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## Superfoods

### Antioxidants for Better Health

by Noelle Robbins

If we are what we eat, then eating “superfoods” could make us super healthy, super energetic and super durable.

Alameda couple Erin Barrett and Jack Mingo may appreciate the first two benefits of consuming superfoods, but it was the hope of reaching the third—vital longevity—that launched their superfoods crusade. “My father died of a heart attack at the age of 49,” says Mingo, and “all his kids have a genetic predisposition to high cholesterol.” Barrett, armed with a penchant for research and a slim budget, set out to maximize every dollar by focusing on antioxidant-dense foods to counter the risk of Mingo’s family history of heart disease.



Barrett’s investigations revealed that while no two lists of superfoods include exactly the same fruits, vegetables, grains, spices and fats, there is agreement that superfoods are packed with nutrition that goes beyond vitamins and minerals. Superfoods are described as possessing particularly potent health-promoting and healing properties. Powerful antioxidants thought to fight cancer and heart disease are important components of superfoods. Omega 3 fatty acids from proteins like salmon and probiotics—or beneficial bacteria in fermented foods like yogurt—are also grouped in the superfood basket.

For Mingo, switching to a healthier diet meant some happy discoveries. “I had been trying to cut out fats, and we learned that some fats are beneficial

. That was a wonderful thing,” He and Barrett now regularly incorporate heart-healthy fats such as nuts, olive oil and even chocolate in daily meals. And while Mingo carefully guards his 72 percent dark “medicinal chocolate,” Barrett was delighted to find that watermelon, “always one of my favorite fruits,” is packed with phytonutrients, the plant-based compounds common in superfoods.

Tinrin Chew, an oncology nutritionist at Alta Bates Comprehensive Cancer Center, applauds families seeking healthier diets. “Ten years ago the five-a-day campaign was introduced,” she says, “to encourage consumption of at least five servings of fruits and vegetables per day. By 2006 more than 4,000 chemicals had been discovered in food [that] may detoxify or neutralize carcinogens in the body, reduce inflammation

and regulate cell growth.” The key, she says, is “eating a rainbow of foods—every variety and color—with every meal, every day.”

Chew’s list of superfoods include blueberries, yellow corn and pomegranates. One unusual nominee is aronia, a deep purple-blue berry from Europe that can be homegrown and is higher in antioxidants than either blueberries or pomegranates. Chew promotes the anti-inflammatory and anti-bacterial qualities of spices like the turmeric in curry. And she recommends lightly sautéing tomatoes, to release antioxidant enzymes, finished with a drizzle of olive oil to enhance absorption of nutrients.

One superfood Chew is learning about is coconut oil. “It was long thought that coconut oil was worse than lard, full of saturated fat,” she says. “But newer research shows that coconut oil may not only possess anti-cancer properties but is easily digested and quickly absorbed, which means it is a good source of energy.”

The building blocks of a healthy diet, Chew says, are whole foods and lots of color, not pills. She also suggests adding color to water with diluted superfood fruit juices or green tea.

Mingo and Barrett plunged into superfoods hoping to prevent disease but are quick to tout immediate benefits they have experienced: improved digestion, more energy and—they are not shy to add—great sex. Superfoods may, indeed, create super lives. □