can be a little maddening to friends and family, especially when we go to a restaurant. If, for example, a waiter passes by with a plate of coq au vin, my head will snap around as I breathe in the seductive smells. At such times I'll check out of the conversation, trying to determine exactly which herbs and spices are in a dish. It's not that I need to be right. It's a compulsive culinary crossword puzzle that I conduct with myself. No one can't help it.

This isn't bragging. I'm stating a fact about myself that I only fully recognized when I was well into adulthood. Until then, I thought everyone was like me: assaulted all day long by fusillades of flavor and irresistible aromas. It took me a long time to realize that not everyone inhaled and ingested their way through life this way. In fact, only about 4 percent of the population has this, er, gift—and it explains why so many of us turn out to be chefs, restaurateurs, sommeliers, winemakers, restaurant critics, cookbook authors, and bloggers of the alliance of press and pantry that I call the "foodoisie." In a way, it's their destiny for the same reason that tall men with impressive leaping skills become basketball players, small men with great eye-hand coordination become golfers, socially awkward undergrads become Internet billionaires. For those of us who end up in the food world, to borrow a phrase from nouvelle-cuisine master Alain Senderens, "the table beckons." Always.

For the first half of my life, I was not fully aware that I was a member of the foodoisie. True, I loved food—eating it and cooking it—but it was a hobby, not an occupational hazard. When writing about food became my occupation, the professional pursuit of pleasure put on pounds and screwed up my body chemistry. The choice was clear: mend my munching or fast forward to Judgment Day. In terms of a healthy diet, I realized that although I ate wonderful rarefied food I was still a typical American in my eating habits, because, whether you are scarfing down scoops of Cherry Garcia with butterscotch sauce or dining on béarnaise-bathed filet mignon and butter-browned potatoes Anna, it all puts you on a glide path to obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and all other so-called diseases of civilization. Maybe better to call them "illnesses of indulgence."

This book is the result of my truly insatiable appetite for the pleasures of the table and my equally strong urge to survive. Rather than forgo health on the one hand, or hedonism on the other, I believe that the two can coexist quite happily.

The event that brought me into the full-time food world occurred on December 18, 1990. Two days before, my daughter Lucy and I caught a dozen blackfish off Coney Island. Before then, my résumé was as typically wide-ranging and inconsistent as any freelancer's. I had been an itinerant humor writer, shuttling between magazines such as *National Lampoon* (where I was managing editor) and the life of a joke writer and producer of comedy television. It was a wacko, nerve-racking way to make a living, raise a family, and, on the first of most months, pay the mortgage. To balance out this unsettled existence, a generous act of fate guided me to the serene pastime of fishing. It took over my life, converted me into a hunting-and-fishing journalist, and eventually led to my own "Outdoors" column in the *New York Times*.

In 1994, I wrote a series of columns called "A Season on the Harbor." Each month I reported on a different fishing excursion in New York City waters. It may come as a surprise to some, but the Big Apple has 578 miles of coastline once you stretch out all the curves and crannies. It is home at different times of the year to hundreds of millions of striped bass, bluefish, shad, weakfish, lobsters, oysters, clams, and mussels. Researching those columns was heaven to me: casting into acres of striped bass beating the waves to a froth off Runway 9 at JFK (where jets with lowered landing gears came haircut close), or laying my rod across the gunwales of my boat to take in a fireworks display over the Statue of Liberty with no other soul in sight.

In early December, for the last piece in the series, Lucy and I went out for blackfish, a local quarry that looks like a mahimahi that has been mugged and left for dead. Look notwithstanding, it is quite delicious. On a blustery but fishable day, we boarded a local part-to-fish boat out of Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. The regulars huddled inside the cabin, stowing their rods in the corner and settling into the more consequential business of penny-a-portion pinocle. On deck, next to Lucy and me, an affable angler named Eddie Dols pulled in fish after fish. Eddie was generous with his knowledge and showed us how to detect a bite. He had spent his working years as the keeper of Olaf, the walrus at the Coney Island Aquarium. Lucy and I left the boat with two dozen blackfish fillets in our cooler.

The next day, I had scheduled my annual Christmas lunch with my college roommate Vinnie Farrell, at '21' Club in Manhattan. The chef was Michael Lomonaco, who has since gone on to numerous television appearances and is in the history books as the guy who went to pick up his eyeglasses rather than taking the elevator to his restaurant in the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001. I knew Lomonaco as a fellow fisherman, with whom I had shared advice on tackle, lures, and general fishing lore.

I phoned him with a request.

"Hey, Mike, I caught a bunch of blackfish. If I bring them in, could you cook some for me and Vinnie? You can sell the rest."

"No problem," he answered, as I knew he would.

The next day found me waiting in the coat-check line at '21' Club, with my little red Igloo cooler in hand and Frank Gifford and Ethel Kennedy just ahead of me. All in all, the ritziest coat-check line I'd ever been on.



“Did you bring your lunch?” Gifford asked in jest.

“As a matter of fact, I did.” With that we fell into conversation. I learned that Gifford had taken the occasional striped bass off Long Island Sound, near his Connecticut home.

Lomonaco invited me into the kitchen. This took place before images of the controlled chaos of restaurant kitchens had become a staple of television programming. True, I had flipped burgers in summer camp in the Poconos, and worked as a counterman at Cohen’s Famous Knishes in West Orange, New Jersey, but it was not until that day at ‘21’ that I got my first glimpse of a world-class restaurant kitchen firing on all cylinders.

Like other kitchens I would get to know in the coming years, Lomonaco’s moved at MacArthur 2: everyone shouting over each other yet somehow communicating, pans clanging, meat sizzling, the door to the dining room swinging in and out as hot plates left the kitchen and trays of empties returned. It was a symphony of aromas barely registering before they were replaced by new sensations: the perfume of rosemary on veal chops, wine clouds billowing off a superheated pan, the sizzle of burning sugar, the crackle of crisping meat, the scent of salmon so fresh it smelled like a sea breeze, and—since this was ‘21’ Club, where money was no object (or maybe the *only* object)—healthy helpings of the season’s last white truffles.

