

Introduction

By John Mackey

Breakfast: Cocoa Puffs and milk or bacon and eggs; orange juice from frozen concentrate.

Lunch: Plain hamburger with mustard and mayonnaise, French fries, and a chocolate milkshake or soft drink.

Dinner: Fried chicken, pot roast, or mac and cheese; potatoes; milk; dessert.

My childhood diet wasn't exactly the stuff that nutritional dreams are made of. Neither were my food choices uncommon. Growing up in Houston, Texas, in the 1950s and 1960s, I ate the standard American diet of the era, though a particularly narrow version of it. I didn't even eat pizza, which, as I look back today, seems strange. I certainly didn't eat any vegetables (with the exception of potatoes) and honestly, I didn't understand why anyone would. My saving grace may have been that I ate some sweet fruits, such as bananas, apples, oranges, and grapes, which helped give my otherwise deficient diet a much-needed boost of fiber, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants.

I don't blame my parents—they didn't know any better. That was the era of TV dinners and fast food, when America was unreservedly embracing the conveniences that modern technology made possible, with little awareness of its hidden health costs. Thankfully, public awareness of diet and health has evolved since then, and we have so many more opportunities today to make informed choices about what we feed ourselves and our families. That makes it all the more shocking that a large percentage of Americans still eat a diet that is nutritionally not so different from my childhood menu. For example, 96% percent of Americans don't reach the USDA's minimum recommended daily intake of 2.5 to 3 cups of vegetables (which in itself is on the low side, in my opinion). The Standard American Diet consists of 54% processed foods, 32% animal products, and just a paltry 14% fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains. When you consider that French fries are counted in that 14%, the picture gets even worse. And it's taking a tremendous toll on our health: 69% percent of adult Americans are overweight and 36% percent are obese, and this is leading to an epidemic of chronic disease.

If you've picked up this book, you're likely already aware of these issues. The statistics above aren't just numbers to you—they may include yourself or people you know and love. I'll make an educated guess that you're not living on fried chicken and soda—you're already trying to make health-conscious choices about how you nourish yourself and your family. But you've probably also discovered how challenging it can be to know what the right choices are. Yes, we have so much more information today than my mother had when she served up another frozen TV dinners, but we don't always know how to make sense of it. In the space of just a few decades, we've gone from information blackout to information overload, with thousands of books and websites and legions of newly minted experts telling us what we should and shouldn't eat.

Despite the sobering statistics, I'm optimistic about the potential for change in individual lives and in our culture at large. As I see every day at Whole Foods Market, consumer consciousness—the most powerful engine of change—is shifting to embrace more sustainable, more ethical, and more organic foods. In my own lifetime, although the health of our nation has arguably gotten worse, our *health*

potential has actually increased. With the incredible selection of fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthful whole plant foods available to us year-round, we have the potential to be the healthiest human beings who have ever lived on planet earth. Plus the nutritional knowledge that is available to most of us today, *if we act on it*, makes it reasonable to aim to live to be one hundred years old, and avoid falling prey to heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and other chronic conditions. My parents' generation couldn't say that. They didn't have access to the knowledge, or the choices, that we have now.

My goal with this book is to empower you—with information, options, and inspiration—to reach your highest health potential. If that doesn't inspire you, you might want to take a moment to ask yourself why. I often hear people say, "I don't want to live to be a hundred!" But what they're really afraid of is getting old and sick. It's not lifespan but *health* span they're concerned with. When I ask them, "Would you want to live to a hundred if you were healthy, vital, and free of disease?" they say, "Of course!" And I believe this shouldn't be a pipe dream, for most of us. Yes, there are genetic and environmental factors we can't control, and accidents can befall anyone. But we do have more control over our health than ever before, and if we focus on that enormous potential, we just may be able to thrive all the way to the ripe age of one hundred. The key to unlocking it, as I will explain in this book, is a whole foods, plant-based diet.

My Own Health Journey

How did the kid who never touched a vegetable end up founding America's biggest natural foods supermarket company and writing a book on whole foods, plant-based eating? My relationship to food, like many things in my life, progressed through a series of awakenings. The first came at age twenty-three, when I moved into a vegetarian co-op. This was a radical step for me because, while my food horizons had expanded a little since leaving home, I still had not embraced the idea of eating anything green, and I certainly wasn't a vegetarian. However, my growing countercultural interests convinced me I'd meet interesting people in the co-op.

To say I was pleasantly surprised would be an understatement. I discovered that there was a whole wide world of food that was fascinating and delicious. I learned to not only eat but to love vegetables and became the very opposite of my picky childhood self—someone who relished trying new foods and experimenting with the incredible diversity of global cuisine.

I also began to read about natural foods, and soon they became a passion. I had found my life purpose, although I didn't know it at the time. Before long I became the food buyer for our small co-op—my first taste of the food business. Soon after, I took a job at the largest natural food store in Austin, The Good Food Company. I learned the basics of retail and found it gratifying to sell healthy food to people. One day, an idea popped into my head: *I could do this. I could start my own store.* The business that would eventually become Whole Foods Market was born just six months later.

