

The Diet We Were Made For
(rough draft)

Wagosh (Fox) enjoyed getting up before first light and walking quietly along the Deer trails to watch all of the morning life awakening. He would go past the pond of Amiik (Beaver) to see her swimming back from his night's activities working on her dam now ready to nap for the day. He would watch Osprey catching the first light Atop the big Pine in the bog as she stretched her wings before gliding off to catch a fish for breakfast for her young. In the clearing Wawazkeshi (Deer) and her two fast growing fawns were browsing contentedly before their morning nap so he very quietly slipped by so as not disturb them. And at the lakeshore he'd see Fish rising from below to slurp insects off the surface of the water, and Dragonflies, warmed and energized by the rising Sun, snatching insects from above.

This particular morning he was hungry. He was up in the chill of the predawn and had already hiked quite a distance so he had worked up a good breakfast appetite. As he was thinking about this he saw some Zhiishiibag (Ducks) swimming around a ways out on the lake, and he thought "Boy would one of them taste good right now!" Unfortunately, they were out there and he was on the beach, and they were quite wary besides. They kept their distance. "So," he thought. "I must come up with a way to entice them in closer so that I may grab one of them"

So he came up with a plan. He built a lodge on the beach, started Fire, and sat down to drum and sing songs. He knew he would need some special songs to entice the wary Zhiishiibag so he chanted some new ones that he had just learned on his recent travels south. And they worked. The Zhiishiibag began swimming with the rhythm of the Drum and couldn't help but join in the chant. Hypnotized by the rhythm they came in closer and closer. But they would only come in so close.

Wagosh knew that if he was going to eat he would somehow have to gain the trust of the Zhiishiibag so that they would come in even closer.

"Nakana (My Relations)," he said soothingly "I am not here to harm you, I am here to Dance and Chant and I believe that I am doing it along. I wish that you, My Brothers, would come to join me so that together we could Dance around the Fire and join our voices in the Chant."

Wagosh, knowing the deceptive ways of the stalker, sounded sincere enough that the Zhiishiibag looked at each other and actually considered his invitation. Not wanting to look overly enthusiastic for them to join him, Wagosh went back to drumming. Before long, out of the corner of his eye, Wagosh saw a couple of the Zhiishiibag carefully venturing up on the beach. When the others saw it was safe they followed. And before long they were all dancing in rapture in a circle with Wagosh around the fire.

By this time it was getting late in the day. Shadows were setting in over the beach, and the cool damp wind was blowing over the lake. Wagosh knew

now was the time and he was growing very hungry besides. So he said to the Zhiishiibag "Brothers, you honor me by joining me in the Dance, and you are good singers, the best I have had the privilege to join with in a long time. I would like to play an honor song for you. I have saved a special song which I have brought back from the south, but my fingers grow numb in this cold and my voice would honor you better if it did not have to compete with the Wind. So I ask if you will join me in my lodge. I already have a warm fire going in there with a thick stew simmering upon it."

"But I must ask one thing of you—that you be blindfolded. When I learned this Chant I was told that its power would be broken if any of the dancers were to look upon the person playing the Drum."

Zhiishiibag now had no reason to doubt Wagosh so they allow him to blindfold him as they entered the lodge.

As Wagosh began the Chant the Zhiishiibag realized it was truly one of power and danced with abandon. Like most of the rest of Wagosh's statements the one about the thick stew over the Fire was not true either. But it was getting thick, one by one, as each Zhiishiib (single Duck) danced by him he would grab the Zhiishiib, wring his neck and throw him in the stewpot. The Chanting began to grow weak and one of the Zhiishiibag said "What is happening?"

Wagosh replied soothingly "Do not worry. Keep on dancing. It is only that some of your Brothers voices grow hoarse."

This contented them, with the exception of the last Zhiishiib in line, as he no longer heard anyone behind him. He pulled up his blindfold, only to see that half of his Brothers were missing, and Wagosh was wringing the neck of another.

He screamed "Pull off your blindfolds and run, Wagosh has deceived us!"

They scrambled for the door of the lodge, tipping over the stewpot and kicking the fire coals everywhere.