Because we were friends, Mike liberated a few shavings of those costly beauties for an extra course of bay scallops to go along with the blackfish, which he dredged in seasoned cornmeal crumbs and sautéed in clarified butter. He served the fillets atop a bed of black olives, sun-dried tomatoes, sautéed fennel, and a sprig of fresh dill. The confluence of the holiday season, the setting, and the fact that my daughter and I had caught the main course combined for the most wonderful blackfish that anyone could ever hope to eat.

After that sublime meal, the story basically wrote itself. My editor at the *Times*, Susan Adams, liked the piece so much that she prevailed on her boss to give my story most of a page, which was unusual for the “Outdoors” column. They even ran two pictures with Eddie Dols reeling in a fish, and Lomonaco flipping pans in his chef’s whites.

I received more letters on that one piece than all the letters combined for everything else I have ever written, with the exception of a column I wrote about 9/11. Something in that lucky turn of events spoke to me loud and clear: I needed to let my inner food guy out and find him a writing job.

Then, obeying E. B. White’s maxim that people in New York must “be prepared to be lucky,” I got lucky when the woman writing the “Underground Gourmet” column at *New York* magazine decided to put down her pen. My friend Kurt Andersen was *New York*’s editor-in-chief at the time. Earlier in 1994, I had already written my first major food article, a cover story for *New York* about the opening of Gramercy Tavern. It was a “making of” piece, about the process of the creation of a restaurant, not the creation of meals, not really a dining piece. Still, it made a big splash and put me at the threshold of the food world. “Would you like to write ‘Underground Gourmet?’” Kurt asked.

Different from the main restaurant-review column, “Underground Gourmet” celebrated the ethnic diversity of the New York foodscape as well as up-and-coming and affordable fine dining. Whereas the chief restaurant critic’s job was split between piling on the plaudits for deserving restaurants and warning the public away from disappointments, the *Underground Gourmet*’s task was to turn people on to little-known and out-of-the-way places that served great food. You either wrote a good review or wrote none at all.

I took the gig. At that time I carried 172 pounds on my five-foot-nine frame. My Levi's had a thirty-four-inch waistband, just about right for my demographic.

It was the perfect food job for me, much more in line with my tastes than writing reviews of pricey restaurants. During the years that my fishing-and-hunting writing took me into small-town America, I had made a habit of tracking down authentic heartland food, by which I mean the kind of fried, smoked, and barbecued fare traditionally consumed beyond the Lincoln Tunnel. I made a practice of including a paragraph about a restaurant here, or a recipe there, in every story I wrote.

This is something I had noticed in the writing of Hemingway—the patron saint of outdoor writers. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the image of Robert Jordan's goat cheese sandwich with thick slices of onion and crusty bread makes a conversation about love, women, and war both sensual and unforgettable. Equally memorable is the blunt food critique offered by Agustín to his flinty comrade-in-arms, who warns, "You will have a breath that will carry through the forest to the fascists."

Taking a leaf from Papa Hemingway, I have always slipped some food into my fishing-and-hunting stories—even if it's just a Baby Ruth or a piece of my mom's rugelach. Juxtapose that with fishing for largemouth bass in the Everglades and it really hits home with the reader.

You might say that paragraphs about chefs and recipes are not the most obvious fit for magazine pieces about fishing holes and duck blinds, but isn't it all about food? Fishing, hunting, and eating all stem from the same drive: to consume and survive. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world to combine the two. The editors of *Field & Stream*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Afield*, and *Outdoor Life* didn't seem to mind one bit.

Half in jest, I introduced myself to my new readers at *New York* by writing, "There is one thing I call Kaminsky's Constant: namely if a man lives long enough, eats long enough, and drinks long enough, there comes a time, usually in his early forties, when his age, waistline, and IQ are the same number."

I wrote that *half* in jest. The other half ... Well, that's my occupational hazard and what prompted me to write this book.

As the Underground Gourmet, I indulged my passion, first developed in two years behind the wheel of a Yellow Cab, for what I call "drive-by dining": a sense of food radar that told me when a place was worth a meal. If a restaurant smelled good, I was interested. Busyness was another good character reference. The real secret—which I sensed years before I could even verbalize it—was that if the people who worked in the restaurant looked like they actually *enjoyed* doing what they were doing, then they were doing something right. A sour-faced staff is like a six-story Jumbotron flashing "Eat Here At Your Peril!"

At least three times a week, I would grab whoever wanted to join me and head out for the wilds of Queens, the shores of Staten Island, the back alleys of Brooklyn, the northernmost reaches of the Bronx, the forgotten ethnic enclaves of Manhattan, searching out the best food in town, whether it was Italian, Jewish, Chinese, Korean, Mexican, Russian, German, Greek, Indian, Persian, Vietnamese, Spanish, Dominican, Peruvian, Japanese, Lebanese, Turkish, Cuban, Polish, Hungarian, Portuguese, or Norwegian. Ethiopian too. Also Palestinian, Uzbek, West Indian, Puerto Rican, to name just a few.

Did I mention that New York is the greatest restaurant town on earth? We may not have a

indigenous cuisine, unless you count dirty-water hot dogs, but we sure have the cultural critical mass for an amazing variety of ethnic cuisine. A food critic could not ask for more.

In an interview with Dick Cavett, Bette Davis once confessed that she had been a virgin until she was twenty-eight years old, explaining that, once she had taken the plunge, she did everything in her power to make up for lost time. As covering the New York food world became my occupation, I was as eager as Bette to experience more. Within two years I had put on fifteen pounds. But I was having too good a time to pay attention to hazards—occupational or otherwise.

Writing about food for *New York* also gave me entrée into the world of celebrity chefs. I had cornered the admittedly small market for seven-thousand-word cover pieces on significant restaurant openings. When Daniel Boulud or Alain Ducasse or Thomas Keller opened a place aiming at four stars from the *New York Times*, I got to be the fly on the wall reporting on the frenzied critical path that climaxed on Opening Day. I traveled to France with Daniel Boulud on what I came to think of as The 100,000 Calorie Tour. My immediate purpose was to see the farm where he grew up, meet his family, and have a Sunday dinner. His goal was to introduce his young wine director Jean-Luc Le Dû to the greatest winemakers in Burgundy and the Rhône Valley. We drank absurdly great wine and ate enough foie gras to endanger Europe's goose population.

