

# FOOD



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## Talking About Food: A Spectrum Conversation with Nutritionist Beverly Utt

Food and Adventism go together like macaroni and cheese, but the conversation has moved significantly since Ellen White started it by suggesting a vegetarian diet. Today, people are quick to share details about their efforts at giving up sugar, gluten, soy, or GMOs, or their commitment to going vegan. And the talk might continue with critiques of processed versus whole food or fast versus slow food.

### **Q. You were telling me about "eater-tainment." What is that?**

I think we were talking about the toxic environment vying for our attention nowadays, with fast-food apps identifying quick-service options within five miles of every man, woman, and child, edible food-like substances lining the grocery shelves, and the supersizing option couched as a value-added choice. When you walk into your favorite supermarket, you are confronted with 30,000–40,000 possible choices of food and beverage products. How is a product going to stand out and capture your attention? Food consultants are re-engineering sweet, salty, and oily foods to unlock the code of crave-ability and cram as much hedonics as they can into each bite.<sup>1</sup> Some even suggest that food is being fashioned to condition us to hyper-eat in a way similar to stimulus-response disorders such as compulsive gambling or substance abuse. This is tough competition for those of us trying to put a simple, satisfying, and nutritious meal on the table day after day.

### **Q. How has that affected the American diet?**

We've wandered far from eating foods low on the food chain. All this re-engineering may have an effect on our satiation threshold, as in the case of artificial sweeteners, for example. Some of them are so sweet (Neotame is reportedly 7,000–13,000 times sweeter than table sugar) that the possibility may exist for our sweetness threshold to

keep rising, thus raising the bar, so to speak, of what we consider satisfying.

Americans value convenience nowadays. Unfortunately, this has allowed us to step out of the kitchen and cook less. The Western diet, also referred to as the SAD (Standard American Diet) diet, is notably deficient in vitamins A, C, folate, and fiber, and comes packed with saturated fat and refined carbohydrates. Unfortunately, we see this type of diet creeping into other countries around the world. I would suggest people weigh the true long-term cost of convenience and return to the kitchen. Cooking real food may be our best defense against the chronic diseases we currently face.

Another phenomenon we've witnessed is the elasticity of the human appetite. With the birth of supersizing in food eaten away from home, the unintended consequence is that we have supersized ourselves. As French-fry bags get bigger, so do French-fry eaters! Since 1960, the prevalence of adult obesity in the United States tripled, and since 1970, the prevalence has tripled in children. Obesity may have plateaued in some groups but remains high overall. Learning how to control our portions may be one of the most powerful strategies to achieve and maintain a healthy body weight.

**Q. With cooking shows on television, and a flood of photos of every meal we eat on Instagram, food is continuously on people's minds now. The British writer and foodie John Lanchester said recently, "Most of the energy that we put into thinking about food, I realized, isn't about food; it's about anxiety. Food makes us anxious. The infinite range of choices and possible self-expressions means that there are so many ways to go wrong."<sup>2</sup> How do we avoid going wrong?**

Perhaps we need to limit our appetite for hype, whether it be the latest diet craze or super-foods. Maybe we need to let go of our vicarious fascination with television shows, celebri-

ty endorsements, endless blogs around food, and just find that place where we prefer to cook and eat a certain way, because we feel better, and our bodies work for us better. Maybe our efforts could be directed towards becoming comfortable in the kitchen again, instead of viewing cooking as a spectator sport. Look for ways to expand our cooking repertoire, which could have the effect of once again eating whole food, simply prepared, together with those we love.

I personally like to frequent farmer's markets. I've driven all over Washington State to purchase the freshest apples to put up for applesauce, berries, and heirloom tomatoes. Perhaps it's the modern-day version of hunting and gathering. But I don't do it to save the world or to wear some badge of political correctness. I realize that I am very fortunate to be able to do this. It's good to be looking for fresh fruits or vegetables you can eat simply by themselves or use as ingredients with other unprocessed food. Most of the world cannot enjoy the luxury of organic heirloom produce or free-range and grass-fed meat and poultry. With the world's population heading for just short of 11 billion people, it is not realistic to think of feeding the world without the aid of industrial agriculture. My suggestion would be to figure out what you truly value and then realistically match your behavior to your beliefs according to the resources you have available. Make incremental improvements when you can.

