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In Good Health:

Taking It Slow | What's old is new again in the ancient diet trend that rejects the fast, convenient, processed Western way of eating. | By Noelle Robbins

Patricia Scott's family dines in a decidedly uncivilized way, more akin to how our distant ancestors ate than to what many modern societies consider a sign of progress and development.

Scott, a mom and part-time attorney who homeschools her children, might be the very kind of overwhelmed parent likely to succumb to the temptation of dietary staples so many busy families rely on as they rush through their days—the kind of food found in colorful packages, handy resealable freezer bags and take-out boxes. The kind of food modern society devours by the ton that is heavy on a few refined grains, processed and sweet enough to appeal to kids, forms the basis of the Western diet.

Scott has chosen another path. On a recent morning in her sunny Alameda home she served her lively children hearty bowls of oatmeal and soft-cooked eggs—a meal shaped by the principles of the so-called “ancient” or “primitive” diet.

Her cheery, light-filled kitchen boasts an abundance of produce and protein, beans and grains that are whole, fresh, local, seasonal and organic. And she prepares, serves and enjoys these raw ingredients in a way that connects eating to the source and vitality of the food.

“I thought I didn't have the time for preparing fresh foods from scratch but it just calls for little steps that make cooking easier and more enjoyable,” says Scott, offering encouragement to others who want to establish similar food traditions.

If the Scott family diet sounds familiar, perhaps it's because there is a gentle international crusade underway that embraces this same philosophy: the Slow Food movement, launched in



Natural nourishment: Patricia Scott feeds her family the ancient way, by culturing kombucha, sprouting beans and soaking raw oats at home. Photo by John Daniel Scott.

Italy in 1989. The dining experience, the joy and pleasure of eating, is one of the central tenets of Slow Food. Members of this movement wanted to address the impact of too much fast food, part of a too fast way of life, which was leading to the disappearance of centuries of food traditions, and was disconnecting people—body and soul—from the origins and quality of their food. Equally important in this country, Slow Food USA encourages an American food system that is “good, clean and fair.”

“This means benefits for consumers and growers—healthy food grown in a healthy agricultural environment bringing fair prices to farmers and sold for fair prices to shoppers,” says Vera Ciammetti, founder of Slow Food Alameda. In other words, farmers can make livable incomes from growing fruits, vegetables and meat; and consumers at all income levels can have access to healthy food at an affordable price.

“We emphasize local sources of food while embracing a wide range of ethnic foods,” says David C. Lee, co-leader of Slow Food East Bay, about the local Slow Food philosophy. “We support sustainable farming, preserving farming heritages, crop diversity and organic food agriculture.”

“Connecting farmers to their customers” is integral to Slow Food efforts, adds Gordon Jenkins, co-leader of Slow Food Berkeley. And so is saving agricultural space from development to make sure we have enough acreage to grow the food we depend on, he says.

The Bay Area is home to several active Slow Food Convivia (or chapters). And over the Labor Day Weekend, Aug. 29 to Sept. 1, San Francisco will play host to the only U.S. Slow Food Nation Event. This weekend of delicious eating will feature a victory garden in the Civic Center and many booths and presentations at Fort Mason showcasing Slow Food principles and delights.

The Slow Food movement in the Bay Area, at least, is going beyond foodies in the know. Some local schools have also begun to embrace healthier food with the help of a school lunch program that adheres to these same fundamental ethics. Revolution Foods, based in Alameda, contracts with schools at all economic levels—including public, charter and private schools in Oakland—to provide fresh, local, at least half organic, made-from-scratch hot lunches. To serve more than 45 schools and 75 after-school programs in the Bay Area, Revolution Foods works with local farmers, bakers and meat

A New (Old) Way of Eating

EVENTS & RESOURCES

Slow Food Nation Event, San Francisco, Aug. 29 to Sept. 1, San Francisco Civic Center Plaza and Fort Mason Center;
www.slowfoodnation.org

Weston A. Price Foundation, Ninth Annual Conference, Wise Traditions 2008; Hyatt San Francisco Airport, Nov. 7 to 9; www.westonaprice.org

Revolution Foods, (510) 596-9024;
www.revolutionfoods.com

Three Stone Hearth, 1 Bolivar Drive B., Berkeley, (415) 647-8216;
www.threestonehearth.com

Slow Food Convivia,
www.slowfoodusa.org

BOOKS

Sally Fallon, *Nourishing Traditions* (New Trends Publishing, Inc., 2001)

Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food* (Penguin Press, 2008)

Jeff Cox, *The Organic Food Shopper's Guide* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008)

Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (HarperCollins, 2008)

Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should Be Good Clean and*

producers to prepare and deliver tasty, nourishing lunches, in many cases to students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. And Revolution Foods brings more than just high-quality noontime meals, it also provides nutrition education to students and parents—a back-to-basics approach that links a new generation to the sources and healthy value of whole, fresh foods.