When café society's headquarters, Le Cirque, closed up shop for a year while preparing for a move to new quarters, I went to France and Italy with owner Sirio Maccioni and his band of chefs—submitting, in the name of accurate reportage, to an unending movable feast. For the record, I also shucked oysters, peeled and sectioned lemons, and sliced potatoes. I like the camaraderie of the kitchen.

Once you forge an acquaintance with chefs and devote yourself to the intricacies of how they think and cook, it's not too long before you get invited to collaborate with them on the rite of passage: the Very Pretty Coffee Table Cookbook. I worked for four years on *The Elements of Taste* with Gray Kunz, presiding wizard at the revered Lespinasse in the St. Regis Hotel. For nearly a decade Lespinasse captured top honors citywide and nationwide for Kunz's exquisite and eclectic cuisine. Our concept was simple: to analyze all foods and the way that chefs compose recipes, with the same rigor that wine writers use to describe just one food, fermented grape juice. We came up with twenty-two elements of taste, but simplified and pared the number down to fourteen when *Food & Wine* editor in chief Dan Cowin told us it was too complicated, bordering on geekiness.

If Gray Kunz was the alpha of my cookbook career, the omega was the corresponding collection of tailgating recipes that I wrote with football legend and commentator John Madden. This involved traveling coast to coast, to every parking lot in the NFL where tailgating was allowed, walking up and down endless rows of pickup trucks, inviting myself to other people's parties. I ate my way through a button-popping menu of venison chili, taco salads, hot dogs, sausages, and Jell-O shots, about which I can report that the effect of a two-ounce cube of grape Jell-O laced with vodka is indistinguishable from a tab of purple Owsley. Among my rewards, I found the best barbecued brisket in America (it was made by the McSparin brothers in Parking Lot G, Arrowhead Stadium, at every Kansas City Chiefs home game).

There was a schizophrenic aspect to working on these two cookbooks at the same time as

saw one morning when I finished the reporting for the Gray Kunz recipe for “Braised Short Ribs with Pickled Papaya and Horseradish.” This was without question his most complicated dish, consisting of thirty-one ingredients and featuring a spice rub, a marinade, a braising liquid, and a parallel pickling operation, all of which took place over the course of three days. I was noting down how long to pan-roast the coriander seeds in the spice rub when Madden’s agent, Sandy Montag, called.

“I have Madden on the line. He’s going to Vegas for a few days and will be hard to reach. If you have any questions, ask them now.”

I looked through my notes. “Coach,” I said, using the title that comes naturally to anyone who works with John, “I need to go over the recipe for the whole sirloin.” I was referring to a fifteen-pound piece of meat that he had grilled expertly.

“Well, you take a sirloin and you salt and pepper it, maybe some garlic salt too. Then you cook it for ...” He raised his voice as he questioned his wife: “Hey, Virginia, that whole sirloin—what do you cook it for? Two or three hours?”

Then, turning back to the phone: “You cook it two or three hours.”

As I later realized in the course of writing two grilling books, Madden’s advice, though deceptively simple, makes good kitchen sense: big pieces of meat take a long time, and there is no strict rule to timing; you cook it until it’s done.

Through the Madden and Kunz projects, I learned that the thing about cookbooks is that you don’t write them so much as eat your way through them. You cook and sample recipes, dipping your index finger into sauces and fillings and frostings, constantly tasting and retasting. And you’re doing it during work hours, not at mealtime. It’s a hazardous lifestyle. I didn’t know that when I started, but I noticed, at the end of the Madden project, that the Carhartt overalls that I wore to places like Green Bay, Wisconsin, bulged in the middle, a reflection of my growing girth. I consoled myself with the words of P. G. Wodehouse: “Boys have stomachs. Men have bellies.”

By that measure, I was becoming quite a man.

Another hazardous perk of food-writerdom was an unsolicited nine- or ten-course tasting menu that dogged me whenever I visited a restaurant where I knew the chef or, at least, someone on the staff recognized me. “The chef would like to make a menu for you,” the waiter would say with a wink-wink leer. It is hard to complain about being force-fed a mind-blowing array of dishes, especially when envious diners at other tables must content themselves with the everyday menu. But the truth of the matter is this omnivore’s nirvana is not achieved painlessly. There always comes a time in such meals when the chef will send out a surprise of foie gras or squab right after I have polished off what I thought was a concluding course of beef. In such instances I will often run up the white flag and instruct the waiter: “Please, tell the chef he wins.”

Lest you think that my new vocation was all a mix of trendy ethnic food from the Outer Boroughs and truffle-showered lark’s tongues served up by Manhattan dining divinities, I also came across strange new foods in the course of journalistic assignments around the world. I ate salmon eye—traditionally reserved for honored guests—by the shores of a Finnish lake; grasshoppers at a Zapotec market in Oaxaca; unsightly if delicious corn smut among the Mixtecs of Mitla; *mopane* worms the size of gnocchi at a banquet with the Shona tribespeople of Zimbabwe; barbecued bear ribs brought to me by a California bow hunter who looked

bit like a bear himself; saliva-fermented *chicha* (a beer-like beverage) in a small Inca village in the Peruvian highlands; prairie oysters (cattle testicles) in Livingston, Montana; alligator tail batter-fried by Jimmy Tiger, a Miccosukee hunter in the Everglades; and roasted dwarf armadillo that two young boys in Uruguay delivered to my hotel after a chance early-morning conversation about the local hunting. Equally exotic to me, fried Spam, presented to me by a family of walleye anglers at the Red Squirrel Lodge in Bemidji, Minnesota, where, in a ritual to mark the opening of fishing season, the least successful angler of the day required/honored to eat a plateful of this all-American “delicacy.”

After another five years of magazine and newspaper writing, cookbook work, and tasting menus, I had acquired an additional fifteen pounds. My heart, my gut, and my blood sugar were unimpressed by the four-star pedigree of many of those extra calories. To them, there was no distinction between a Ferran Adrià tasting menu and a Colonel Sanders Varied Bucket.

