Study: When you eat affects weight gain

By Gretchen Reynolds, New York Times

Scientists, like mothers, have long suspected that midnight snacking is inadvisable. But until a few years ago, there was little in the way of science behind those suspicions. Now, a new study shows that mice prevented from eating at all hours avoided obesity and metabolic problems – even if their diet was sometimes unhealthful.

Researchers at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in San Diego and elsewhere began experimenting with the eating patterns of laboratory mice in a previous study. On that occasion, some mice consumed high-fat food whenever they wanted; others had the same diet but could eat only during an eight-hour window. None exercised. The mice that ate at all hours soon grew chubby and unwell, with symptoms of diabetes. But the mice on the eight-hour schedule gained little weight and developed no metabolic problems. Those results were published in 2012.

For the new study, which appeared in the journal Cell Metabolism in December, Salk scientists fed groups of adult males one of four diets: high-fat, high-fructose, high-fat and high-sucrose, and regular mouse kibble. Some of the mice in each dietary group were allowed to eat whenever they wanted throughout their waking hours; others were restricted to feeding periods of nine, 12 or 15 hours. The caloric intake for all the mice was the same.

Read the whole story

Working longer hours may mean drinking more

By Patti Neighmond, NPR

People who try to reduce the stress of a long work day with a drink or two, or three, may be causing more health problems for themselves.

Around the world, people working long hours are more likely to drink too much, according to a study that analyzed data from 61 studies involving 333,693 people in 14 countries.

They found that people who worked more than 48 hours a week were 13 percent more likely to engage in risky drinking than people working 35 to 40 hours a week.

Read the whole story

Wine festival embraces regions of Amador County

Amador County this spring will celebrate the four regions that inspire chefs, winemakers and winegrowers in the county – Southern France, Italy, the Iberian Peninsula, and "Heritage California" (old vine Amador Zinfandel and mission).

The Amador Four Fires Festival is May 7 at the Amador County Fairgrounds in Plymouth.

The event will include more than 200 wines from 37 wineries—each vetted by a distinguished group of sommeliers and judges. Paired with traditional cuisine prepared over open-flame and reminiscent of the four regions, it will include grilled lamb, whole pigs, simmering paellas, grilled fish and more.

Additional activities include tastings of regional artisan goods, three venues of seminars, cooking demonstrations, live music, and a sensory station featuring wine aromas, barrel toasts and soils.

Proceeds from Amador Four Fires benefit the non-profit Amador County Fair Foundation and their "farm to future" mandate to revitalize the county's beloved fairgrounds as a year-round event venue.

The festival is from 11am-4pm. Tickets are $75 in advance and $85 at the door. VIP tickets are $125 in advance and $155 at the door. All tickets will be available for purchase **online** starting Feb. 1.

Truckee food institution changes hands

By Dave Zook, Moonshine Ink

Overlooking downtown Truckee, with the huge glowing "Hilltop Lodge" letters, Cottonwood has became a Truckee staple, offering comfortable reverie, fine dining, and live music. After 26 years, ownership is changing hands, but with a plan to keep the same atmosphere and food flowing for years to come.

“People deserve to know that it’s going to stay the way it has been, and the consistency will remain,” said Mike Blide, who became co-owner of Cottonwood in 1996 and served as its general manager. “We are happy that it’s going to stay family owned.”

Cottonwood opened on New Year’s Eve in 1988 with Jennifer Haag and then-business partner Ed Coleman as the initial owners. In 1995, Blide and Jennifer married, and the following year the couple bought out Coleman. Cottonwood grew in popularity due to its nightly specials, busy bar, and live music on Thursday and Friday nights.

Read the whole story

K’s Kitchen: Creamy vegetable pasta

By Kathryn Reed

An open container of cream, half a carton of vegetable broth, fresh rosemary and spinach stared back at me when I opened the refrigerator door to figure out what I was going to eat.

It wasn’t enough. Off to the grocery store I went.

But for what I wasn’t sure. Mexican? Italian? Something else?

I bought overpriced asparagus, a three-pack of exotic mushrooms that seemed pricy and green onions. The end result was pretty darn good and worth every penny.

Sometimes winging it can have its rewards.



Creamy Mushroom, Asparagus, Spinach Pasta

1 bunch green onions, chopped

8 cloves garlic, minced

White wine

½ bunch asparagus, chopped

2 C vegetable broth

8 ounces mixed wild mushrooms, chopped

1 T fresh rosemary

4 ounces fresh spinach

¾ C heavy cream

Salt and pepper, to taste

1 pound spaghetti

Parmesan cheese, optional

Cook pasta according to package directions.

Coat pan with white wine so it is about 1/8-inch deep.