Wagosh burst into a rage! He was hungry and wanted all of the Zhiishiibag and half of them were escaping! He picked up a hot coal and threw it at them, hitting one of them in the eyes. That Zhiishiib, who we now know as Mahng (Loon), has red eyes to this day because of it. Then he threw a chunk of firewood at them as they scrambled down the beach towards the Water and he hit one of them squarely in the back. Yet she made it to the Water, but she was so injured that she could never walk well on land again. So she spends all of her time in the Water, having to eat the starchy roots of Water plants.

"From now on you shall be known as Hell-Diver!" Wagosh shouted after him.

And so it is that to this day we call him Hell-Diver.

This is the worst insult that Wagosh could have heaped upon Zhiishiib, as Hell to a Native person is having to live the rest of her days eating starch. The story is allegorical as to how that happened to us — how we were lured from our natural diet by the hope that starch would provide its plentiful food and easy living. Only, like broken Zhiishiib, we found that when we dove into the pot of endless starch we became broken Humans. The boiling black cauldron trapped us

in our self-made Hell of disease, obesity and lethargy.

Following is another story, beginning with my own, about how we can return to the foods we ate when we were free upon the water — the foods that give us health and freedom.

My knees felt like rubber, my thigh and calf muscles would not respond. They acted as though they were numbed asleep even though I felt no tingling, no pain. Tears of frustration trickled as I stood — barely stood — immobilized in the middle of the store aisle.

Only three days 'til Christmas and I had not yet chosen nor made a single gift nor sent one card or letter. Though only in my 20's, I felt old. My body dragged behind my spirit. I had no emotional reserve. Bewilderment gnawed at me just as much as frustration, because I had no clue as to why. My vital signs were normal, I was a responsible vegetarian making sure I was meeting my nutritional needs, and I was leading a relatively stress-free and healthful life in the Northwoods.

Fortunately, I was with a friend who took care of me that day. A couple of weeks later she made an appointment for me with a health food store healer who some of my friends considered to be too fringy to be taken seriously. With the aid of a pendulum and other techniques that would send chills up an AMA doctor's spine, he determined that my vital energy was depleted and that I needed to radically alter my diet in order to heal.

Though understanding little of his approach, I had nothing to lose in following his recommendations. At any other time I would have respectfully sidestepped such counsel, as I was convinced my diet was well-founded and meeting my nutritional needs. I started every day with granola fortified with additional nuts and fruits, and topped with a generous serving of yogurt — all organic. Other meals were based on beans and rice, tofu and tempeh, with lots of fresh vegetables and fruits and healthful garnishes such as brewers yeast and seaweed.

Yet my nutritional needs were apparently not being met. Each morning I awoke a little hungrier than the last, to the point where I needed a small mixing bowl to hold all the granola I was eating. I incorporated more healthful snacks and took supplements, yet I could not satiate myself. It never occurred to me that there might be a problem with what I was eating; I just assumed that my increased appetite was telling me I needed more of it.

This man was saying I actually needed much less of it. He had me drop everything except the water and for weeks lie fallow and consume only certain green vegetables, along with meats which were closest to the wild (such as that of Sheep and Goat). I rested completely and followed the diet scrupulously.

Under his guidance I slowly incorporated raw vegetables, then fruit and a few nuts. Over a six-month period I gradually improved, to the point where I felt not like my old self again but better than that — like a new person. Even before my crisis I would have periodic digestive disturbances — acid stomach and slowed digestion. That disappeared and has not returned.

He did not call it a Native or ancestral diet, because he was trained in a

different discipline with different terminologies. Yet, as I later recognized, his gift to me was my Native diet.

Imagine for a moment a relationship with food that springs from the organic hungers of the body. There are no “forbidden fruits”, there is no philosophy to follow. You can eat when you are hungry, until you feel full. The food is not hurtful to the Earth and is very beneficial to your health. You will lose weight automatically and maintain your ideal weight. You will be protected from degenerative diseases, food cravings will become but a memory, and you will no longer need supplements. The components of this diet are readily available at your local supermarket and natural foods store.

Sound like another slick commercial come-on or New Age panacea? Actually, it’s as old and indigenous as we are — as a species, that is. In its “born-again” form it is variously called “natural diet”, “Paleolithic diet”, “Native diet” or “ancestral diet”. I prefer the latter term, as it is self-descriptive. In sharing recent findings, researchers in the fields of human nutrition and endocrinology, along with anthropologists and archaeologists, have been formulating what they consider to be the ideal diet. They are concluding that it is the preagricultural diet that we as a species evolved on, as it contains the foods that we are best suited to digest and least likely to react to.