**Q. In your presentations you talk about lifestyle as being significant. What exactly is the lifestyle that you recommend?**

We have learned a lot from the National Institute of Aging and National Geographic's search for hot spots of longevity around the globe. Loma Linda found itself amongst other Blue Zone contenders in Sardinia, Okinawa, and Ikaria, a community in Greece. Residents of these places produce a high rate of centenarians, suffer a fraction of the diseases that commonly kill people in other parts of the developed world, and enjoy more healthy years of life.

The author of the Blue Zone study became convinced that for people to adopt a healthful lifestyle, they needed to live in an ecosystem that makes it possible. As soon as you take culture, belonging, purpose, or religion out of the picture, the foundation for long, healthy lives collapses.

Commonalities amongst the Blue Zone 100-year-olds included lifestyle behaviors like keeping socially engaged in ways that gave meaning to their lives. They have a strong sense of purpose. They are outward looking toward serving

and supporting others. None of them smoke. All keep active every day. And all of them eat a low-calorie diet with emphasis on plant-based foods. Sound familiar?

Long life is no accident. It begins with good genes, but it depends on good habits. Adventists have been given a birthright, a "lentil tradition," so to speak, a lifestyle package approach to living a long and healthy life.

**Q. These days, diets are also tied to particular kinds of exercise. The CrossFit gyms often recommend the paleo diet, for instance. What are some of the ways eating and drinking the right stuff at the right time can support improving one's mental or athletic performance?**

The biblical account in Daniel 1 may not be cited as a definitive resource on diet; however, there may be useful lessons to be drawn from it. While it may be that Daniel and his friends sought to avoid food offered to idols in violation of their Hebrew religious beliefs, in presenting their request to the king's steward, it appears that they recognized the role that a healthy diet could play in enhancing their intellectual and physical performance.

Some lessons to consider: first, they recognized the importance of eating a healthy plant-based diet. Second, the positive effects of better eating habits were apparent in





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a brief period of time as confirmed by their healthier appearance, strength and mental performance. Third, when we live in closer harmony with how our bodies were designed to function, we can experience better health.

These lessons are just as valid today. The benefits of a healthier diet based more closely on the Creator's original design have been shown to increase longevity and improve mental, physical, and even spiritual performance. This has been widely recognized and presented in scientific journals, books, magazines, broadcast media, and the Internet. The Adventist health message has always supported this, though similar views on diet and health are gaining more attention and popularity from other sources as well.

**Q. Why does it matter what we eat, if we are not overweight? Do you believe that we are what we eat?**

Yes, because the nutrition we provide our bodies is information. What we choose to eat has consequences both immediate and long-term, chemically, physiologically, structurally, and behaviorally. When we eat in optimal ways, to promote the way our bodies have been designed, we can expect positive results.

I do believe we are what we eat in the sense that when we consume cleansing, healing, and restorative foods, we actually promote an anti-inflammatory milieu inside our cells to improve our health and prevent disease.

**Q. Recently I read an article about how the time of day when one eats makes a difference. Do we have to worry about timing as well as about what we eat?**

The French appear to feast on rich food, yet remain slim. Best-selling books like *French Women Don't Get Fat* may underscore the fact that French people have figured out how to eat well, but sensibly. Here's one clue—the French do not take lunch lightly. It is a sit-down affair where 60 percent of their day's calories are eaten before 2:00 p.m. We would do well to replicate this way of eating a good breakfast, hearty lunch, and light dinner. It is referred to as *front loading*, meaning to eat more calories earlier in the day, and taper off as the day progresses.

