



Mindful Eating in a Mindless World

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

I'll never forget the day my doctor told me to stop eating just about everything I liked: gluten, soy, eggs, nuts, and sugar. It could have been those six months in India that did me in, or perhaps some mysterious virus. Whatever the reason, his culinary prescription did not thrill me.

Exhausted from illness, I walked back to my apartment and opened the refrigerator. There on the sparse shelves, my doomed diet winked back at me: tofu, miso, multigrain bread, almond butter, raspberry jam, and wilted chard, the only permissible item. After giving all of

the baneful groceries to my neighbor, I trekked to the store and stared at food labels for a few hours before leaving.

A few months after the shock subsided and I was in a long-term relationship with millet bread, it dawned on me that I was no stranger to gastronomic adventures. My first serious partner, at 20, was macrobiotic. His diet involved mochi, twig tea, and umeboshi plums whose sourness made my face scrunch like a dried fig. Next I dated a vegan who filled our fridge with Not Dogs and Nayonnaise.

My boyfriend after that liked wings and ribs. On our second date he took me to a burger joint, where dim lighting concealed grease-soaked walls. Being a wheat-free herbivore, it was a stretch, but I liked the guy and braved the bun of my veggie burger in his honor.

Unfortunately, things weren't always pretty. Macro man and I argued when I didn't want steamed kale for lunch *again*. Mr. Vegan and I engaged in far too many tense conversations about dairy. And the handsome carnivore found my vegetarian chutzpah offensive at times. The only saving grace was that all of us liked cookies.

Sadly, food is often a point of contention that can easily drive a fat wedge between people. Much like religion, some feel their diet is the one and *only*. But countless contradictions make it hard to conjure up a one-size-fits-all answer. Vegans avoid meat and dairy, while ayurveda enthusiasts go for milk and ghee. Pescetarians permit fish, whereas fruitarians feast only on what falls off the tree.

To those of us who nutrition hop, conflicting systems can generate confusion. However, for the billion people without food (one-sixth of humanity, according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization), such confusion is hardly an issue; these people simply need to eat *something* ... anything. I didn't fully get this until my path took me to the rural village

in Swaziland where my sister lived for three years. Suddenly, it didn't matter whether I ate Lara Bars or Lunabars when children with empty bowls surrounded me, waiting for a small scoop of maize from the local care-point, if there was one. Usually there wasn't, but that's hardly a surprise considering that most of the corn and soy on the planet is grown for livestock, not humans. Few benefit from this — neither the poor nor the cattle, whose genetically modified feed pales in comparison to good old grass.

Indeed, we have much to be grateful for, but how many of us realize this? And how many of us actually *experience* our food when we eat? These days it's common to stuff our faces with wild inattention. By the time our plate is clear, we can't remember what our meal tasted like. I realized this 10 years ago while visiting Plum Village, the monastery of Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. I learned to lift my chopsticks to my mouth with awareness and pause before gorging myself to acknowledge the wondrous palette of colors and tastes before me. It was there, while admiring the beauty of my brown rice and vegetables, that I suddenly saw rain, sun, and stars on my plate. When I looked up, a nun with soft eyes was smiling.

Never did I appreciate food more than those precious days. Every bite seemed like a miracle, some beloved gift from the land. Thanks to Plum Village and various agricultural escapades, I remembered that food doesn't grow in supermarkets.

It was through this experience that I discovered the true gift of food. From the fertile earth it comes to us, expecting nothing but our enjoyment in return. Like a true lover, its only wish is that we feel nourished. We can remember this anytime we eat. Just as our heart is awakened when we lock eyes with someone we adore across the room, let us smile at our food and feel that sweet urge to ingest the object of our loving. It needn't take long — a simple gaze of love and thanks is enough. As we do so, we realize the truth of the First Contemplation recited before meals at Plum Village: "Our food is the gift of the whole Universe — the earth, the sky, and much hard work." Indeed it is. Let us acknowledge this whenever we dine and allow our fullness to expand beyond our bellies and bless all beings everywhere. 🌱

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