

The World's Healthiest Diets

Why they're good for you and how to bring them home

recently learned that Iceland—a country with long, dark winters—has a surprisingly low rate of depression, including seasonal affective disorder.

The explanation appears to be their traditional diet, which is unusually rich in mood-stabilizing omega-3 fats, says Daphne Miller, MD, in her fascinating book, *The Jungle Effect* (Collins, 2008). A family physician in San Francisco and graduate Fellow at the University of Arizona's Program in Integrative Medicine, Dr. Miller highlights “cold spots” on the globe where indigenous diets contribute to remarkably low levels of common illnesses, including cardiovascular disease (Crete, Greece), diabetes (Copper Canyon, Mexico), and breast and prostate cancer (Okinawa, Japan). She traveled to see how these people eat firsthand. Below are a few ways to reap the health benefits of indigenous eating.

Keep it simple. Typical American versions of native foods, such as burritos and pastas, don't provide the same benefits because we load them with unhealthy ingredients, Dr. Miller points out. When she compared an American burrito to Tarahumara Indian ones in Copper Canyon, ours contained 959 more calories, 55 grams more fat, and 2,125 mg more sodium! “We need to retrain our taste buds to appreciate the exciting flavors of simpler foods,” she says. “The Tarahumarans probably wonder why we add cheese and sour cream to a burrito.” The delicious native version included only black beans, red chili sauce, and shredded meat on a corn tortilla.

Select slow-digesting carbs. Carbohydrates that break down slowly—keeping blood sugar levels more even—are fixtures in native diets. Meals in Iceland often include slow-digesting, waxy potatoes, such as red and new varieties, dressed with vinegar (which slows emptying of the stomach), while Copper Canyon res-



idents eat juicy slices of jicama (a slow-release, starchy tuber) and corn tortillas. Made with coarsely ground corn, the tortillas digest slowly, especially when eaten traditional style: with beans.

Focus on fermented foods. From the yogurt in Greece and sauerkraut in Iceland to the fermented grains of Cameroon, fermented foods are also native staples. The probiotic content not only protects against digestive disorders, but according to Dr. Miller, “research suggests that having the right balance of bacteria in your gut may play a role in cancer prevention.” People prone to precancerous polyps had more of the harmful *Bacteroides* species of bacteria in their gut, and fewer beneficial *Lactobacillus*.

Forage for wild-type greens. These diets emphasize locally grown produce, particularly leafy greens (known as *horta* in Crete). Greens provide antioxidants and folate that protect against heart disease and cancer, and when harvested from a garden or meadow, require physical effort to get them to the kitchen.

Aim for moderation. Native diets include foods that in large doses would be considered unhealthy, such as lard, red

meat, and feta cheese. But because these foods are expensive and scarce in indigenous cultures, they're used “the way we would use a spice,” Dr. Miller explains. So the dishes are flavorful, yet pose fewer health consequences than if using these items as main ingredients.

Use your kitchen. “Research shows that if you cook at home, you're healthier,” notes Dr. Miller. When Americans say they're too busy, she points out that indigenous people manage to cook without our time-saving devices. For an easy meal, she suggests placing fresh dried beans and water (at a one-to-three ratio) in a slow cooker before work. When you get home, season, top with salsa and avocado slices, and serve with corn tortillas.

Horta Omelet

To make this breakfast recipe from the Isle of Crete, Dr. Miller suggests using free-range eggs for better taste. Sprinkle the dish with fresh lemon juice to boost the flavor and help your body absorb nutrients in the greens.

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 cups chopped fresh greens (such as purslane, kale, or Swiss chard), with tough stems removed
- 2 tablespoons loosely crumbled feta cheese
- 3 to 4 eggs, lightly beaten
- 3 tablespoons chopped kalamata olives
- 2 lemon wedges
- Pinch of salt

Heat olive oil over medium heat, add garlic, and stir until soft. Add greens and stir until soft. Evenly distribute greens on bottom of pan and sprinkle with feta. Pour eggs over the top, and cook until they're done. Top with olives, salt, and lemon juice. Serves 2.

Source: *The Jungle Effect*