**Q. In Deborah Madison's book, *Vegetable Literacy*,<sup>3</sup> she talks about the stories of plants. What do plant stories have to do with eating?**

Deborah Madison has observed that plant families share culinary characteristics. For example, related vegetables can stand in for each other when cooking. Related herbs bring out the flavor of their family's vegetables. She talks of the Umbellifer herbs like cilantro flattering the family's Umbellifer vegetables, such as carrots and fennel. Knowing these family secrets can expand our kitchen wisdom, freeing us from the need to follow recipes verbatim, and, ultimately, moving us forward to a place where we can enjoy cooking more intuitively.

The amazing complexity we see in plant structure and characteristics strengthens my appreciation for God's creative design.

**Q. Lanchester also talks about food as a means of self-definition. As diets within the Adventist culture change, do you think they are changing the definition of Adventism?**

For decades in North America, Adventists were distinctly known for not eating meat. But we weren't giving up sugar or utilizing healthy fats. We ate a lot of processed imitation meats, and our preparation of vegetables was not particularly healthy or appetizing. Nowadays, a lot of celebrity chefs are making a name for themselves with their fabulous vegetarian presentations, and we no longer own the vegetarian zone.

### Q. What is your new favorite dish or dishes that you are cooking in 2015?

I love learning to cook from global food ways as inspiration to expand my repertoire. I was looking to use spices more freely in my cooking. So my son and I cooked together with friends an Indian-inspired dinner. We made chana dal sundal for an appetizer to eat as we cooked together for several hours before sitting down to a fabulous dinner. It is now on my list as a "keeper." It is a street food from Southern India made with chickpeas, spiced with black mustard seeds, chiles, and grated coconut.

My favorite comfort food to prepare is an avocado taco with cilantro, white onion garnish, and homemade green tomatillo salsa. Once you've made the salsa, you can whip up these tacos in minutes.

Seasonal variations are always fun to do. I make a winter panzanella salad with sherry vinaigrette. Butternut squash stands in for the tomatoes. Pomegranate seeds, goat cheese, and walnuts accompany the arugula and red onion. This helps hold me until I can make the summer version of panzanella salad with luscious ripe tomatoes! ■

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**Beverly Utt** is a culinary nutritionist at MultiCare Health System. She works to bring real-life solutions to the plate by balancing good taste with good health. This type of thinking has positioned Bev as a consultant to authors, chefs, the food industry, and medical institutions.



### References

1. Elisabeth Kolbert, "XXXL: Why Are We So Fat?" *The New Yorker*, July 20, 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/07/20/xxxl>.
2. John Lanchester, "Shut Up and Eat," *The New Yorker*, November 3, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/03/shut-eat>.
3. Deborah Madison, *Vegetable Literacy* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2013).

**Editorial** → continued from page 2...

long time, because she "didn't know how to let go of judging people so quickly, on how they look, or dress, or speak," and so she couldn't stop judging herself.

Ah, judging. That does seem to be a major problem. No matter where we find ourselves in the conversation about the Internet, judging others' actions as inappropriate seems to be what we all do. Myself included. Acknowledging our own judgmentalism is so-o-o-o-o difficult, because it means that we might have to think of things differently, and that is always tough.

Lamott's proposed solution to this judgment problem is to offer welcome to someone else. It helps a lot, she says, "especially to the deeply unpleasant or weird. The offer heals you both. What works best is to target people in the community whom no one else seems to want. Voilá: now welcome exists in you."

So today I want to spill that Diet Coke on the *Spectrum* community and extend welcome to all. If you are reading these words, you are part of the community. Whatever your criticism of the words and positions put forth on our site, you are part of the community. Whether or not you have membership in a Seventh-day Adventist church, whether or not you like or dislike the people who comment, you are part of the community. We are counting on you to do your part in making this a place of welcome. We invite you to help us write the book of welcome within the Seventh-day Adventist community. Doing so should heal us all. We have a wonderful message to share, and heritage to cherish.

Let's make the Internet and Adventism a happy, welcoming place. ■

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**Bonnie Dwyer** is editor of *Spectrum* magazine.

