

Food

Your grain-free diet isn't natural, good for you or good for the planet

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By Maria Speck October 30



The research is clear: If health is on your mind, whole grains should be on your plate. (Deb Lindsey/For the Washington Post)

Grains — whole, ancient or neither — are under attack. Just as we have finally embraced vegetables on our plates, grains and starches have started disappearing from our meals at a rapid clip. Go to many a restaurant, and good luck finding rice, bread or potatoes next to your hunk of meat or fish. Top restaurateurs have whispered into my ear that people simply don't want any grains, so they have cut back on serving them. Yet, if you have visited drought-plagued California lately, you know it is high time to rethink our meat-based diet and hit reset.

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Concerns about grains and gluten are behind this sea change on our plates. About a third of Americans are cutting back on gluten, and many are eliminating carbs, good or bad, altogether. But if you think your gluten-free or grain-free diet is natural and good for the planet, you are wrong.

Simply put, there aren't enough land or water resources to support your grain-free meals. The current drought and water crisis in

California brings this point home. According to the Water Footprint Network, a pound of beef requires a whopping 1,851 gallons of water to produce. The same amount of rice requires 300 gallons. And rice is a gas-guzzler compared to drought-tolerant millet, sorghum, teff and Sonora wheat. Overall, the network estimates, grains require 197 gallons of water per pound.

[Got grains? Here's a book to help you cook them — quickly]

Just as important, grains are good for the planet because they are low on the food chain. If you care about sustainability, grains should have a solid place on your table: According to University of Cambridge engineering professor David MacKay, it takes about 25 times more energy to produce one calorie of beef than one calorie of corn; this means it is much more efficient to consume grains directly than to eat the animals that consume them. An estimated 70 percent of all farmland is used for livestock production, using scarce resources. Diets that celebrate animal protein, including paleo and similar regimens, are simply not sustainable.

Unless you have a serious health problem such as celiac disease (about 1 percent of the population) whole grains and good starches can and should be part of your diet. Even if you can't tolerate gluten, most grains are gluten-free, such as amaranth, buckwheat, quinoa, millet and teff. And two new studies help debunk widespread myths about carbohydrates, which are typically shunned by adherents to paleo, Whole30 and similar diets. There is no "metabolic advantage" to carb restrictions for weight loss, according to scientists at the National Institutes of Health. They found that a low-carb diet is only about half as effective in losing weight as a low-fat diet. Another new study at the University College London suggests that humans have eaten starchy plants like tubers for much longer than the dawn of agriculture — contrary to what many paleo fans claim. These cooked starches were crucial to brain development and helped us grow the large brains that set us apart in the animal kingdom.



Roasted Brussels Sprouts and Pomegranate Quinoa (Lexey Swall/For The Washington Post)

But don't all grain starches make you fat? People who reduce their carb load are often thrilled about weight loss. But most likely they cut back on "empty" starches from processed flours as in fluffy white bread, cheesy pizza and sugar-sweet cakes — rather than steel-cut oatmeal, wild rice salad or barley stew. They also tend to eat more fruit and vegetables, so it's no surprise that they

slim down.

The research is clear: If health is on your mind, whole grains should be on your plate. A diet rich in whole grains has long been connected with a lower risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and stroke. And a large, new, long-term study from the Harvard School of Public Health linked higher whole grain consumption to significantly reduced mortality. Not to forget the fast-evolving research into gut health. Whole wheat, rye and barley belong to a group of “pre-biotic” stars that help your gut bacteria thrive. All in all, whole grains are nutritional powerhouses, packed with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, beneficial fiber and even protein.

We need a new balance on our plate that — without romanticizing the past — should resemble a peasant diet. To quote chef and sustainability advocate Dan Barber, in just about every other cuisine, “protein plays second fiddle to grains and vegetables.” There is no need to go meatless or to give up all animal protein, but meat or fish should be used as flavorful accents rather than the centerpiece they have been for far too long. If you need one more reason to cut back on meat, just consider the new report by a World Health Organization panel concluding that processed meats such as bacon and sausages are carcinogenic and flags red meat consumption in general. The Harvard School of Public Health recommends that one-quarter of your plate should be whole grains.

Finally, whole grains are on the leading edge of the locavore movement. Grains are being grown again in many areas where they have long been abandoned — from upstate New York to Massachusetts and Maine, to South Carolina, Arizona and California. And they are getting better. They have distinct subtle aromas and varied textures worth exploring, from trendy smoky freekeh, tangy rye and caramel-tinged teff, to grassy amaranth and earthy buckwheat. And if you think supporting local grains is delusional, think how far we have come with better-quality meat in the past 25 years or so.

So if you care about your health and the planet you will leave for your children, go ahead and reset your grain-free diet. It is high time to reduce the overall portion of meat and fish we eat every day. Let’s bring grains back from the margins to the center of our tables.

Speck is a journalist and the award-winning author of the new [“Simply Ancient Grains”](#) and [“Ancient Grains for Modern Meals.”](#) She lives in Massachusetts.

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