

# How Eating More of What You Love Can Make You Healthier; Keeping your gut happy isn't all about kombucha. What our interior ecosystem needs to thrive is what springtime provides: beautiful produce. These recipe makeovers give a healthy boost to dishes we're craving now

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## FULL TEXT

PHOTO: Ben Giles

IT'S RARE that doctors tell you to eat more of what you like—rarer still that they give you research to back up this fabulous prescription.

"Our grandmothers told us, 'You are what you eat,' that we should eat a balanced diet, etc. But the science behind this idea was quite limited," said Dr. David Artis, Michael Kors Professor of Immunology and director of the Roberts Institute for Inflammatory Bowel Disease and director of the Friedman Center for Nutrition and Inflammation at Weill Cornell Medicine. "What has happened in recent years is that 21st-century technologies are finally caught up and are educating us about how different diets have an impact on human health and our microbiota." That last term refers to beneficial microorganisms that live in the gut, the skin and the upper respiratory system. "It's worth reminding ourselves that the word microbiota didn't exist 15 years ago," Dr. Artis added. "This is truly a revolutionary concept in our understanding of human health and disease."

Though often used interchangeably with "microbiota," the term "microbiome" describes the collective genetic material of microbial communities and how these microorganisms potentially function together in a particular environment—in this case, the gut. Bacteria, yeasts, fungi and even viruses live in a symbiotic relationship with the human host. They assist in digesting food but do far more than quell heartburn, helping us to access nutrients required for the function of the brain and other organs and to inhibit growth of disease-causing pathogens. We all possess this complex interior ecosystem—whether we drink kombucha or not. "When you're a kid, you're told that all bugs are bad. Wash your hands, sterilize everything," Dr. Artis said. "Now we know there are trillions of bugs inside us that we rely on every day for normal health and development and to educate our immune system not to attack us."

Walk into any supermarket and you'll find shelves of kombucha, kefir and supplements touting their levels of probiotic microorganisms purported to support digestive function. But do you need to lavish these bugs with costly drinks? The answer, thankfully, is no. At least as important as probiotics are prebiotics. The latter feed the beneficial bacteria we already have, causing them to thrive, multiply and improve gut function and, Dr. Artis emphasized, overall health. "A high-fiber diet appears to have an enormously beneficial effect on the immune system and on our susceptibility to inflammatory disease," he said.

Better still, prebiotics are, for the most part, delicious ingredients, widely available and at the foundation of good cooking. Fruits, vegetables and whole grains are loaded with the dietary fiber that sustains the beneficial bugs in our gut. Honey and maple syrup contain complex carbohydrates—oligosaccharides and inulin, respectively—that also feed these bugs. Leeks, asparagus, spring onions, dandelion greens and Jerusalem artichokes are among the

many fresh prebiotic foods hitting the farmers' markets this month. And there's good news, too, for those of us with restless palates, ever hungry for novel tastes and textures.

According to James Wong, an ethnobotanist at the University of Kent in the U.K., healthy people have a diverse range of gut microorganisms, and a varied diet that sustains them all. "It is important to clarify that we are still in the very early days of the research and just don't know enough to proclaim the benefits of adding individual bacterial strains to our diets," he explained. "The best evidence we have so far shows that above all, it is diversity that is important and this can be easily done by eating a wide range of different plant foods which help feed the ecosystem of the gut bacteria we already have."

Dr. Uma Naidoo, director of nutritional and lifestyle psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, explained that there are potential mental as well as physical benefits to cultivating the garden within. "A healthy microbiome is now thought to help prevent diabetes, heart disease, weight gain and cancer, and is known to lower the incidence of metabolic syndrome, mood and cognitive disorders," she said.

How do we translate this to the plate? The answer's surprisingly simple. Incorporate a wide range of prebiotic foods, add some of the natural probiotic foods and try to eliminate processed foods and limit added sugars.

With that in mind, I gave a couple of recipes a makeover. Pasta primavera became a happy microbiome pasta with the substitution of whole-grain kamut pasta and plenty of leeks, garlic, onions and asparagus, which rank among the most potent prebiotic ingredients. The yogurt that replaces cream in the sauce is a delicious probiotic delivery system, as is a good fresh feta. Again, diversity is key, and a flavorful catch-all recipe like this one can incorporate all manner of healthy herbs.

Diversity is a virtue, too, of my recipe for a provençal-style, pick-your-produce tian, a colorful, vegetable-forward gratin that beats a cheddar-laden casserole in terms of taste and nutrition. The beauty of the tian lies in its simplicity: Extraneous ingredients are eliminated in favor of layer upon layer of gut-healthy vegetables, cooked on a bed of those beneficial onions—or leeks, if you prefer. You can swap in most anything in season at the moment.