Add onion and garlic, cooking over medium heat. Cook until

liquid is absorbed.

Add veggie broth and asparagus. Simmer about 3 minutes.

Add mushrooms and rosemary.

Gradually add spinach until it is wilted. Keep stirring. Bring to a boil for 5 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Add cream, turning down heat so concoction simmers.

If you want the sauce to be thicker, add flour or corn starch. If using cornstarch, first dissolve it in cold water so there are no chunks before adding to mixture. Constantly stir.

Drain pasta and then return to pot it was cooked in.

Add creamy vegetable mix to pasta. Mix. Serve in individual bowls. Top with cheese.

Meat industry's worst nightmare could become a reality

By Roberto A. Ferdman, Washington Post

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is preparing to release the latest version of the government's influential dietary guidelines this year, and there could be a major change that accelerates the trend of Americans eating less meat.

The guidelines, which are updated every five years, have traditionally advised Americans about healthy eating choices, eating choices which, until now, have only reflected what the

government views as a diet that is healthy for humans. But the panel that advises the government is pushing for the recommendations to reflect what is healthy for the environment, too. Given the huge carbon footprint of meat production, making this change would almost certainly entail lowering the official, government-recommended intake of meat.

Americans, though they are eating less meat than they have in the past, are still fond of steaks, hamburgers, and chicken wings. And the environmental impact of that diet is significant. Carnivores contribute far more to environmental decay than do vegetarians. The livestock industry is responsible for an estimated 15 percent of total global carbon emissions, roughly two-thirds of which is the result of beef production. On a per kilogram basis, the carbon footprint of lamb and beef production is unparalleled.

Read the whole story

‘Twelve Recipes’ is a not an ordinary cookbook

By Sam Sifton, New York Times

Cookbooks today fall largely into two camps. There is glossy art-house food erotica assembled by chefs eager to set down markers of regional pride, of particular aesthetic technique, of gastronomic genius. Cooking from those books is like making a paint-by-numbers Ingres or Hockney. You get the shape and the color and the line. But the dish is never really art.

And there are lifestyle bibles, aspirational guides to a better and often more ethical way of being. These cookbooks

offer recipes for change, a chance to consider quinoa as a regular ingredient, the ability to alter your diet from selfish to one engaged with a wider story about health and happiness. Was that really what you wanted for dinner?

Rare is the cookbook that acknowledges the simple truth that there aren't really all that many recipes in the world. There is just technique, and practice, and joy and love, and at the end of it something simple and delicious on the plate, something that the reader may not have considered making before cracking the spine of the book.

Cal Peternell's smart new cookbook, "Twelve Recipes," recently published by HarperCollins, is one of the last type, a cookbook written for new cooks, for uncertain cooks, for good cooks looking for simple inspiration, for anyone wrestling with a New Year's resolution to cook more and better. It arose from conversations that Mr. Peternell, a longtime chef at Chez Panisse in Berkeley had with his oldest son as he headed off to college: a kitchen rat who had never learned to cook, who had merely seen it all happen around him, who needed to be taught how to shop, how to warm garlic in a pan, how to make a vinaigrette, how to braise.

Read the whole story

Fast-food chains move to drop chemicals

By Candice Choi, AP

NEW YORK — Fast-food chains have a New Year's resolution: Drop the junk.

As people express distaste for food they think is overly processed, McDonald's, Taco Bell and other chains are trying to shed their reputation for serving reheated meals that are loaded with chemicals. That includes rethinking the use of artificial preservatives and other ingredients customers find objectionable.

"This demand for fresh and real is on the rise," said Greg Creed, CEO of Yum Brands, which owns Taco Bell, KFC and Pizza Hut.

During the presentation for analysts and investors last month, Creed said the company needs to be more transparent about ingredients and use fewer preservatives.

Recasting fast-food as "fresh" and "real" will be tricky, in large part because it's so universally regarded as cheap and greasy. Another problem is that terms like "fresh," "real" and "healthy" have nebulous meanings, making it hard for companies to pin down how to approach transformation.

One way chains are looking to redefine themselves is by purging recipes of chemicals people might find unappetizing. Already, packaged food and beverage companies have reformulated products to remove such ingredients, even while standing by their safety. PepsiCo, for instance, said it would remove brominated vegetable oil from Gatorade after a petition by a teenager noted it isn't approved for use in some markets overseas.

And fast-food chains are indicating they want to jump on the "clean label" trend too:

– Last month, McDonald's USA President Mike Andres outlined improvements the company is working on, including the simplification of ingredient labels. Without providing details, he said to expect some changes in early 2015. The remarks came after the company reported a 4.6 percent decline in U.S. sales for November, capping two years of struggling

performance.