As a matter of pure economics, I couldn't afford to give too much thought to the toll my new career was taking on my body. My job was my diet, and my diet consisted of eating, tasting, enjoying, and reporting on the best, most interesting meals I could find. Under such work rules, it's a given that you will sacrifice some health considerations.

The day I turned fifty, I filmed a show for the Food Network in Oaxaca, Mexico. In honor of this milestone, and since I was the producer and got to call the shots, I ordered up a sheep roast and invited a whole village where mescal was made. The local band, undeterred by their inability to agree on a key in which they could all play, serenaded me with a joyfully though barely recognizable, rendition of “Happy Birthday.” A fun day, but not a slimming one.

My waistline creep continued: from size thirty-four in my early thirties to “thirty-eight.” I crossed the Big Five-Oh. Note: I put the thirty-eight in quotes because it is usually a fiction representing an imaginary line that few men like to admit they have crossed. On the other side of thirty-eight lies forty, which begins with “f,” which stands for “fat.” As long as a man can keep size thirty-eight-inch pants buttoned, even if he needs to draw a deep breath to do so, he can tell himself that he is not borderline obese. No delusion hangs by more slender threads.

Then my doctor told me I needed to go on Lipitor.

No problem. I began taking the drug, which I dismissively referred to as “my cholesterol license.”

I was less lighthearted when my nephews began referring to me—and my stomach—as “the Buddha.” I gave in to my wife's advice and began going to the gym. Although I have always walked a lot (the norm in NYC), waded miles of rivers while trout fishing, and biked around Prospect Park for years, I regarded gyms as the realm of garish spandex outfits and unmanly group calisthenics to the beat of an annoying tape loop ... probably Abba.

To my surprise, I liked working out, especially under the tutelage of a great trainer (have you ever met anyone who didn't think his trainer or shrink was great?).

Soon I felt better, but fitness training plus food writing, and all the eating that it entailed still equaled fat.

“You have to do something about your weight,” said my doctor, Steve Tay.

“Hey, I eat healthy and exercise,” I answered, as if good intentions ever scored a victory.

over arterial plaque and elevated blood sugar.

My protests notwithstanding, my weight curve went in only one direction as I aged. I wasn't John Candy fat, maybe more like Seth Rogen pudgy. But, as I learned the day my life insurance renewal was denied, you don't have to be a super-fat boy to be a candidate for heart disease and diabetes. I am far from alone in this risk pool. The fastest-growing life-threatening condition among Americans is obesity, going from one-in-six fifteen years ago to one-in-four today. In the South the trend is to one-in-three.

When I was told that my weight was a possible precursor of diabetes, I permanently disabled the snooze setting on my life's alarm clock. I want to see my kids get married and watch my grandchildren grow. I want to fish the Missouri River in my eighties. Most of all, I want to stick around and enjoy the senses of taste and smell that I was born with: more green wine, more juicy steaks on the Patagonian plains. But how does a guy who loves food and wine—in fact, makes his living writing about them—gain control of what he puts in his body?

Tens of millions of Americans face a similar dilemma. Nobody wants to stop enjoying food, but neither does anybody want to lop 20 percent off his or her anticipated life span. I could have responded to Dr. Steve's admonition with the words of one of my food-writing heroes, A. J. Liebling of *The New Yorker*, who wrote in his mouth-watering memoir *Between Meals*: "No sane man can afford to dispense with debilitating pleasures; no ascetic can be considered reliably sane."

If you follow Liebling's go-to-hell approach to weight control, you will surely have some memorable meals, but it is cold comfort—like graveyard-cold—if, as Liebling did, you end up weighing three hundred-plus pounds and dropping dead at age fifty-nine. A much better model, who writes about food with equal brio, is Calvin Trillin, also of *The New Yorker*. When I asked him his secret for weight control, he credited his late wife: "When Alice was alive, if I had to sum up my wife's method of keeping my weight down in one word, I'd say 'nagging' would be that word, sometimes leavened by ridicule." He left out that the bicycle is his preferred method of transport in Manhattan. I have both a wife and a bike; so, if Trillin could do it, I could do it too.

I took my doctor's advice seriously. I didn't stop drinking, but no more than two glasses of wine at dinner was my goal. White bread, white rice, and white potatoes were put on the "No Eat" list. I became more diligent about exercise, but I had been training for years, so that side of the equation didn't require as much reprogramming as my diet.

After six months of discipline (during which time I went to South America for extended stays to research a cookbook featuring grilled meat and red wine), I melted away twenty-five pounds (and another fifteen since then). More to the point of this book, I have not put them back on.

As Steve foretold, my blood sugar came down, and as my insurance agent promised, my policy was approved. The guy who had been fat at fifty was now slimmer at sixty. I have changed what I eat and how much I eat, and the same goes for drink. It has become second nature to take the stairs leading to my apartment two at a time. I thought those days were long past. My suit size has gone down, my shirts are three sizes smaller at the neck, my X-tees have gone from too tight to too big, and it is no longer hard to breathe when I bend over to tie my shoes. Once again, I have a thirty-four-inch waistline, the size I wore just before I became a professional eater.

I didn't know it at the time, but, instinctively, I was putting Culinary Intelligence in practice. Please take note: I didn't say Culinary Super-Intelligence. It's not astrophysics. My approach is much more practical than it is intellectual. It starts from the premise that anyone who wants to eat a healthy diet is confronted by a big obstacle: a food culture based on industrially processed ingredients and the unholy trinity of sugar, salt, and fat, all used to boost flavor and create pleasing texture. Getting people to eat fattening fast food, made hyper-palatable with chemically enhanced ingredients, is like giving candy to a baby. Without thinking, the baby eats it.

Step one on the path to Culinary Intelligence is to break this habit of mindless eating and cut out processed foods. Do it now. You will lose weight.

But if you give something up, how do you replace it? To begin with, eat fresh, peak-flavored ingredients that a caveman—or at least a farmer from a few thousand years ago—might have recognized as food. A delicious melon, crisp and sweet sugar snap peas, or a golden-brown oven-roasted free-range chicken doesn't need very much in the way of sugar, salt, or added fat. Do healthy ingredients cost more? Sometimes, but not always, particularly when they are local and in season.