Following similar guidelines in her own home, Scott adheres to the traditional eating habits identified by Weston Price, a dentist who in the 1930s traveled worldwide to investigate the links between nutrition and dental health. What Price discovered went far beyond healthy teeth. His observations of isolated populations relying only on local sources of food revealed communities eating a wide range of seafood, meats, fats, vegetables, fruits, nuts, whole grains and seeds in their most unrefined states. The health of these people, who had consumed these same essential foods for hundreds, maybe thousands of years, amazed him. The vast majority enjoyed excellent physical and mental health—largely free from chronic disease, mental illness and dental decay. They were vibrant, strong and able to produce generations of healthy offspring.

These findings resonate with Scott as she shapes nutrition strategies for her young family. Her favorite “primitive diet” resource, which she refers to as her cooking bible, is *Nourishing Traditions: The Cookbook That Challenges Politically Correct Nutrition and the Diet Dictocrats*. Author Sally Fallon, with a nutrition background and training in French and Mediterranean cooking, offers more than just recipes in this tome. Fallon, expanding on Price’s findings, stresses natural diets free of the influences of the processed food industry. This means relying less on packaged foods that spur soulless, speedy eating; and taking a more conscious approach to nutrition that emphasizes fresh, good-tasting, easy-to-digest food eaten in an appreciative, calm way. One example is offering more whole-grain bread baked from scratch that fills the kitchen with a warm, inviting aroma, in place of bland, and nutritionally empty, rice cakes.

In *Nourishing Traditions* Fallon relates what Price found in populations switching to “civilized” diets of refined grains, canned foods and sugar: significant increases in tooth decay, susceptibility to infections, chronic illness and infertility.

Fair (Rizzoli New York, 2007)

Frances Moore Lappé, *Diet for a Small Planet: 20th Anniversary Edition* (Ballantine Books, 1985)

FILMS

Deborah Koons Garcia, *The Future of Food* (Lily Films, 2004)

www.thefutureoffood.com

Among several food preparation suggestions, Nourishing Traditions describes the benefits of soaking, fermenting and sprouting which, through a predigestion process, enhance the bioavailability (the ease in which the body can access and use nutrients) of key food components including enzymes, fiber, vitamins and minerals.

Using these techniques, Scott manages what amounts to a full-fledged garden and mini-laboratory in her kitchen. She sprouts lentils and beans for hearty soups and stews. She soaks raw whole oats to release vitamins and minerals; and cultures kombucha, a fermented tea using a starter (a small batch of fermented product added to a fresh batch to kick-start the souring process) similar to the method that gives rise to sourdough bread. Her purchases at the local health food store—decidedly organic and unrefined—include raw butter, which contains healthy microorganisms missing in pasteurized products. She also buys, when she can, meat raised on fast-growing green grass (in contrast to animals that, in the last months of life, are finished with grain, dry grass or hay). This kind of meat is a good protein source of Omega-3 fatty acids—the same Omega-3s found in local wild salmon, which will be in short supply this summer.

Scott includes protein and healthy fat in most meals. A typical day in the Scott household starts with a breakfast of whole oat cereal with ground flax seeds (also an excellent source of Omega-3s), and organic eggs. Midmorning snacks for her children might include sprouted wheat bagels topped with organic cream cheese or raw butter, freshly ground peanut butter or raw honey. (No processed sugary jams or jellies are in sight.) Lunchtime brings lots of whole, fresh, organic fruits—apples are a big favorite—and yogurt for the kids, while Mom might enjoy hummus and a salad loaded with ripe avocado. They are all balanced meals incorporating protein, fiber, healthy fats and heaps of vitamins and minerals.

Dinner around the Scott dining table often features a savory soup or stew made of sprouted lentils and carrots, organic turkey, and fresh, seasonal veggies like chard, kale, zucchini and collard greens. Kid-friendly favorites include uncured hot dogs (no nitrates or nitrites that are suspected carcinogens) made from antibiotic-, hormone-free meat; whole grain pastas and lots of sweet potatoes prepared with olive oil and sea salt. The kids also love steak (from green grass-fed cows) and broccoli, which Scott's husband, John, will often eat as leftovers for breakfast.

