

Back to Reality: Variety and fiber key to new diet

BY MADELEINE MARR

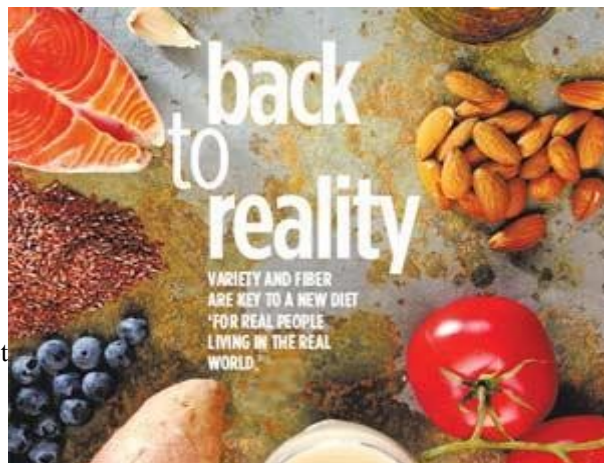
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Waffles for breakfast. Ham and avocado wrap for lunch. Stir-fried rice for dinner. Blueberry-vanilla custard for dessert.

Sounds like a day of bliss for non-calorie counters.

Actually, it's a typical day's menu from *The Reality Diet* (Avery, \$24.95), a new book by Dr. Steven Schnur, CEO of South Florida Cardiology Associates in Miami Beach. Its 200-plus recipes cover an eight-week period -- though you can stick with the plan the rest of your life. And why not? There's even pizza on this thing, albeit with Canadian bacon, no pepperoni.

"I've designed it so you're eating regular food you enjoy -- from hot dogs and hamburgers to lobster thermidor," says Schnur from his sprawling, Starship Enterprise-like office at Mount Sinai Medical Center. "This is a diet for real people living in the real world."



As you might have noticed, low-carbing-it isn't a requirement this time around. As a doctor, Schnur says, he can't condone the nutritional restrictions of many trendster diets.

"Human beings are designed to eat from all food groups," he says. "In the last few years, patients on the low-carb plans come in saying they were dizzy, light-headed or too tired to exercise . . . that's because carbohydrates give you energy!"

Shirley De Leon, Schnur's in-house nutritionist and a consultant on the book, agrees: "It's not carbs that are making people overweight -- it's overeating, period," she says. "We're eating too much and moving too little, and the equation doesn't balance."

Schnur's hardly magic-bullet prescription: Fiber, the structural part of plants that's not broken down by digestive enzymes. And not just a spoonful of Metamucil in your morning OJ. He's talking a daily diet filled with fiber-rich foods like oats, beans, fruits, wheat bran, whole-grain cereals and such root vegetables as turnips, rutabagas, parsnips, sweet potatoes. Even the big supposed no-no, spuds.

The federal government agrees, recommending that adults consume a minimum of 25 fiber grams a day. Right now, Schnur says, the average Joe/Josephine takes in half to two-thirds of that.

"It amazes me when people say this is a high fiber diet," he says. "I'm not stuffing you with 50 grams, I'm just bringing you to where you should be."

What's so great about fiber? We all know it helps with -- *ahem* -- digestion, but did you know it also lowers cholesterol by allowing it to be eliminated naturally?

But its most alluring feature, for dieters, at least, is that it keeps hunger pangs at bay.

"The amount you're taking in helps to control your portions so you're satisfied and not wanting to grab for Dunkin Donuts after an hour," Schnur says. "It's a happier experience."

And a happier dieter is often a more a successful dieter.

Take Y-100 radio personality Michael Yo, who was one of Schnur's test patients. The six-foot-three 31-year-old started the plan in June 2005 at 240 pounds, dropping to 208 in a little over four months. He remains at this number, and judging by recent pics on the Y-100 website, he doesn't need to shed any more.

"It's amazing -- you're never starving," Yo says. "I was eating good food that I already liked -- not just carrots and broccoli -- just in a saner way."

He adds that he has always been a workout buff, and wouldn't be able to keep the pounds off without the sweat.

The Reality Diet does strongly recommend burning at least 300 calories a day, or 2,000 calories a week. Not as easy as it sounds. Figure close to an hour of fast walking seven days a week.

Luckily, all those carbs step in to give you the boost you need.

"It's key to be committed to exercise," says Schnur. "You've got to wonder about any diet that doesn't promote it."

He is, of course, referring to the wildly popular South Beach Diet created by Arthur Agatston, a former colleague at the heart center. (One gets the feeling the two aren't exactly grabbing skim lattes together.)

No, the focus of the South Beach Diet isn't aerobics class. It susses out "good" carbs from "bad" ones with the use of the glycemic index, which estimates how rapidly blood sugar levels rise after a carbohydrate is eaten. Carbs with a high glycemic index (e.g. potatoes, pasta, white rice) are forbidden, while those on the low end of the scale (whole wheat products, wild rice) are acceptable.

"Will you lose weight on diets that have the glycemic index as their engine? Yes," Schnur says. "But is it a satisfying way? No."

Talk about satisfying. Leaf through the back of Schnur's book; the scrumptious-sounding recipes -- e.g., spinach pesto fettuccine, banana flan, salmon croquettes -- were conceived by San Franciscan Andrew Hunter, who has helped develop crowd-pleasing menus for TGI Friday's, Outback Steakhouse and Ruby Tuesday.

Though a recipe for, say, a mushroom and cheese quesadilla may sound like an overindulgence, look closely. The tortillas are whole wheat and fall under Schnur's "2:90" rule: All carbs must have at least 2 grams of fiber per 90 calories.

That's why it's important to keep an eye on labels in the supermarket aisles. If you can believe it, Wonder Light bread passes muster while some whole-grain pastas don't. (There's more chow-shopping advice on the doctor's site, www.therealitydiet.com.)

"The meals are made up of fresh, good ingredients that are very simple to put together," says De Leon, who has lost over 20 pounds since giving birth three months ago. "When you're eating all the right food with all the right vitamins, your body just works with you."

De Leon suggests preparing most of what you eat at home, and bringing it with you in order to control portion sizes. When you dine out, ask for say, the dressing on the side, and don't be afraid to inquire how something is prepared (see sidebar for more tips).

Just know this is no quick fix. If you're a size 12 who wants to fit into a size 6 bridesmaid dress by Labor Day, it ain't for you.

"Unlike all those other diets out there, mine doesn't target belly fat, make you eat every three hours or have phases or stages," Schnur says. "Setting your watch to eat? Thinking you'll keep pounds off if you lose them quickly? Detoxifying over a weekend? Ridiculous. You have to eat sensibly, and make it a lifestyle."

"Have a nice breakfast, a nice lunch, maybe a snack during the day, a good dinner, and that's it. Learn to live life not thinking about food -- and make that your reality."