To be honest, these recipes are hardly innovative. People have eaten this way forever around the Mediterranean. I've always loved the Richard Olney classic "Lulu's Provençal Table" for its produce-driven recipes; a recent browse through the book revealed a trove of inadvertently microbiome-friendly dishes.

It might not seem revolutionary. But it is a prescription for better health—not to mention great cooking.

#### Microbiome Makeover

Recipes redone with prebiotic power.

#### Pick-Your-Produce Tian

TOTAL TIME: 1¼ hours SERVES: 6

AFTER: Pick-Your-Produce Tian PHOTO: Bryan Gardner for The Wall Street Journal, Food Styling by Heather Meldrom, Prop Styling by Sarah Vasil

cup extra-virgin olive oil

2 large yellow onions, thinly sliced

5 cloves garlic, thinly sliced

1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves

1 teaspoon flaky sea salt

6 medium russet potatoes

5 medium zucchini

7 medium tomatoes

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. In a wide skillet over medium-low heat, warm 3 tablespoons olive oil. Add onions and garlic. Cook until onions are soft and translucent, but not colored, about 10 minutes. Remove from heat. Stir in thyme and ½teaspoon salt.

BEFORE Cheesy Vegetable Casserole PHOTO: Bryan Gardner for The Wall Street Journal, Food Styling by Heather Meldrom, Prop Styling by Sarah Vasil

2. Lightly grease a gratin dish with 1 tablespoon olive oil. Cover bottom with cooked onions, garlic and their oil.

3. Use a mandoline, if you have one, or a sharp knife to thinly slice potatoes and zucchini. Slice tomatoes ¼ inch thick. Arrange potatoes, zucchini and tomatoes in an alternating pattern on top of onions in gratin dish. They should be tightly packed, halfway between lying down and standing upright. Use as many slices as you need to and save remainder for another purpose.

4. Drizzle with remaining olive oil and sprinkle with remaining salt. Bake, uncovered, 45 minutes. Cover with aluminum foil and bake until potatoes are tender, about 15 minutes more. Serve at room temperature.

#### Happy Microbiome Pasta

TOTAL TIME: 30 minutes SERVES: 5-6

AFTER Happy Microbiome Pasta PHOTO: Bryan Gardner for The Wall Street Journal, Food Styling by Heather Meldrom, Prop Styling by Sarah Vasil

1½ cups whole-milk Greek yogurt

Finely grated zest of 2 lemons

½ cup extra-virgin olive oil

2 teaspoons flaky sea salt, plus more as needed

8 leeks, white and pale-green parts only, thinly sliced

3 cloves garlic or 6 green garlic stalks, thinly sliced

1 bunch pencil-thin asparagus, peeled, trimmed and cut into 1-inch pieces

2 cups green peas, fresh or frozen

1 pound dried kamut pasta or farro

½ cup pine nuts

1 teaspoon Maras pepper flakes or ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes

5 ounces baby spinach, trimmed and roughly torn

1½ cups coarsely torn leaves of a mix of fresh herbs such as mint, chives, parsley and/or basil

2 cups fresh feta cheese, drained and coarsely crumbled

Freshly ground black pepper

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat.

2. Meanwhile, make yogurt sauce: In a large serving bowl, whip together yogurt, lemon zest, 3 tablespoons olive oil and 1 teaspoon salt. Set aside.

BEFORE Pasta Primavera PHOTO: Bryan Gardner for The Wall Street Journal, Food Styling by Heather Meldrom, Prop Styling by Sarah Vasil

3. In a wide skillet, heat 3 tablespoons oil over low heat. Add leeks and garlic, and cook until leeks are soft and translucent, about 6 minutes. Add asparagus and cook just to soften, 3-5 minutes. If using frozen peas, add now and cook, tossing to thaw, about 2 minutes. Turn off heat, leaving skillet on burner to keep warm.

4. Salt boiling water. Add pasta and cook according to package directions.

5. While pasta cooks, add remaining olive oil to a small skillet over medium heat. Add pine nuts and pepper flakes and lightly fry until pine nuts are golden and oil is deep red, 3-4 minutes.

6. Three minutes before pasta is fully cooked, add spinach in handfuls and fresh peas, if using, to pasta water. Stir and briefly cover if necessary to return water quickly to a boil.

7. Drain cooked pasta and vegetables, shaking well to eliminate excess water. Add pasta gradually to yogurt sauce, folding in a third at a time. (Be careful not to rush when adding the pasta, which may cause the sauce to break.) Fold in warm leek-asparagus mixture. Add remaining salt and several grinds of black pepper. Check seasoning and adjust to taste. Shower with herbs, pine nuts and chile oil, and crumbled feta. Bring to the table before tossing to combine.

Credit: By Aleksandra Crapanzano

## DETAILS

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