Many of us have already been seeking better health through conscious approach to diet — vegetarianism, macrobiotics, food combining, supplements, organic foods, and so forth. And many of us feel better and have more energy because of it. Yet I know people who are not fully satisfied with their approaches. They still have food cravings to deal with, along with perhaps excess weight and/or chronic health problems. Some of my friends say they just plain don’t feel satisfied from what they are eating.

Our foraging ancestors, and all preagricultural peoples, consumed foods that were easy to gather and edible in their raw state. They used little more technology than sharpened sticks and stones to gather their food and processed it minimally, if at all. This allotted them diets lush with vegetables, fruits, meat, fish and nuts. They consumed five to ten times more fiber than do we, slightly more protein and fat (see Ancestral-Agricultural Diet Comparison Chart).

The fiber came in part from fruits and non-starchy vegetables, which made up a larger portion of their diet than ours, and in part from the quality of their produce. Ours has been hybridized to increase sugar and starch content, at the expense of fiber. They consumed better quality protein as well — more fish, leaner meat, and more nuts.

The dietary difference between them and us is based on the fact that our foodsources changed dramatically when we became agriculturalists and herders. As our farm-fueled population expanded we increasingly supplanted animal protein with plant-source protein, and nourishing plant foods with starch. This shift was at the expense of fruits, vegetables, fish, and nuts (curiously, these are what health authorities of most persuasions are now asking us to consume more of!).

The most stark change was the astronomic increase in complex

carbohydrate(starch) consumption. Starch has become the backbone of our diet, whereas our ancestors consumed very little. The starch available to them was primarily from tubers and the seeds of wild grasses, both of which were seasonal, small, and fibrous, making them laborious to gather and prepare. Sugar sources were similarly rare.

Their virtually starch-free diet is said to be a primary reason for their exemplary health. They suffered virtually no obesity, diabetes or immune disorders, such as rheumatoid arthritis, tooth decay, osteoporosis, and appendicitis. We can live our entire lives healthily without starch, but without fat we would become severely ill in a matter of weeks. We have but one hormone (insulin) to control rises in blood sugar, which can spike rapidly due to fast-digesting starch; we have four hormones to help raise blood sugar level, which remains traditionally low when fed by slow-digesting fat. These factors indicate that we are designed to metabolize fat more so than starch.

Conventional wisdom would have us cringe at the consideration of favoring fat and snubbing starch — our dietary sacred cow. Fear of obesity and cardiovascular disease would loom like razor-edged rocks before a rubber raft. New findings by the above-listed specialists actually indicate the opposite. Fat does not necessarily make fat. Because we metabolize fat slowly and efficiently, we burn it quite completely. Starch breaks down rapidly, flooding the system with calories. The body's inability to burn them off as fast as they come triggers an immune response, which the body deals with by dumping the excess as fat.

Fat quality, more so than quantity, affects cardiovascular health. The fats of fish and wild animals help prevent heart disease, as they have a healthy ratio of fatty acids. Analyses of Native diets indicate that the higher the consumption of these beneficial fats, the less the incidence of many diseases. On the contrary, low-fat diets appear to cause long-term harm. (For a more thorough discussion consult the further reading references listed below.)

Vegetable, seed and legume oils were not naturally occurring in our ancestral diet, so we did not evolve the capacity to healthily assimilate them. Nut and fruit (olives and avocados are fruits) oils are part of our food history, therefore genetically compatible with us and healthful.

Many of us are already familiar with and practicing elements of our ancestral diet with food combining and macrobiotics (the underlying principle of which is to eat that which is naturally and seasonally available in your area. However, as is indicative of our culture, we import "macrobiotic" foods, thereby negating the principle). Atkins' and Eades' popular weight reducing diets (see references) are based on the ancestral diet.

Because the ancestral diet is not based on any philosophy or set of principles, but strictly upon what we are designed to eat, the recently evolved food crops upon which our agricultural society are based are not included. Three of them — grains, legumes, and dairy — which are major components of most of our present day diets, played negligible roles in our ancestors' nutrition. Grains and legumes (and most tubers) have toxic properties to protect them from being

eaten, which is why they were little consumed by our ancestors. Thus we do not have the inherent ability to properly digest them. Not coincidentally, corn, wheat, legumes (which include soy and peanuts) and milk are our most common food allergens.

