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SATURDAY EXTRA

Paleolithic eaters find community at breakfast; Facebook users meet to share ideas, recipes

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Joshua Layton teaches martial arts, drinks espresso and uses [Facebook](#). He also eats like a caveman.

The Paleolithic diet was pioneered in the '70s as a way of replicating the diet of hunter-gatherer societies. More of a lifestyle than a strict regimen, those who eat paleo centre their diet on meat, fish, root vegetables, fruit and nuts. Dieters focus on rich food, avoiding grains, dairy, salt and any processed food.

"It's not about acting like a caveman or re-enacting some kind of prehistoric lifestyle," said Layton. "It's about getting ideas about what's really healthy for us through getting ideas from our evolutionary history."

Emulating early humans who sought wholesome meats, boiled vegetables and anything easy to forage, paleo-eaters don't snack and avoid oils.

Many adherents say the diet has boosted their energy, mood and body composition.

"This is the best-quality food I can have for my money right now," says Mathieu Dumontet, who has followed the diet for two years. "Instead of buying empty food and wanting something, I'm always full."

Michael Bisson, associate professor of anthropology at McGill University, says the diet is close to what humans ate in Paleolithic times.

"Diet is entirely contextual, in terms of the environment and technical surrounding of a particular people," said Bisson. "What they appear to be doing is replicating a diet from very late in the Paleolithic, and there's nothing wrong with that."

Bisson described humans living in the Epipaleolithic era 15,000 years ago as "the pinnacle of the hunter-gatherer adaptation" who got the most of their environment right before the dawn of agriculture.

In January, Laval fitness consultant Melanie Halpert took up a 30-day paleo challenge, seeking energy and relief from cravings.

"My mom was like 'You're crazy, what are you doing? You can't eat this way!' " said Halpert. "I sent her some research and told her to sleep on it. And she said she had stayed up all night reading about it, and was really interested and wanted to do it."

Eight months later, Halpert says "it doesn't even cross my mind" to return to the typical North American diet - though she does admit getting a reaction from friends.

"People are like 'oh you're doing that caveman diet thing' and maybe they make a joke about how come I'm wearing shoes, or how come I'm not wearing animal skin or something," said Layton, who's been eating paleo for three years.

"Outside of paleo, it's sometimes very hard for people (because of) social pressure if you're not strongminded," said Dumontet. "At first you're answering tons of questions when you just want to enjoy your meal."

It's because of that pressure that paleo-eaters seek community.

Layton started the [Facebook](#) group Eating Paleo in Montreal a year ago. Roughly one hundred local dieters, from professional athletes to firsttimers, exchange recipes, review restaurants and list grocery store finds. They also organize monthly breakfasts.

"A lot of people go to a store and just find a book, but it's nice to do some meetings in the real world," said Layton. "It's providing an outlet for people to get together and share what they know and their enthusiasm for this experiment."

While all three say they allow some leeway - a glass of wine, a scoop of ice cream - they stress that they don't have any cravings.

"Paleo has changed my relationship to food, and especially sugar," said Halpert. Layton agrees.

"It's about food quality rather than quantity," he said.

Bisson says he believes the diet is a good idea.

Life expectancy in the Paleolithic Era was around 30 years. By following this ancient way of eating, dieters may find a way of prolonging their own lives.

"There are lots of things that are unhealthy in modern diets that it looks like they're avoiding," said Bisson. "I suppose they're living longer than the average life span. More power to them!"

PHIL CARPENTER THE GAZETTE / Enjoying breakfast together are (from left), Guy Giard, Sylvie Ouellette, Melanie Halpert, Caroline Rioux, Mathieu Dumontet, Joshua Layton and Marilène Gilinas. They all follow a paleolithic diet, originally met through a Facebook group started by Layton, and now gather monthly for breakfast.;

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