

The Nutrition Reporter™

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EXTRA

The independent newsletter that reports vitamin, mineral, and food therapies

A Review of Recent Health Books

This December supplement to *The Nutrition Reporter*™ focuses on recent nutrition books that have impressed us. To order any of these books, go to www.amazon.com, www.powells.com, www.bn.com, or your local bookstore.

Going Against the Grain: How Reducing and Avoiding Grains Can Revitalize Your Health, by Melissa Diane Smith (Contemporary Books, 2002, \$14.95). Advocates of high-protein and high-carbohydrate diets often argue like religious fanatics, leaving large numbers of people confused if not wary of nutritional extremism. But as this controversy evolves, new perspectives and highly original concepts have emerged. I happen to think a lot of the evidence supports a diet higher in protein and vegetables and lower in refined carbohydrates, most of which are based on grains and sugars.

In *Going Against the Grain*, nutritionist Smith builds a powerful case against the consumption of all – or nearly all – grain-based foods. Grains entered the human diet about 10,000 years ago, too recently for us to genetically adapt to a "foreign" food. At the very least, grains (and sugars) provide more carbohydrate calories than anything else – something that should be of concern in a society in which one-third of people are obese and two-thirds are overweight to some degree. Many grains, such as wheat, are rich in gluten – and about one in every 100 people has celiac disease, the most obvious form of gluten intolerance. But Smith cites other research suggesting that one of every two people may be maladapted to eating grains.

The bottom line of this book is that much of the human race is not biologically designed to consume large amounts of grain foods, and we suffer a variety of health problems as a consequence. In many respects, this book is revolutionary thinking, but it is thinking we should pay attention to. Smith explains the evolutionary rationale for avoiding grains, provides questionnaires to help the reader assess their level of grain intolerance, and recommends three different diet plans, which range from including some grains in the diet to avoiding them all. The

many dietary tips and recipes help turn her concepts into practical advice. Anyone with health problems should consider reducing or avoiding grain foods, at least for a while, if for no other reason than to completely eliminate them as a potential cause of illness.

Dangerous Grains: Why Gluten Cereal Grains May Be Hazardous to Your Health, by James Braly, MD, and Ron Hogan. Avery, 2002, \$14.95)

Braly and Hogan's book covers much of the same ground as Smith's. Both books are well written and explain the theory and medical evidence indicating that grains can be unhealthy, and people interested in the subject should probably buy and read both books – if for no other reason than appreciating good writing and the concurrence of original ideas.

Braly's book does have some comparative problems. He includes a list of 187 medical conditions that have been documented to at least sometimes involve gluten sensitivity. I have no doubt about the accuracy and value of this list, but it left me with the feeling that gluten sensitivity may be responsible for just about everything except World War II. That's a mistake – often made in earnest – that too many dietary advocates of one type or another have made over the years. Many diseases have many different or multiple causes. The major omission in Braly's book is the absence of truly practical advice, other than simply getting blood tests to determine if you are gluten sensitive and then avoiding grains. The book contains no recipes, so while the scientific evidence is good, the constructive advice is limited.

The Paleo Diet: Lose Weight and Get Healthy by Eating the Food You Were Designed to Eat, by Loren Cordain, PhD. (Wiley, 2002, \$24.95). If you take away the weight-loss hype on the cover – something that is used to promote nearly every health book these days – Cordain's book contains the theoretical basis for *Going Against the Grain* and *Dangerous Grains*. Cordain is one of the leading experts on the Paleolithic, or Stone Age diet, and how diet (as part of the environment on Earth) helped shape our genes. His point, essentially, is that we are genetically still

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Stone Age people, and that our genes are not adapted to the highly processed grains, sugars, and fats we consume. This idea was the basis of my own *Syndrome X* book concept (Wiley, 2000, \$14.95), and I experienced great improvements in my health when I eliminated nearly all grains from my diet.

The diet plan in *The Paleo Diet* attempts to create a comfortable modern version of the basic Stone Age diet, which consisted almost entirely of lean meat, fish, vegetables, fruit, seeds, and nuts. Some of the recipes seem to follow in this spirit more than others. In many respects, it's very easy to eat in a modern Paleo style, once you eliminate nearly all grains, sugars, and refined fats: you're left with the good foods noted above. At home, cooking meals will take a little more planning but probably no more preparation time. In restaurants, ordering takes a little more consideration and asking for substitutions, such as steamed veggies instead of fries. If you're hooked on eating fast foods on the run, and you're unwilling to modify your lifestyle, none of these diet plans is really for you, but then you will likely suffer serious health problems as a result

Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet, by Harvey Levenstein (Oxford University Press, 1988, \$30). This is an older book that gained attention over the past year. Although it tends to read like a nutrition history textbook, it describes the development of modern eating habits.

Many of our modern eating habits are derived from those of our "mother country" England. People ate large quantities of foods (often burning off the calories through physical labor). But the diets were not very diverse, and most people did not like fruits and vegetables – which sounds all too familiar today. In general, people saw the human body as being like an engine, that food was fuel and the type of food was less important than the amount. Kellogg's and other cereal companies began around the turn of the century as health-food companies – until then, most people preferred high-protein, high-fat breakfasts.

The book also contains many fascinating tidbits. For example, iceberg lettuce was developed in 1903 to withstand the rigors of shipping, and Domino Sugar's marketing successfully denigrated brown sugar and increased appreciation of white sugar – though both are obviously nutritional disasters. Although *Revolution at the Table* focuses on the 1880-1930 timeframe, it provides many insights into the modern food industry and our current eating habits.

Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health, by Marion Nestle, PhD (University of California Press, 2002, \$29.95). Most of this book damns the food industry for placing its

profits over good nutrition and health. It is, in some ways, a behind-the-scenes look at how food companies manipulate – and pervert – dietary tastes and preferences. How bad is the situation? Nestle points out that industry funding often provides full funding to university nutrition departments and that nutrition societies, which like to convey a sense of scientific objectivity, seek out and sell out to corporate sponsorship. In the course of researching the book, Nestle interviewed many colleagues who were happy to describe the insidious ways that food companies influence nutrition public health policy and dietary recommendations – but not a single colleague agreed to be quoted by name in the book.

Nestle's book is a careful investigation of how large processed-food companies persuade most people to eat more and more junk foods. For example, grain carbohydrates, sugars, and synthetic fats (e.g. trans fats) lend themselves to being formed into a seemingly endless number of foods. Nestle points out that 11,000 new foods – with ingredients that are essentially variations of the same poor nutrition theme – are introduced each year. All together, there are about 320,000 processed, packaged foods on the market, with a combined advertising budget of more than \$33 billion annually. This entire commercial effort obscures the greatly underfunded simplicity of good nutrition: lean meats (if you choose to eat them), fish, vegetables, and fruit.

The book's major failing is a narrow-minded view in chapters relating to the dietary supplement industry. There are certainly hucksters selling supplements to increase the size of a penis or breasts, but I believe most companies are well-meaning and have a reasonably sound scientific basis for their products' rationale. The bigger problem is really the giant food hucksters who fatten their profits by making their customers fatter and healthier. With better food, we would probably have less need for supplements.

– Jack Challem

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