Forty percent of our adult population exhibits some allergic response to dairy. Legumes give most of us at least minor digestive disturbance, and some legumes are rendered digestible only through processing. Wheat and corn allergies are common. Many more of us, while not diagnosed as allergic to these foods, still suffer. We might choose to tolerate the health problems we incur over these foods rather than give them up. Or we may not react to the degree that it be an obvious allergic response, yet we still have stressed immune systems — the instigator of autoimmune diseases.

These foods trigger immune response because we have not genetically adapted to what our immune system perceives as an onslaught of alien starch. Genetically, we are virtually identical to our foraging ancestors, as we are at most only 400 generations removed from them — not enough time to evolve. (Our pets suffer from these foods as well, and for similar reasons. For example, the cancer rate in dogs is skyrocketing, and they are afflicted with some of the same autoimmune diseases that visit us.)

So how do we return to our old diet? Let's first gain some perspective by taking a look at the accompanying food pyramids. Then, to give more of a feel for our native diet, I'd like to take you back to our aboriginal past to experience a hypothetical day's meals ...

Upon rising we sate our early hunger with a quick and easy meal of the Blueberries and Juneberries growing in the Meadow before us, and round it out with a handful of Nuts from our stores of last autumn. By late morning appetites return, drawing us to the succulent Fish roasting over the Fire. While we were making Rush mats for a lodge, two of our kin brought the Fish up from our traps in the River, and gathered Greens for the lunch as they made their way back. This morning the children, instructed by the women, set snares and deadfalls in the thicket just east of camp. Shadows now stretch across the valley — their signal to check the traps. In a flash they are back with two Lizards and a Jackrabbit (the women and children generally provided more of the protein than did the men) to add to the Flowers and Mushrooms they gathered earlier in the afternoon. We look forward to an evening Feast!

Of course in this day it is not practical for all of us to return to a fare of wild foraged foods. Our lifestyles wouldn't allow that, nor would our crowded Earth. But we can, as with macrobiotics, follow the principle with the foods available to us. Obviously, we're looking at an entirely new concept in food shopping! But don't let that dissuade you; the diet is quite easy to replicate without altering your food procurement routine. The following guidelines should help get you started:

→ Shop the walls of your food store. There you'll find the ancestral foods —

fruits, vegetables, fish and meats. The taboo processed foods, grains and beans are conveniently sequestered to the middle aisles.

- Buy organic when possible, and free-ranged over grain-fed meat.. It ain't wild, but it's the next best thing.
- Choose foods edible in their raw state, even though you may be cooking them.
- Select foods and proportions within the guidelines of the Ancestral Food Pyramid.
- Seek out new foods. The more varied your diet the more interesting and satisfying it will be and the broader will be your nutritional base.
- Purchase fish that are not pond raised. They are fed soy mash and do not compare nutritionally with their wild counterparts. Ocean salmon, for example, have twice the omega 3 fatty acids of their pen-raised kin.
- Hulled nuts are often rancid and nutritionally compromised. For example, Brazil nuts in-the-shell have four times the selenium of their hulled counterparts, and hulled Sunflower seeds are so often rancid that most of us don't know what a fresh Sunflower seed tastes like. Nuts keep best in the shell, yet still go rancid in time, so check harvest date when purchasing.
- Eat a significant portion of your food raw or lightly cooked.
- Change your diet slowly to allow your intestinal flora to adjust. If you have any trouble (diarrhea, bloating, gas), eat greens for a couple days, then slowly add meat, nuts, and fruit, in that order.
- Those of us not accustomed to eating meat will need to increase water intake, as the metabolization of meat requires more water than does other foods.
- Incorporate some wild foraged foods (see reference listed below).

Menu Suggestions

Following is a week's menu based on my style of eating. I offer this to give you some ideas as to the range of culinary possibilities. Adapt food choices, volume and time of consumption to the way your body functions. I, for example, eat less than the average person and do well with more fruit than many. Unlike me, some people do better starting their day with other than fruit. Some prefer grazing (nibbling small amounts of food throughout the day) in lieu of meals. You may wish to approach your own meal preparation either more simply or elaborately than do I. Either way, I think you will find, as I have, that your dining enjoyment will grow along with your new dietary choices.