In *Blue Trout and Black Truffles*, a lyric and nostalgic memoir of food and dining in Europe before and immediately after World War II, *New Yorker* contributor Joseph Wechsberg credited Charles Gundel, a Budapest restaurateur of the early twentieth century, with the following: "It is difficult to make something good out of second-class materials, but it is quite easy to spoil the first-class ones." So, yes, you need the best ingredients you can afford, but just as important, whoever is making the food in your household must know what to do with them in order to coax out the most satisfying flavor and texture. A bad cook can mess up the most costly ingredients. A good one can make them heavenly.

In a restaurant you rely on the chef, although more than one chef has resorted to shocking and awe amounts of butter and salt to liven up a recipe. At home these decisions fall to the cook-in-residence. If you are that person, you need to understand flavor and how to prepare food that is satisfying without making you fat. Take-out food won't do the trick. Nor will a steady diet of ready-made meals. Good cooking with real ingredients is the only way to eat a healthy, satisfying diet. Some authorities may not be so insistent on this point. I see no other way.

You may be tempted to say that my perspective is not applicable to the rest of the country because I live in food-crazed New York, and, more particularly, in Brooklyn, where the food and-restaurant scene is arguably the most vibrant in the city. To me Brooklyn is a magical place where old-time ethnic-food stores abound: where butchers, greengrocers, and cheese shops are on every street, and where, in recent years, there has been an explosion of farmer's markets, farm-to-table restaurants, and urban farms on rooftops and street corners. Much of Brooklyn feels more like a village or small American town from years gone by than suburban America, where I spent my childhood.

This is not to say that America is all malls and McDonald's. One recent Thanksgiving, we found great heritage-breed turkeys in my wife's hometown, Rockford, Illinois. I have bought beautiful local vegetables in the Winn-Dixie Supermarket in Boynton Beach, Florida. In every season you can find local and organic products at farmstands and, increasingly, at supermarkets just about everywhere. Moreover, such staples as beans, chickpeas, lentils

anchovies, sardines, and high-quality canned, bottled, or frozen vegetables are not difficult to buy in any supermarket anytime. I once made a whole seven-course meal according to the recipes of a demanding French chef by creatively substituting with ingredients from the Grand Union in Lake Placid, New York.

Often overlooked—but they shouldn't be, because they are no longer confined to big cities—are ethnic markets. As more of our crops are grown and harvested by these new Americans, there are more markets that cater to them. In these stores, you will undoubtedly find a lot of unprocessed “real” ingredients. Latin and Asian markets are always a good bet.

So, yes, on any given day, I suppose Brooklynites may have more access to a greater variety of the best ingredients than people in Duluth or Tallahassee. But you can eat well and healthfully everywhere if you apply your inborn Culinary Intelligence.

Ten words tell the CI story:

Buy the best ingredients you can afford. Cook them well.

If you are not gifted in the kitchen, you can add twelve more words: live with someone who likes to cook and is good at it.

If your goal is to adopt a diet that works for the rest of your life, always remember, eating should be a pleasure, and not a penance for the environmental and economic sins of our times. So, although I responded seriously to my insurance-flunking wake-up call, being serious did not need to mean somber or joyless. But then, we are a country with a long-standing, often religious distrust of pleasure. Since food brings pleasure, it also invites sermonizing. Whether we celebrate the virtues of free-range and local ingredients or excoriate the malefactors of Big Agriculture, the argument can sometimes veer into a level of sobriety that takes the fun out of food. Eating local and thinking global; banning genetically modified food; curtailing the excesses of factory farming that condemn millions of animals to nasty, brutish, and short lives; confronting the tsunami of marketing, packaging, and advertising that, in the space of fifteen years, has seduced average Americans into consuming three hundred more calories per day and collectively putting on two billion pounds of body weight—all of these are pressing social and moral issues, but not particularly helpful in choosing your next meal.

You and I are not a social issue. We are individual human beings who consume food in order to stay alive. Statistics don't decide to eat a healthier diet; individuals do. Consider that everyone who lost weight over the last twenty years of a steadily fattening America did so in spite of statistics. Forget the trend lines—which are alarming—and think about yourself.

## **The Most Important Thing: Flavor per Calorie**

If I had to reduce Culinary Intelligence to one guiding principle, it would be maximizing Flavor per Calorie (FPC): the notion that if ingredients are chosen on the basis of optimum flavor, and prepared with the goal of intensifying that flavor, then you can be satisfied while eating less.

It is important to understand that taste starts in the mouth but does not end there. You have five different kinds of taste receptors on your palate. As I learned from Charles



Zucker, whose groundbreaking work in the science of taste has provided the first full exploration of our principal taste receptors, some of them are also found in your gastrointestinal tract.

Clearly, you don't taste with your stomach the way that you do with your mouth. Your palate is a gateway. It is designed to discern different tastes so that you can avoid harmful or nutritionally worthless substances and consume nourishing ones. After food has passed through this portal, the next line of taste receptors, in your stomach, signals your body that it is receiving nutrients. By maximizing FPC, the stomach you have pampered with great flavor will receive a return message from the brain: "We're cool. I've had enough."

It stands to reason, then, that if you get more taste bang for the bite, you won't need so many bites. If, on the other hand, your food is indifferently prepared from ingredients that lack flavor, the only alternative is to pile on the high-caloric combo of sugar, salt, and fat.

Achieving maximum Flavor per Calorie starts with ingredients as they come from nature. For fruits, ripeness is paramount. For vegetables, freshness. The flavor of meat, fish, and poultry depends on what the animal ate, how it lived (was it free-range or confined?), how long it lived (was it long enough to develop marbling?). Was it cured or aged afterward?

If ingredients start out full-flavored, then realizing much of their FPC potential will result from further developing flavor through cooking. Caramelizing vegetables and creating a crunchy browned crust on meats are key techniques. So are long, slow braises that tenderize meat and help develop the mysterious but essential "Fifth Taste" known as umami, often described as "deliciousness" (see [this page](#)).

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My approach to all food is that of a sensualist, not a Trappist monk. I believe in gratification, not denial. To illustrate this, let's put aside, for the moment, the question of fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables versus out-of-season produce from distant places. (I'm in favor of the former and not so much the latter.) Let's consider, instead, some foods that are not commonly found in many weight-control plans: beer, steak, chocolate, and cheese. I enjoy them—perhaps not in the quantities that I once did, but I found that I didn't have to give them up so long as I sprang for the best products I could find.

