

PREFACE

This book was originally published in the 1980s under the title *Oakland Organic*. At that time I lived in Oakland, across the bay from San Francisco, and had been changing my diet toward vegetarianism over a number of years. I was also supporting a surge in interest in organic foods, a topic that will be discussed in detail in this book. 100 years ago 40% of Americans were farmers, and most of our food was organic by default since we had yet to develop the artificial fertilizers, petrochemical insecticides and chemical food additives that we have since served ourselves in a kind of chemical feast. Today, according to the American Farm Bureau Federation, just 2% of Americans are farmers. Much of what stocks the supermarket shelves now is the result of “agribusiness,” or farming by large corporations such as Cargill, Monsanto, ConAgra and Archer Daniels Midland.

The problem for those interested in better diet 40 years ago, and continuing now, is how, particularly for people who do not have land to grow food themselves, to maximize the nutritional content and health benefits of what we eat. Ideally all Americans would have access to fresh, locally-grown, affordable organic foods. In some ways that goal has become easier than it was 40 years ago, when people had to seek out little independent health food stores and co-ops to buy better foods. Today an increasing number of farmers markets serve urban dwellers and, lest they lose customers to Whole Foods or other health store outlets, even supermarkets now routinely stock organic foods and other items such as soy milk and meat substitutes.

Many Americans settle for convenience over health when it comes to food choices. We have, since the 1950s, succumbed to the culture of “fast food,” in a misguided effort to “save time.” Many workers get a half-hour lunch during which they rush to a drive-through window, order greasy, high-calorie food, and then eat behind the wheel on their way back to the workplace. Our supermarkets are full of canned, frozen, sometimes irradiated, artificially preserved or otherwise “embalmed” foods. Studies such as Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* detail the frightening outcomes of our massive system which involves raising animals on feedlots and administering doses of growth hormones and antibiotics; unsafe practices at slaughterhouses; e coli contamination of meat which leads to recalls, food poisoning and sometimes death; and additional health risks introduced by minimum-wage fast food workers in the kitchen and behind the counter of the fast food outlets.

The United States is experiencing an epidemic of obesity. Today, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports 35% of American adults as obese, and 17% of American children. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that 3/4 of the American population will likely be overweight or obese by 2020. Particularly since the advent and proliferation of fast food outlets the American obesity rate has steadily climbed. There is also speculation that the growth hormones and antibiotics which are given to animals to boost their weight gain are also contributing to weight gain in the people who consume those animals.

Beyond concerns about being overweight, an ongoing study funded by the National Institutes of Health demonstrates that vegetarians live on average almost eight years longer than the general population, similar to the gap between smokers and nonsmokers. An involuntary experiment in vegetarianism for an entire population happened during World Wars I and II, when wartime food restrictions mostly eliminated meat consumption in Scandinavian countries. A significant decline in the mortality rate followed, which only returned to prewar levels after the restriction was lifted.

There are also everyday benefits including a feeling of better health on the part of vegetarians. A study of 15,000 American vegetarians determined that those who eat meat have twice the odds of being on antacids, aspirin, blood pressure medications, insulin, laxatives, painkillers, sleeping pills, and tranquilizers. So plant-based diets can help people avoid taking drugs, paying for drugs, or risking adverse side effects (*Huffington Post* 12/26/12).

Chapters to follow will further explain why you might wish to avoid meat in your diet, and explain ways to gradually transition to healthier fare. Vegetarianism as a philosophy and practice dates back thousands of years. Over the centuries, those seeking higher spiritual consciousness also embraced vegetarianism in the belief that a healthier body leads to a healthier state of mind. There is also the idea of optimal health; that health is not simply the absence of disease or pain, but the enjoyment of the higher functioning of both body and mind.