

Wheat - Don't Shoot the Messenger

October 16, 2013

Twenty percent of the world's calories come from wheat, according to the United Nations – a larger share than any other single food. Ever since our distant ancestors discovered that this grain could be mixed with water, left to ferment, then baked to airy, crusty perfection on hot rocks, wheat has been a cherished staple of diets around the world.

And yet a few popular diet books like *Wheat Belly* and *Grain Brain* now advise us to “Just Say No” to wheat, cutting it completely from our lives. In today's blog, we'll take a closer look at some of the fictions in these fad books and some interesting facts about modern wheat.

“OUR WHEAT IS GMO” - NOPE.

It's widely believed that today's modern wheat is GMO (genetically modified). It's not. In fact, US wheat farmers have been the loudest voices fighting against the introduction of any GMO wheat. (Here's a 2010 article, in Reuters, that reports this concern, for instance.) Half the U.S. wheat crop is exported – and any GMO wheat in our food supply would dry up sales to other countries.

“TODAY'S WHEAT IS HIGHER IN GLUTEN” - NOPE.

Glutens are proteins in wheat (and barley and rye) that help it stretch and rise into crusty loaves of bread. The wheat-naysayers claim that modern wheat has been bred to contain higher levels of gluten. Donald Kasarda, a researcher with USDA, reviewed data going back more than 100 years, and found no evidence that gluten levels have risen in wheat.

Two caveats here. Kasarda's data do show that average consumption of gluten is rising, especially in the last 15-20 years. That's because gluten is being added as an isolated ingredient in so many processed foods. (Not an issue, if you eat your foods more on the intact / minimally processed end of the scale.) Research also shows that wheat has been bred to increase its pest resistance -- a worthy goal to save the environment through use of fewer pesticides. Some people are sensitive to these compounds (ATIs, or amylase tripsin inhibitors), however.

“WE'RE SIMPLY EATING MORE WHEAT THAN EVER” - NOPE.

Another argument says that wheat is doing us in because we're suddenly eating so much more than we ever have. Not so. US wheat consumption hit a peak in the 1870s of almost 230 pounds per person per year. It then dropped steadily until the early 1970s, when it rose once again, as fast food restaurants and supermarkets made more different wheat-based foods more readily available. In the last decade, wheat has once again dipped – and is now at about half its peak.

That said, we recommend you change out some of the wheat in your life for other grains. When our doctor says “eat more vegetables” we don't simply eat carrots and leave it at that, as healthy as carrots are. No, we understand instinctively that it's important to eat a variety of vegetables to get a range of nutrients, textures and tastes. Same thing goes for grains, folks. Wheat's just fine, but change it up!

“WHEAT IS THE MAIN REASON WE'RE OVERWEIGHT AND OBESE” - NOPE.

Wheat makes an easy scapegoat, but other countries with much higher per-capita wheat consumption have much lower rates of overweight and obesity. (The French, for instance, consume nearly twice as much wheat per person as Americans, but have about one-third our obesity rate.) Weight problems are almost never the fault of one food; it's total diet and lifestyle that matter. Go ahead and enjoy your whole grains, especially in their intact and traditional minimally

processed forms, in the context of a diet overflowing with fruits, vegetables, legumes, fish, olive oil, and other health foods. A whole grain cookie (even a gluten-free one) is still a cookie.

“PASTA SENDS YOUR BLOOD SUGAR SPIKING” - NOPE.

For good health, it's best to eat foods whose carbohydrates are absorbed slowly, giving us steady fuel, rather than foods that cause a sudden surge in blood sugar. A measuring system called the Glycemic Index awards the steady-fuel carbs a “low glycemic index” while those sudden-surge carbs are said to have a “high glycemic index.”

One of the very cool facts about pasta is that it has a low glycemic index, due to the way the pasta extrusion process rearranges the starches in the wheat. Cook it al dente, top a small portion with healthy “partners” like vegetables, olive oil, tomato sauce and beans, as traditional cultures have done for centuries, and you have a very healthy meal.

SO WHY ARE PEOPLE SINGLING OUT WHEAT?

Wheat and gluten intolerance are on the rise, and of course it's important to find out why. I recently attended the International Celiac Disease Symposium in Chicago, to learn more about this important topic.

Here's one of the thoughts I came away with, from this top-level international scientific conference: Imagine that all your life you've been able to run marathons. Sure, it's difficult, but you stay in shape and your body is up to the challenge. At some point as you age, though, you just can't handle 26.2 miles anymore – not because the marathon has changed in any way, but because you have.

Some people suspect that eating gluten (and therefore wheat) is like that. The complex gluten proteins are extremely challenging for our bodies to digest, but when we're healthy, 99% of us can consume gluten without any problem. When our digestive system is already compromised by antibiotics, stress, inflammation and a steady diet of processed food, however, some of us discover we're no longer up to the challenge of digesting gluten. It's not because the wheat has changed, but because we have. Don't shoot the messenger!

Visit the WGC's [Gluten Free Grains](#) page for links to other blogs on the important factors of gluten intolerance and celiac disease. (Cynthia)