Michael Pollan, local bestselling author, and professor at the U.C. Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, would likely applaud Scott's choices. His latest work, *In Defense of Food*, dedicates several pages to Price's research on the health benefits of eating a diverse, whole foods-based diet. Pollan laments the global spread and outcome of what he describes as the "Western diet," and modern agricultural and manufacturing practices: industrialized, processed foods and refined grains; the abundance of cheap, nutritionally shallow sugars and fats; and the loss of biodiversity in plant and animal crops spurred on by the use of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers.

In his book, Pollan outlines several agricultural and technological changes, which affect the way we grow and process food, and account for the distance we have traveled from ancient diets to the modern Western diet. These agribusiness and food manufacturing advances have resulted, for instance, in an imbalance in the way we eat essential fatty acids (Omega-3s and Omega-6s, for example) due to overreliance on too few food crops; and have contributed to a profusion of nutrition-poor foods stemming from overprocessing—which strips vital nutrients—and overuse of simple fertilizers.

Right now, there are three main staple grain crops in the world—wheat, corn and soy. This creates several problems. A monoculture (cultivating a single crop on a farm or in an entire region or country) approach to agriculture means unknown bacteria, viruses and pests can wipe out entire nations full of crops, the Irish potato famine being a prime example.

In addition, relying on a few varieties of grain as the mainstay of our diets means that we fill up on calories containing too many of some nutrients, like Omega-6 fatty acids in corn (which can produce inflammation in our bodies), and miss other important components like Omega-3 fatty acids (which inhibit inflammation).

Omega-6 and Omega-3 are essential fatty acids crucial to human health and we get lots of Omega-6 from corn and safflower oils that are abundant in processed food. Jeff Cox, Sonoma-based author of *The Organic Food Shopper's Guide*, says that the optimal balance should be 4:1, Omega-6 to Omega-3. He notes, however, the typical Western diet has a ratio closer to 20:1. Some of the best sources of Omega-3 are fish, walnuts and flax.

Nature wants balance and diversity, as does the human body, a

microcosm of the planet itself. This highlights another critical problem with modern Western agriculture—fertilizers. Plants and grains pass healthy benefits on to us from soil rich in nutrients and microorganisms. Some of the minerals in hearty soil are tiny but crucial for growing vigorous crops and healthy humans—including iron, zinc, calcium, magnesium and selenium. Soil that is full of good stuff for our bodies also provides vitamin B, vitamin E and important phytochemicals that serve as the building blocks of antioxidants in plants that help protect us from conditions like cancer and heart disease.

Cox says organic farming is a large part of the solution to ensuring nutrient-rich soil and crops. Many conventional farming practices rely on the use of three simple fertilizers—

nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium—that can produce big yields depleted of important vitamins and minerals. Organic farming, however, emphasizes a rich mixture of compost and what is called green manure—crops which, when plowed under, return nutrients to the soil. So a diet abundant in organically grown fruits and vegetables—available at farmers' markets, health food stores, and more commonly now, in supermarkets—can be a good source of many important vitamins, minerals and anti-oxidants, while reducing exposure to chemical pesticides and weed killers.

Quality and variety matter in a sound diet. “It may be surprising to learn that there are between 1,400 to 7,000 kinds of apples sold today,” Cox says, “although only a small assortment is available in most large markets.” Whole grains like oats, barley, amaranth, quinoa and spelt add diversity to diets; and there are more breads, flours and cereals boasting this wide range of grains now available to shoppers. Buying in bulk and grinding flour at home is another option, and a grain mill is on the top of Scott's kitchen wish list.

Scott and her thriving family enjoy a wide range of plant and animal foods such as nuts, coconut, honey and chocolate (preferably dark and organic). When they eat out, sushi is a favorite. They also make sushi at home using avocados and nori (seaweed paper) from a local Asian market. Above all is the goal of eating fresh, seasonal and organic whenever possible.

Scott chooses food grown closer to home because it's fresher and tastier and also because she likes to support local farmers.

Delighting in the flavors, textures and colors of food is as important as counting vitamins, minerals, fiber and protein. “We share many of our meals with other people—family members and friends,” she says. “We make our meals a dining experience.”

Scott also teaches her children to eat in a conscious manner, urging them to pay attention to how the food makes them feel. She says there is wisdom in food, an emotional and spiritual element that goes hand-in-hand with honoring traditional ways of eating, which enhances the health payoffs. Her flourishing family offers living proof.

Noelle Robbins is *The Monthly's* health columnist.