“Why do we need to have preservatives in our food?” Andres asked, noting McDonald’s restaurants go through supplies quickly. “We probably don’t.”

–Subway, a privately held company that does not disclose sales, started airing TV ads Thursday for its new chicken strips free of artificial preservatives and flavors. After suffering bad publicity, the company said earlier last year it would remove an ingredient from its bread that an online petition noted was also used in yoga mats. The ingredient, azodicarbonamide, is approved by the Food and Drug Administration and widely used as a dough conditioner and whitening agent.

–Chick-fil-A said in 2013 it would remove high-fructose corn syrup from buns and artificial dyes from its dressings. A couple months later, it said it plans to serve only chicken raised without antibiotics within five years.

– Carl’s Jr. last month introduced an “all-natural” burger with no added hormones, antibiotics or steroids. “We are obviously looking at other products on our menu to see which ones can be made all natural as well,” said Brad Haley, the chain’s chief marketing officer.

It’s not clear how far fast-food companies will go in reformulating recipes. But the nation’s biggest chains are facing growing competition. In the latest quarter, customer visits to traditional fast-food hamburger chains declined 3 percent from a year ago, according to market researcher NPD Group. Fast-casual chains – which are seen as a step up from traditional fast-food – saw visits rise 8 percent.

Part of the appeal of fast-casual chains is that they position themselves as being higher in quality. Chipotle, which touts its use of organic ingredients and meat from animals that were raised without antibiotics, said sales at established

locations surged 19.8 percent in the most recent quarter. And Panera vowed this summer to remove artificial colors, flavors and preservatives from its food by 2016.

The ethos of wholesome ingredients is increasingly being embraced across the industry. But not without some challenges.

Dan Coudreaut, executive chef at McDonald's, has noted the difficulties in changing recipes. In an interview last year, he said McDonald's is looking at ways to use culinary techniques to replace the functions of certain ingredients.

"If you take (an ingredient) out, what are you giving up?" he said.

Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, said there are likely many cases where artificial preservatives or colors could be replaced with natural alternatives without significant costs. Since their functions vary, he said companies would have to evaluate recipes product by product.

"Sometimes, food additives can be crutches or insurance policies. If a food is frozen, germs aren't going to grow. But preservatives might be added just in case, or they may be used just because their supplier has been using it for so long," he said, adding that such changes are "not a big deal" in terms of the overall health.

Michele Simon, a public health lawyer and author of "Appetite for Profit: How the Food Industry Undermines our Health and How to Fight Back," also said getting rid of additives here and there won't be enough to change the way people think about fast-food.

"That's just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic," Simon said. "These companies have a fundamental problem in who they are."

Despite menu changes, fast food still unhealthy

By Karen Kaplan, Los Angeles Times

Fast food has gotten a little better for you over the last 18 years – except in cases where it's gotten worse.

Among 27 menu items subjected to scrutiny by Tufts University researchers, eight of the offerings contained fewer calories in 2013 than in 1996 and nine contained more. In addition, five of the 18 items tested for sodium content had less of it at the end of the 18-year period and seven had more.

The researchers looked up nutritional information for all of the cheeseburgers, French fries, grilled chicken sandwiches and nondiet sodas sold between 1996 and 2013 at three leading fast-food chains. The restaurants weren't mentioned by name, but one of them was "the top restaurant on the basis of sales" – a designation that describes McDonald's. The other two chains had "similar menu items," a "national presence" and were "in the top 10 for total U.S. sales revenue" – attributes that describe Burger King and Wendy's. (The researchers, from Tufts' Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging and the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, declined to confirm or deny these identities.)

In general, the calorie content of similar items varied from chain to chain, the researchers found. For instance, an order of small fries at one of the chains packed 110 more calories than an order of small fries at one of the other chains. (The one exception to this trend was large-sized orders of fries.)

Read the whole story

Tasty meal isn’t just about the food

By Maanvi Singh, NPR

What makes the perfect meal?

Most of us might envision a specific dish, or a certain ingredient – a fine steak cooked medium-rare, grandma’s chicken curry or mom’s hearty ratatouille.

Charles Spence thinks about the food, for sure. But he also thinks about everything else: the color and size of the dinnerware, the music playing in the background and the lighting in the dining room.

That’s because Spence, an experimental psychologist at Oxford University, has dedicated his career to studying how our environment affects the way we experience food and drink. He has found, for example, that the weight and color of our utensils can affect how sweet or salty a food tastes. And people tend to enjoy the same dish more when it has a longer, more descriptive name.

In :The Perfect Meal: The Multisensory Science of Food and Dining”, Spence and psychologist Betina Piqueras-Fiszman from Wageningen University in the Netherlands explore how even the most minute adjustments can enhance the dining experience.

Read the whole story