



The Unprocessed Life

The new wellness mantra: Cut out everything you can—including “health” food—that is packaged, precooked, or laced with additives. Marcia DeSanctis sorts through the science.

It is 8:00 A.M., and Dana James, a nutritionist I have enlisted, is storming through the refrigerated labyrinth of Whole Foods on Union Square. Chic in a pencil skirt and tall black boots, her blonde hair clipped loosely off her neck, James radiates a relaxed glow, even as she dishes me up some decidedly tough love. “Thirty-one grams of sugar!” she says, brandishing a tub of my current obsession, an Australian-style yogurt, and pointing to the ingredients label. “That is nearly eight teaspoons of added sugar. Come on!” One by one, James exposes delicious health-food staples I’ve long believed to be nutritious—a whole-grain cereal, nut bars, cultured coconut milk—as little more than processed junk.

This supermarket walkabout was a crucial lap in my journey to ratchet up my understanding of today’s most confusing dietary subject. One study, published in *The Lancet*, left no room for ambiguity: Industrially processed food is not just killing us but also addicting us. The price we pay as a civilization is obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and, according to controversial new research from the World Health Organization about bacon and other processed red meat, cancer. Here, quite possibly, lay the reason for the pale cast to my skin and a mystifying malaise that had me crashed out in perpetual fatigue. Following the admonishments of everyone from health bloggers to Michelle Obama—who banished mac ‘n’ cheese from the White House kitchen—I vowed to quit cold turkey and prepare my food myself for ten days.

Alert with a new sense of purpose, I perused online catalogs for nut mills and countertop tortilla makers. With no instruction manual on what, precisely, an unprocessed diet looks like, I also soon found myself caught in a semantic debate among scientists, nutritionists, and doctors about how exactly to define this demon. “I think consumers associate processed food with junk food,” says Connie Weaver, Ph.D., a nutritionist in the Department of Nutrition Science at Purdue University. “But you say ‘processed food’ to me? I’m thinking yogurt and bread and cheese and wine.” Gulp. “When you see a bottle of wine, you don’t see a bunch of grapes. So, yes, wine is a highly processed food.” By many definitions, I learned, so, too, is olive oil. No, no, no.

Ironically, processing started from sound science for all the right reasons: to make the food supply safe, affordable, available, and plentiful. What is most harmful is not the act of processing itself but rather the cooking or chemical additions commonly used to tantalize our taste buds and compensate for the lackluster flavor of food that is no longer fresh. Products that have been frozen, pasteurized, canned, fermented, preserved, dried, refined, or even cooked at all are, by definition, processed—but clearly not all are harmful to our health. Carlos Monteiro, M.D., Ph.D., a professor of nutrition and public health at the University of São Paulo, has dubbed as “ultra-processed” highly palatable, superconvenient chemical creations, including sugary

PROP STYLING: JOJO LI, FOOD STYLING BY MICHELLE GATTON AT STOCKLAND MARTEL

sodas, that the food industry has engineered to keep us hooked. This peril-laden category covers prepared meals like supermarket frozen lasagna, many of which, organic or not, are salted, sweetened, and fattened to a fare-thee-well. “They are heavily processed, meaning they are heavily precooked,” says Thomas Sherman, Ph.D., a professor of pharmacology and physiology at Georgetown University. “You absorb these carbohydrates so quickly, you might as well be eating a candy bar.”

Carbohydrates and processing are especially close bedfellows. Vasanti Malik, Ph.D., a research scientist in the Department of Nutrition at the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, helps minimize confusion by warning that bread, with its simple carbohydrates, is overly processed unless it’s made with sprouted or truly whole grains—yes, even the gluten-free varieties. “Refined flour, refined corn, white rice, white pasta—all that is white flour,” she tells me. “By cutting out refined grains, you’re inherently cutting out lots of processed foods.”

In a way, going DIY is less complicated than squinting at ingredient lists to determine which plastic-wrapped loaf of bread contains the least bleached flour. Apron secure, I blend milk from soaked almonds, grill chops courtesy of the pasture-raised pigs from a farm near my home in rural Connecticut. Before bed, I put garbanzo beans in a pot to soak, then brew buttermilk for Irish soda bread I mix from kamut flour and bulgur. When my daughter comes home from school one day, she finds me where she’d left me that morning: by the stove. “So did you bag a deer for dinner?” she asks.

