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10 Ways to Eat Well

Mr. Green's food commandments
by **Bob Schildgen**



NOT TOO MANY YEARS AGO, natural and organic foods were smiled on as the quirks of cranks and hypochondriacs. Advertising exhorted Americans to rush their food from supermarket to belly with the least possible aggravation. Meals, whether from a just-add-water pouch or a drive-through, were meant to be convenient and fast. The slogan to promote throwaway beverage containers--"no deposit, no return"--summed it up. Not only was preparing fresh food too much hassle, but even taking an empty back to the store was also a burden to be lifted.

Today natural foods have become so mainstream that some of us former eccentrics are feeling uncomfortably normal. Millions of people now know how their diets affect the environment and their own health. There's even a "slow food" movement to counter industrialized farming and assembly-line products. But translating that knowledge into practice isn't easy. If you need help changing your eating habits, here are ten inexpensive ways to put those bold ideas on the dinner table.

1 Eschew meat-centered meals Americans consume 185 pounds of beef, pork, and poultry per capita each year. It would be better for our health and the environment to knock back fewer bacon burgers, steaks, and chicken wings. Just follow the example of Thomas Jefferson, who ate meat "as a condiment to the vegetables which constitute my principal diet." Our third president made it to 83, a pretty good run for his period in history--especially when you consider the stress he endured because of financial problems brought on by his inept farm management. (George Washington was a much better farmer, although, ironically, he was done in by agronomic diligence: He caught a fatal case of quinsy after riding around inspecting his plantation in bad weather.)

2 Buy organic Organic farmers and ranchers are not allowed to use chemical poisons on their crops and livestock, and, in general, are better stewards of the land. Yes, you will end up paying more for your meals because it usually costs more to produce food organically. But if you follow the rest of the advice on this list, you should be able to reduce your costs enough to make up the difference.

However, eating organic is not a cure-all: With multinational food conglomerates moving into organics, it is sometimes preferable to buy from conventional local producers who treat their land well and whose products travel short distances to market.

3 Support local farmers Small farmers--those who are left--need all the help they can get, thanks to decades of failed agricultural policy. If you're close to one of the country's 3,700 farmers' markets, make it part of your shopping routine: Its suppliers don't have to ship their products halfway across the continent or the world. If you can't make it to the market, consider community-supported agriculture, which provides subscribers with regular deliveries of delectables from area producers. LocalHarvest has a searchable online database of CSA farms at localharvest.org/csa.

4 Cut back on processed, packaged foods Food packaging accounts for 30 million tons of waste annually. Much of it is for display--or contains products you'd be better off without. Microwave popcorn is a fine example. Popcorn is the result of painstaking efforts by Native corn breeders in Mexico about 6,000 years ago. (Archaeologists have found popcorn thousands of years old that still pops.) Instead of leaving well enough alone, the food industry gave us microwave popcorn in individual nonrecyclable packages that each hold a mere 3.5 ounces and cost seven times more than popcorn in jars--and deprive you of that comforting rattle of kernels exploding against the lid of a kettle.

5 Seek green variety Anybody who claims vegetables are boring should visit a Mediterranean country. On Crete, where people have the longest life expectancy in the world, they eat 26 kinds of wild plants. Yet we're stuck with 3.5 million tons a year of iceberg lettuce. It takes 36 calories of fossil-fuel energy to grow and ship 1 calorie of iceberg lettuce. "We might as well be shipping baggies of water back and forth across America," says author Bill McKibben. For alternatives, consider easy-growing arugula, endive, chard, chicory, dandelions, mustard, collards, kale, and Italian parsley.

6 Be picky with fish Fish is still a healthy choice, despite the news that the world's fisheries are being strained and that some seafood may contain dangerous levels of mercury or dioxin. The trick is to try tasty but less popular alternatives that eat lower on the food chain, like sardines, or sustainably farmed varieties like trout. Consult the Monterey Bay Aquarium's seafood guide at mbayaq.org/cr/seafoodwatch.asp and the Sierra Club's "Mercury Survival Guide" at sierraclub.org/mercury.

7 Shop in style "Paper or plastic?" How many billions of times must the country's weary grocery clerks repeat this tiresome question? Next time you hear it, cause a stir by righteously chirping, "Neither" and whipping out your reusable cloth or string sack. And for all the fuss about bags, remember that it takes a lot more oil to drive to the grocery store than to make those bags. So, if possible, leave the car in the garage and make human-powered shopping trips part of your fitness program.

8 Make your own Most of the best recipes on Earth were created by peasants who wouldn't be able to read the directions on a modern food package. Yet I have witnessed PhDs microwaving TV dinners while complaining how complicated it must be to make what the processed-food wizards are trying to imitate. The truth is that cheap, healthy, and tasty meals, from cereals to sautés to soups, can easily be made from scratch. Individually packaged instant oatmeal, for example, costs about \$3 to \$4 per pound, while plain old oatmeal, sold in bulk, costs 79 cents per pound, leaving you plenty of resources to experiment with oatmeal cuisine. Try swirling your initials in maple syrup over a steaming bowl if you're feeling adventurous and concerned about presentation.

9 Grow your own Lawns surrounding 85 million U.S. residences take up almost 25 million acres. Digging up just a fraction of this real estate to grow chard, lettuce, peas, and tomatoes would be a marvelous development. You'd save money on food, and some of the millions of gallons of oil used to ship it from farm to market. Apartment dwellers take note: An amazing amount of produce can be grown in containers or window boxes, especially greens you can cut and grow back. For tips, browse university agricultural extension services online (never thought you'd be doing that in a highrise, did you?) or check out *McGee & Stuckey's Bountiful Container* (Workman Publishing Company, 2002).

10 Recycle and compost Recycling is so old hat by now that it may seem unnecessary to harp about it. While we're no longer flinging bottles and cans around like cavemen tossing bones, recycling still lags: Only about half of our aluminum cans are recycled, resulting in a big waste of energy and metal. Recycling is just as important with food scraps. Composting could drastically reduce the almost 500 pounds per household per year of organic matter hauled to dumps, while creating fertile soil for your vegetable garden. Best of all, it gives you the godlike joy of making something from almost nothing.

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