Monday

Breakfast - watermelon (with seeds)

Lunch - steamed broccoli, olives, seaweed

Supper - bass fillets, spinach salad, steamed mixed vegetables (broccoli, cauliflower, artichoke hearts)

Tuesday

Breakfast - bananas, apples, orange

Lunch - scrambled eggs, celery and carrot sticks

Supper - turkey, brussels sprouts, vegetable stir-fry (mushrooms, green peppers, onions, bok choy)

Wednesday

Breakfast - bowl of berries, pears, kiwi

Lunch - mixed nuts (almonds, brazil nuts, filberts)

Supper - smoked salmon, salad of deep green lettuce, parsley, diced olives with olive oil and vinegar dressing

Thursday

Breakfast - melon salad (cantaloupe, honeydew, watermelon)

Lunch - steamed mixed nuts with chives and kale

Supper - steamed clams, fried cabbage and anise greens

Friday

Breakfast - nectarines, grapes

Lunch - veggie omelet (eggs, green and red peppers, cilantro, celery, mushrooms, tomatoes)

Supper - halibut fillet, steamed bok choy and beet greens

Saturday

Breakfast - tangerines, plums, peaches

Lunch - avocado, raw almonds and pecans

Dinner - rabbit stew (rabbit, turnips, celery, broccoli, onions, mustard greens)

Sunday

Breakfast - fruit salad (apples, peaches, pears, banana, grapes)

Lunch - olive salad (diced olives, cucumber, basil)

Dinner - baked salmon and vegetable sticks (celery, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots)

Snacks

nuts

dried meat

pemmican

dried fruit (eat no more than if fresh)

raw vegetables

hard boiled egg

Here are answers to some commonly asked questions:

Should I continue taking vitamins?

Vitamins are needed to metabolize food. The less natural the food, the more vitamins are needed. With this diet of easily-digestible, genetically compatible foods, vitamins may not be necessary. Variety in diet helps provide complete nutrition.

I'm going to get sick on all that fat!

Because of the elimination of vegetable oils and dairy, you may find yourself actually consuming less total fat.

What can I do to get over the restrictiveness of this diet?

Even though produce departments are stocked with a vast array of vegetables, we tend to subsist on about ten favorites. Our foraging ancestors utilized around 100. Our food preferences are culturally influenced, therefore expandable. Experiment; there are many taste delights awaiting discovery. Dogmatism around food tends to backfire; I would suggest allowing yourself flexibility around meals eaten out and tolerance of occasional indulgences. We are designed to handle sporadic, short-term stress; it is chronic stress that fries our immune system.

I don't think I can eat enough food to get the variety I should have for proper nutrition.

Although our ancestors consumed a rich variety of foods, they didn't do so each and every day. Their fare varied from day to day, depending upon season and local availability. Because of the body's capacity to store many nutrients, we normally do quite well with overall, rather than daily, broad food variety.

I find my appetite has increased; will I put on more weight?

Don't worry, eat! Your increased appetite is likely temporary, and is better satisfied than risking the potential repercussions of suppression. You're likely enjoying foods you have been denied for a long time, so naturally you'll tend to indulge at first. Chew your food thoroughly and put your fork down between bites. This will slow your eating and allow you to feel your stomach's fullness, which takes around 20 minutes. You can meet your between-meal cravings and junk food temptations by carrying high-energy politically — er, ancestrally, correct snack foods such as those listed under Menu Suggestions above.

What about organic meat; is it good for me?

When animals intended for human consumption are fed grain they are affected the same as are we — the quantity of their fat rises dramatically and the heart-healthy component of that fat falls dramatically. Our consumption of that fat reflects in our fat composition. So, and if for health reasons we choose to eat organic grain-fed animals, we are still negatively affecting our health. Wild and range-raised (no grain) domestic animals have heart-healthy fat.

What beneficial changes can I expect?

You should have a calmer stomach, less gas, more and more sustained energy. You will likely have a feeling of contentedness after eating, with fewer food cravings.

Let us remember that what we eat and how we eat it is not a formula for health; it is but a component. We need clean air, clear water, and a lifestyle low in stress and high in the nourishment we gain from healing, sustaining relationship. Perhaps we can regain these lessons from our ancestors as well.

For further reading

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Web Pages

Paleolithic Diet Web Page

<http://www.panix.com/~paleodiet>

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