Try this experiment yourself: side by side, taste a Coors Light and, say, a Dogfish Head 90 Minute India Pale Ale. The advertisements for light beer suggest that you can drink more of it. I should hope so, because one light beer is never going to satisfy you. So, after downing one, you still want more beer-ness. You're a little bit more full after two beers, but still there is something lacking, so you pop-top beer number three.

This could go on for a while, but no matter how many light beers you drink you will feel shortchanged in the beer satisfaction department. On the other hand, with the India Pale Ale—it doesn't have to be India Pale Ale, just a real, full-flavored, full-calorie beer—you're going to get that yeasty, fizzy smell, bubbles that jab your tongue with force rather than teeny pops, and a sharpness that can cut through the richness of the most succulent meat while it refreshes your palate. Even the beer belch of the India Pale is going to taste more like beer when it comes up than the Coors Light did going down. Granted, one or two India Pale Ales aren't going to get you as hammered as a six-pack of Coors Light, but for pure taste satisfaction, the full-on real brew will win every time.

Or take the case of grass-fed versus grain-fed beef. Americans have been brought up to

prefer super-tender, mild-tasting, corn-fed beef. This has been very good for the corn business. But cattle evolved to eat grass, not corn. My experience over the last twenty-five years, when visiting Argentina and Uruguay, gave me an appreciation of the deeper flavor of grass-fed animals. Their meat tastes more beefy, even wild. I sometimes wondered, was I simply selling myself on grass-fed because I was ideologically attached to the concept of livestock eating their original state-of-nature diet?

To put my belief to the test, I arranged a series of blind tastings with my friends Franca Castronovo and Frank Falcinelli, the proprietors of Frankies Spuntino and Prime Meats, two very popular restaurants near my home. The Franks, as they are known in the hood, are Italian Americans from Queens who grew up playing street hockey together and later apprenticed under two of Europe's greatest chefs—Paul Bocuse and André Daguin—before reuniting as restaurateurs twenty years later.

At each of our tasting sessions, a group of seven people in the food world (chefs, writers, my wife and daughter, two NYU grad students) sampled beef from seven of the top artisan producers in the country. We tried rib eyes and strip steaks, also known as “New York cut” or “shell steaks,” fourteen pieces of beef in all. The clear favorite—five first-place votes and two seconds—was a grass-fed, dry-aged rib eye from Rosenkranz Farms in the Finger Lakes (via New York purveyor DeBragga). Grass-fed beef has more FPC, and, in my experience, you will need to eat less of it in order to be satisfied. The other moral is that, just as with great wine, good meat will develop more complex flavors as it ages.

Continue this experiment and try some high-quality dark chocolate alongside a Hershey bar. I find that a two-inch square of Scharffen Berger 70% gets my taste buds firing in a way that a whole Hershey bar never does (NB: Hershey owns the Scharffen Berger brand). Likewise, a one-ounce piece of artisanal Vermont cow's-milk cheese that tastes like a French Tomme lights my fire much more than some “zesty” house-brand pepper jack. Beware of the word “zesty”: it's marketese for “doctored up with lots of chemicals that you won't notice because it's also really spicy.”

Insisting on fuller-flavored ingredients is sometimes faulted as elitist. This is phony populism logic. Fruits and vegetables in season are comparatively less expensive than produce that comes from the other side of the continent, or the world. Factory-farmed meat, fish, and poultry are less expensive, if less flavorful, than prime ingredients, but their deficiencies can be cheaply doctored up with crispy breadings and sweet, gloppy sauces. Moreover, when you factor in agricultural subsidies, fast food actually costs more for each unit of flavor per calorie than we pay for unadulterated, old-fashioned ingredients. If you shop intelligently and seasonally, and prepare more of the food you eat, the hit to your wallet is certainly not more, and probably less.

Furthermore, in a country approaching a 40-percent rate of obesity, it is not unreasonable to argue that health-care costs more than offset any pennies that may be saved on inferior products.

I have been lucky that my profession has taken me around the country, and the world, driving home the lesson that our conventional, convenience-food diet is not the only way to get your daily sustenance. In my travels, I have been welcomed into the kitchens of many gifted chefs, some of them famous and more of them not well known beyond the family table. They have taught me most of what I know about what makes food delicious. Applying

those lessons enabled me to make adjustments in how I eat without sacrificing pleasure. There are many ways to enhance the joy of eating—some of them fattening, but many of them not.

For a change in diet to succeed, it must be at least as satisfying as the unhealthful fast food and processed ingredients that it replaces. The only way I know to achieve this is through maximizing Flavor per Calorie. It is my guide to deriving as much pleasure from food as I did in the days when I ate and drank without giving much thought to health implications. I am no less a hedonist now, but a slimmer and fitter one.

Nobody wants to be overweight, yet more and more of us are. Why do we eat in a way that produces results so contrary to our wishes? I think the answer lies in the brain. It reacts to hunger pangs and then makes a decision: eat something that will satisfy, the quicker the better. Long-term nutritional sense rarely figures into this process. You're hungry; you eat. For many it's a never-changing one-act play performed daily, usually resulting in a lifetime of putting on weight. In my case, for nearly thirty years, the narrative was the following:

STOMACH: I'm hungry.

RIGHT BRAIN: I want pizza!

LEFT BRAIN: No way. It's fattening.

RIGHT BRAIN: Just one little piece, okay?

LEFT BRAIN: Then will you stop pestering me?

RIGHT BRAIN: I promise.

Walk to pizza parlor. Order and pay for slice. Right hand brings a slice of pizza to mouth. Mouth bites off a piece, chews, and swallows. The pizza is warm, crisp, melty, salty, and bright with tomato flavor.

STOMACH: Man, that was good!

RIGHT BRAIN: You bet. How about another?

LEFT BRAIN: Hold on. We had a deal.

RIGHT BRAIN AND STOMACH (IN UNISON): Shut up!

Left hand reaches into blue-jeans pocket, retrieves some singles, tells pizza guy to keep the change. Once again right hand brings pizza to mouth. Another shipment heads south.