My own menu continued to evolve. I had shifted to eating a primarily plant-based diet, but I had gradually, over a couple of decades, begun to include occasional animal foods and more highly processed foods as well. While I was still healthier than most of my friends and family, my weight was slowly creeping up and my biometrics, such as cholesterol, blood sugar, and blood pressure, were also

getting worse as I aged. That slow health decline was halted in 2003 when I made a key decision: to stop eating animal foods altogether. For me this choice was motivated primarily by ethical concerns (which I'll share in chapter 13), but I noticed pretty quickly that my health began to improve. However, I was still eating quite a lot of highly processed foods such as oils, sugar, and refined flours. After a few years, my health improvements began to plateau.

Then a friend gave me a copy of a book that would trigger an awakening for me: T. Colin Campbell and Thomas Cambell's *The China Study: The Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted and the Startling Implications for Diet, Weight Loss, and Long-term Health*. Campbell's book recounts what I consider to be one of the greatest nutritional studies ever done (you'll learn more about it in chapter 3), which came to the revolutionary conclusion that a whole foods, plant-based diet has the capacity to greatly reduce or eliminate chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

As I shifted my own diet to focus on whole, plant foods, I saw dramatic improvement and lost weight steadily. In fact, I now weigh the same as I did at eighteen and I feel better than I did when I was 30. My total cholesterol dropped from 199 to 135, my LDL cholesterol from 110 to 70, and my blood pressure declined to 110/75. And I would soon discover that there were many other respected doctors and scientists coming to similar conclusions as those of *The China Study*—pioneers of the whole foods, plant-based eating movement. You'll meet many of these "Whole Foodie Heroes" in the pages of this book.

Indeed, it soon became clear to me, as I read every book and nutritional study I could get my hands on, that there is an overwhelming consensus on the optimum diet for health and longevity among true nutritional scientists. To put it simply, *eat more whole foods and fewer highly processed foods; eat more plants and fewer animal products*. So why isn't this common knowledge? That's a complex question. There are enormously powerful industries invested in keeping Americans eating a diet that leaves them fat and sick. And as individuals, we have become accustomed to the "quick fix" of high-calorie foods, often justifying our habits with unquestioned beliefs and convictions that have little scientific basis. The good news is this: the information you need is out there, and as you start to act on it, your own preferences can and will change. In the pages ahead, I hope to help you see beyond the smokescreen of misinformation and discover for yourself that eating right is not as confusing as it seems.

Why I Wrote This Book

I find it horrifying that so many Americans today are obese, chronically ill, and slowly dying because of the food they eat. We are a nation beset with illnesses that saddle us with expensive and unnecessary health care costs. We pour money into medical research, when in reality, most of these diseases have already been proven to be preventable. We falsely imagine that we have no power to protect ourselves from frightening diagnoses like cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. Our medical system has done some truly wonderful things in the last century, but the chronic diseases of today are far more preventable and even reversible than most doctors realize. I was inspired to write this book because I want more people to know how powerful they truly are when it comes to their own health.

I also feel compelled to do what I can to highlight the good news—the growing whole foods, plant-based movement that is emerging in our culture. The world of diets has an unfortunate tendency toward tribalism, and we can sometimes miss the broad agreements by focusing too much on the minor differences. I see this happening too often in the plant-based community. Individual doctors brand their particular protocols and distinguish themselves from each other—this one encouraging eating more starches, that one more vegetables; this one rejecting all oils and high-fat foods, that one allowing some nuts and seeds; this one insisting on 100% plants, that one incorporating a small amounts of animal foods. What strikes me, however, when I look at these diets is that they are all promoting the same broad patterns. And when it comes to our health, it's the overall dietary pattern that makes all the difference. Get the big picture right, and there's room for variation on the particulars. By highlighting so many of these different proponents of whole foods, plant-based eating in the book, I hope to shed light on the broad consensus that exists among them, remove unnecessary confusion, and promote unity among the various healthy diet “tribes.”

Finally, I want to share with you my own conviction that diet change doesn't have to be about deprivation, limitation, and loss of pleasure. On the contrary, I hope this book will open up new horizons in your consideration of what you can eat and what that food can do for you. You may choose, for your own reasons, to eat a one hundred percent plant-based diet, but I do not believe you need to make that choice in order to live a long and healthy life. What I do believe— and it's a belief that is backed by the best science available—is that eating 90+% whole plant foods, and avoiding highly processed foods, is the optimal choice for health and longevity. Within those parameters, there is tremendous flexibility to create a diet that satisfies your needs, nourishes your body, and delights your senses. I hope that this book will awaken you to the possibilities that lie on your plate.

I should make it clear that the recommendations made in this book are based on the views of my coauthors and myself not Whole Foods Market. I'm tremendously proud of the impact that my company has had, both in increasing cultural awareness of food, and offering millions of Americans more options when it comes to making healthy, sustainable food choices. But I'll be the first to tell you that I wouldn't eat many of the products we sell. People often ask me, “John, how come you sell things in your store that you wouldn't eat?” And I remind them that I'm not a dictator and I don't get to unilaterally decide what Whole Foods Market should sell or what other people should be able to choose to eat. Like all businesses, Whole Foods needs to sell what its customers want to buy, or they will go shop someplace else. What I can do is play my part in helping people be better informed so that they can choose wisely for themselves.

The beauty of our modern culture is that we are blessed with an abundance of choices— what we need are the tools and information to help us navigate them wisely. I wrote this book to help you do just that. Wherever you are—whether at a supermarket, the corner store, or your local farmers' market; airport, a cocktail party, or a shopping mall food court—I want you to have the confidence to pick the best available foods with which to nourish your body.