I’ll admit I took this exercise a bit too seriously. During the ten days I devoted myself to cooking healthy food from scratch, I lost sight of other priorities, such as sleep and bathing. My family never ate better, but we never ate more. So how to find a middle ground, since my demands as a working mother didn’t exactly permit a hand-ground-peanut butter habit, and I was endangering my relationship with my slim-fit trousers from The Row?

My homemade project, though drastic, served to initiate some necessary long-term change. If the food spectrum starts with chocolate-covered Pringles and ends with the still-hanging tangerine, I needed help navigating everything in between. If you must buy ready-made food, says nutrition guru Kimberly Snyder, “go for something prepared on the store’s premises.” Snyder’s clients include some of Hollywood’s healthiest-looking women, such as Reese Witherspoon and Drew Barrymore. “At least you know it was made in the last 48 hours instead of a year ago and won’t have all the food dyes and additives of superprocessed stuff.”

Snack foods are a field particularly littered with chemical horrors. Soy protein isolate, a mainstay of some energy bars and cereals, acts as an endocrine disrupter in the same way as BPA in plastics. “Those disgusting energy and protein bars are not at all whole foods,” says Snyder. A preferable option: Lärabars, made of a few simple ingredients, or better still, a handful of nuts—raw or dry-roasted only, never baked in oil. “Polyunsaturated vegetable oils such as cottonseed, rapeseed, and soybean are some of the worst things for you,” she tells me.

This all requires a massive recalibration of my ingrained reflex to use a product’s calorie count and fat content as a primary barometer for what ends up in my shopping basket. “Don’t stop at the nutritional-facts label. Look at the ingredients,” advises Manhattan nutritionist Nikki Ostrower. She and I are on the phone, each on our laptops, doing a virtual tour on FreshDirect and dissecting the constituents of a popular wheat-crinker brand. “The second ingredient is soybean oil. Then cornstarch, which isn’t even a food. Refiner’s syrup! What is this stuff? A huge double-thumbs down.” Luckily, there are some options, according to Ostrower, that address our need for convenience without compromising our health, including Mary’s Gone Crackers, Go Raw, Nature’s Path, Brad’s Raw Chips, and Hope hummus. “The ingredients in all of these are whole and beautiful,” she says. If you have a terminal hankering for a *petit salé*—something salty and crunchy—select the low-salt, baked option. James loves organic blue-corn tortilla chips because they contain anthocyanin, the same antioxidant found in blueberries.

Sadly those delightful pita chips that have long been my weakness contain no such benefit, so I have begun scooping my tapenade with cucumber slices instead. I’ve given up the additive-laden low-fat deli meat I rolled up and dipped in mustard for a midday snack and scrapped that overly sweetened, flavored yogurt in favor of plain Stonyfield—with a teaspoon of local honey.

I have retired the tortilla maker but resolved to stay as close to the earth as possible, to first eat fruit, nuts, vegetables,

seeds—things that nature has delivered ready-made. My eye is trained to look for thickening agents, sodium, preservatives, and glucose. As for my beloved protein bars, Ostrower advises a soupçon of vigilance. “Look for ten grams of sugar or less,” she says.

Though I don’t miss the pioneer-woman days of entirely unprocessed living, there were parts of the insanity that I loved. There is no pleasure equal to the shared meal, no replica of the sheer, sensate joy of eating delicious food made from scratch. It also does not harm the ego. A chorus of gratified *mmms* is music to a cook, and ten days of them surely helped put the roses back in my cheeks. □

The Less-Processed SHOPPING LIST

Do’s

Choose dehydrated over baked kale chips, which often have added oils.

Look for sprouted varieties of granola—you can’t sprout superrefined white flour.

Buy only ready-made foods that were prepared on-site.

Don’ts

Beware lactose, maltodextrin, rice syrup, barley malt, beet sugar, agave nectar, and cane crystals—all sugars.

Bread in plastic is highly processed. Buy from a bakery—real bread is meant to get stale in a day.

More no-no’s: cornstarch, soy protein isolate, and vegetable oils such as cottonseed, rapeseed, and soybean.