RIGHT BRAIN: How did I let that happen? I hate myself!

LEFT BRAIN: That makes two of us.

Sound familiar? Resolving such conflicts, understanding what you need in terms of sustenance versus what you have become conditioned to want, is at the heart of CI. It's a simple proposition, but complicated in terms of the biology and psychology that underlie what and why we eat.

I think that, to a certain degree, the media, the food industry, and many nutrition experts have burdened us with a too simplistic and incomplete paradigm about the nature of food. The body is thought of as a machine, and food as nothing more than fuel with some engineered additives that lubricate the parts and keep the pipes clean.

This outlook encourages us to understand food as a collection of simpler chemical components rather than extremely complex organic substances. But looking at nutrients

isolation—which is what so many studies and diets do—is like removing all the notes from a musical score, putting them in a box, shaking the box, pouring the notes on a table, and hoping that they land in exactly the same order as Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 28 in major.

Life is never that simple. Adding broccoli to your diet because some study said it fights cancer; cutting down on one kind of fat because a lab rat ate itself to death on a diet of lamb liver; consuming expensive four-ounce containers of yogurt in hopes that its bacteria will bless you with the life span of a redwood tree are not realistic hopes. Nothing you put in your body has just one effect. Everything is multifaceted and interrelated. A diet of whole foods has all the nutrients we need.

Supplements won’t make up for the deficiencies that come with a processed-food diet, but they will generate *mucho dinero* for the supplement industry. Still, we go on spending enormous sums on protein powders, herbal supplements, vitamins, minerals, nutrient extracts, all of them ripped from their natural context, where they are elements of much more complex foods. For this reason, many scientists believe that a simple pill or powder won’t do the trick. Every food is more than the sum of its nutrients. The balance and interaction of nutrients are what make them beneficial.

Nutritionally speaking, it’s time to jettison the fuel-and-engine metaphor in favor of one that views everything that lives as its own complex ecosystem. Your particular ecosystem consists of a community of trillions of living cells. So does the diet that sustains it. It is the product of evolution. This brings me to the question of what is a “natural diet,” how did it evolve, and do we all have to eat like Neanderthals? Among advocates of different diets, much is made of what our earliest ancestors supposedly ate. The implication is that if we were to eat the same way, we would all have washboard abs. The theory is that before agriculture and technology entered the picture, humans ate foods that were naturally good.

But good for what? We evolved to live just long enough to guarantee that a sufficient number of our kids reached the age of prime reproductive and child-caring potential. In other words, our ancestral diet gave us the best chance to reach a life span of thirty-something.

Although childhood obesity is a growing problem, it’s not those first thirty years that concern most of us so much as the forty or fifty that follow. That’s where bad habits take their inevitable toll. Evolution tells us little more than how our distant ancestors adapted to maximize their nutritional opportunities. Obesity was not a big problem. The nutritional requirements of human beings remained the same for ten thousand generations of hunting and gathering. Compare that with the five hundred generations or so that followed the invention of agriculture, and only two or three generations since the adoption of industrial processed foods and the widespread availability of fat, sugar, and salt.

No matter how sophisticated we may have become as gourmets, food remains a basic need. We all have food cravings, and among the most fundamental of them are those for sugar, salt, and fat. There is good reason for this: these nutrients are crucial to maintaining good health. But we don’t need them all the time, or in a form that goes straight to the bloodstream and from there, takes up residence as fat in potbellies and clogged arteries.

A word or two here in defense of dietary fat. It is a fact of evolution that without increased fat consumption our ancient relatives would never have developed large brains. According to the prevailing theory, when humanity’s birthplace in East Africa dried out, about two and

half million years ago, one group of prehuman apes moved toward a diet of large quantities of fibrous food that we would find largely indigestible. These long-extinct cousins of our developed huge, heavily muscled jaws and molars and Klingon-like brows to anchor the chewing muscles. Big brows, big jaws, small brains.

Our branch of the family tree responded to the change in the environment by adopting a diet that was energy-dense, containing more animal protein and fat. These not-yet-human primates required food more like that of carnivores and less like the diet of their plant-dependent cousins. They needed meat, for the energy and body-building qualities of protein and for the high concentration of stored energy in fat. Both are necessary for development of the brain, a ravenous energy-consumer that accounts for about 27 percent of our total energy expenditure.

Many anthropologists believe that the story of human evolution—basically, a tale of apes with big brains—is inextricably bound up with the taming of fire and the advent of cooking. Some scientists, notably Richard Wrangham of Harvard, take the argument even further. Cooking, he maintains, was the key advance that led to the tremendous gains in brainpower that distinguished the genus *Homo* from the less clever creatures whose branches withered on our family tree.

When our forebears ate cooked meat, less energy was required for digestion. They evolved a smaller digestive tract. Cooking took up the workload needed to meet the requirements of a bigger brain. Had we stayed with the fruits-and-shoots diets of the other apes, we would probably have the brains of chimps. This raises an interesting point: will we revert to knuckle-walking dim-wittedness if we all eat low-fat vegetarian diets?

Fat is good, just not so much of it, and certainly not the hard trans fats that clog arteries. Fear of fat has driven us to consume great quantities of processed carbohydrates, which the body converts to sugar and—ironically—deposits as unhealthy amounts of fat.

The reason we crave fat so strongly, along with salt and sugar, is that the human appetite evolved in response to the scarcity of these vital nutrients that often confronted hunter-gatherers. There were times when game was scarce, drought and floods destroyed fruits and vegetables, and salt licks were few and far between. Our genes do not yet recognize that we are living in what Paleolithic people would have thought of as a permanent best-case scenario: salt, sugar, and fat are all around us in health-threatening superabundance, so there is no need to gorge on them today because they might disappear tomorrow. Maybe in another fifty thousand years, natural selection will produce human beings who crave whole grains, high-fiber vegetables, and unfried chicken. For now, though, inside every one of us is a prehistoric person fearful of starving on an ice age tundra.

Our food culture, with the billions upon billions of dollars it generates, is built on a foundation of fulfilling our Cro-Magnon cravings, packaging and repackaging the trifecta of sugar, salt, and fat. In present-day America, if you want to eat a healthy diet, the only way to do it is to find your own alternative path to equal satisfaction. This always requires giving up or curtailing some foods to which we have grown accustomed. So, although the word “Don’t” is not a sustainable long-term eating plan, it is often the only way to begin to make the transition to better, though still pleasurable, nutrition. It will take off weight, and that fat alone is often sufficient to help us get on track.

Making a few immediate changes is a lot easier than daily calorie counting, predetermined

menu plans, or overloading on one food—whether it’s grapefruit, seaweed, eggs, or stea. Such strategies are untenable over the long run. They require you to be on duty all the time but that is not the way to get pleasure out of your meals. To eat well, you need to relax and enjoy.

If, in the beginning, you merely stop eating certain fattening foods, you won’t have to obsess over how many calories there are in every bite of every meal. This doesn’t mean that you can never have a pastry again, just not every day.

Mostly, what you need to do is to seek out satisfaction in new, sometimes different ways. You know and I know that no one is going to be satisfied replacing a cheeseburger with a bowl of boiled chickpeas. But if you add a cup of white wine to the cooking liquid and some oven-roasted tomatoes, fresh herbs, a lashing of good vinegar, a bit of crunchy flaky salt, and a drizzle of fresh floral olive oil, you now have a delicious and appetizing nonburger.

Any change in diet requires close attention in the beginning. Then, like any acquired skill, new choices become second nature and you hardly have to think about them, but you must stay in practice. Because we live in what Kelly Brownell of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity has called “a toxic food environment,” it is easy to be overweight. All over the world, traditional diets are being replaced by high-fat fast foods, sugar-sweetened beverages, and simple carbohydrates, usually in the form of refined white flour.

Barry Popkin, a professor at the University of North Carolina, is one of the leading experts on this dietary transformation, known as “the nutrition transition.” He told me that, in the last sixty years, as soft drinks, burgers, fries, and snack foods were adopted all around the world, there has not been a single example—not one—of any developed nation reducing the number of people who are overweight. We are awash in a sea of empty calories. In a world where famine still commands more attention than obesity, it may come as a surprise that the more pervasive scourge turns out to be overeating—or, more precisely, eating too much of the wrong stuff. There are almost a billion and a half overweight people in the world, nearly twice as many as the underweight figure of eight hundred million.

There is very little mystery about what dietary demons produced this result. They are ubiquitous, and if you do nothing more than stop consuming them you will be taking a big step toward a more healthful diet. You will weigh less and feel better too.

## **No White Stuff**

The first piece of diet advice I received turned out to be the best, or at least the most immediately effective. Without it I wouldn’t have taken off those initial pounds so quickly, and without that encouragement I would not have followed through for nearly ten years and counting. It was given to me by Barry Zins, the fellow who sold me life insurance after I flunked one physical, took off weight, and then passed another. Barry, apart from being a nice guy, had a financial stake in getting me across the life-insurance finish line, and, like me, he happened to have high blood sugar.

“Cut out the white food,” he said.

The No White Stuff rule is not news to you if you read diet books or fitness magazines that promise “The Fast Track to Bed-Busting Abs.” But I don’t. I thought I was doing the right thing, going out of my way to avoid fats and exercising regularly, but my weight kept going

up. Barry's low-carb No White Stuff regimen was new and surprising information.

I turned to him and said, "Huh?"

"White flour, white sugar, white rice, and potatoes. They turn to fat more quickly."

"Surely you don't mean no pasta?" I protested. Like many who endured the last thirty years of fat phobia, I thought that a diet with lots of pasta was a great way to get protected while steering clear of cholesterol-raising meat.

"Whole-grain pasta is fine," Barry said. "But stay off the white flour."

Whole-grain is an important aspect of any serious attempt to take weight off and keep it off. The science behind this is pretty simple. Refined flour—that is, grain that has had its outer shell removed—is quite easy for the human digestive tract to break down into sugar. It is not the sugar per se that is harmful, but the rate of absorption. The fiber in whole grain slows this process down. The surge in blood sugar when there is no mediating fiber kicks off a biological chain of events, stimulating insulin and eventually ending up as fat.

Taking the whole-grain plunge was a big step. In my brother Bob's words, I disparaged whole-grain products as "pine-bark mulch." When my mother-in-law, Gini, baked whole-grain multigrain bread during our visits to her home in Rockford, Illinois, I begged my wife to find us something other than "Mom's torture bread." Ditto for whole-grain muffins, pie crusts, and cookies. I was convinced that whole grains were in the same category as cod-liver oil, reputedly good for you because they're unpleasurable. If I needed any more confirmation, there were all those floss-defying grain bits that lodge between your teeth.

I have since changed my haughty attitude toward whole grains. Actually, I have come to prefer dark bread and adore whole-grain flatbreads and crackers. If you make the whole-grain switch, please read the label before buying multigrain bread. No doubt the package will be emblazoned with health claims—which always seem to come with exclamation points—but if you take the time to read the label, the first ingredient often says white or wheat flour. Maybe it will have the qualifiers "unbleached" or "organic," but it's still processed flour. I keep shopping until I find bread whose first listed ingredient is a whole grain. Sometimes there is no way around settling for bread that has some white flour, in which case just make sure it's not the first ingredient listed.

I will not attempt to argue that whole-grain pasta slips and slides all over your tongue in the same fun way that white pasta does, but more powerful flavors and different textures in sauce can compensate for lack of slitheriness. As a side benefit, the pursuit of added flavor led me to consume more grilled vegetables (such as radicchio and zucchini), roast tomatoes, and olives on my pasta. They boost flavor and add interesting texture: more FPC.

A year after reluctantly giving up white pasta, I came across some cheering news. It turned out that not all white pastas are equally bad. Hard durum-semolina wheat—from which the very best Italian pasta is made—is more slowly digested than pasta made from regular refined white flour. It was a great relief to learn, after I went cold-turkey on white flour, that I could have the occasional bowl of traditional pasta without upsetting my body chemistry and heading back down the road of weight gain. When cooked al dente—slightly chewy, which is the only way you should ever cook pasta—it is also more slowly absorbed into the bloodstream, and that means less of a spike in blood sugar.

## Potatoes Are White



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