



CENTURION
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Food Forward

The science is in: living longer, healthier and more in tune with the needs of our fragile planet comes down to eating better. Kate O'Brien reports on an increasingly self-aware culinary world

PHOTO EVAN SUNG



Celtuce Celebration, a dish at NYC's now all-vegan Eleven Madison Park restaurant

Prior to the pandemic, New York's three-Michelin-starred Eleven Madison Park was one of the world's most lauded restaurants, most notably for its smoked lavender-honey glazed duck and butter-poached lobster. But its Swiss-born owner and chef Daniel Humm had other plans. "During the pandemic, I spent a lot of time by myself and realised that the world was changing and

that I had a responsibility to use my voice and my creativity to make this future more beautiful and delicious," Humm recalls. And this he did, making Eleven Madison Park, in the summer of 2021, the first plant-based restaurant in the world with such high a rating – all while retaining his three stars the following year.

At a time when diet-related disease is a leading cause of death in the Western world, plant-based eating is on the rise and the adage "food is medicine" (ascribed to Hippocrates circa 400BC) is gaining more and more traction. With many of today's top killers, from diabetes and cardiovascular disease to certain types of cancer, linked to lifestyle, how and what we eat is the common denominator, with decades of campaigns on healthier eating failing to make a dent in worsening statistics.

At the boutique wellbeing haven Shou Sugi Ban in the Hamptons' hamlet of Water Mill on New York's Long Island, culinary director Mads Refslund, co-founder of Noma, Copenhagen, takes these findings very seriously. Using the backyard as his pantry (and pharmacy), Refslund ingeniously weaves an umbilical connection to the surrounding land and sea with his inventive, Japanese-Nordic-inspired meals, blending wild foraged medicinal plants with sustainable local seafood and the very best of colourful seasonal produce.

Refslund is committed to eating closer to the earth and in rhythm with the seasons. "Culturally, we are thinking more and more about longevity; we can and want to live longer and better, so there's an awareness that food should be healthy and should feed our mind and soul, not just our stomach," he says. "For me, it's not a question of if it should be organic, it just has to be organic. We're trying as much as we can to use local farms and purveyors as our palette and pantry, and by distilling the concept of cooking into its essential elements, food and nutrition become both simple and inherently sustainable."

We know that the number of centenarians has been rising steadily for decades, but recent research from the University of Washington in the US calculated that human lifespans are about to push into uncharted territory with the potential rise in the number of "supercentenarians" (people living to age 110 or longer). This said, it is estimated that about two-thirds of the eight billion or so people on the planet will die prematurely from avoidable diseases. For Dan Buettner, National



Dan Buettner

Born in Minnesota, the 63-year-old holds an Emmy and three distance-cycling world records. He has been studying longevity in the world's "Blue Zones" – five global locales where people live the longest lives – for more than 20 years. "[Blue Zone residents] are not trying to eat better," he notes, "they eat what is in season and available, which is mostly a whole-food, plant-based diet."



**Dr Tim Spector,
OBE**

A professor of epidemiology at King's College London, Spector studies the link between nutrition and gut health – including mental health. “We now understand better how food, mood and microbes are connected,” he writes in his best-selling book, *Spoon-Fed* (2020). “The evidence all points to a similar beneficial dietary pattern of plenty of colourful plants, nuts and legumes and probiotic-rich fermented food to halt the mental-health pandemic.”



Geographic Fellow, best-selling author and producer of the Netflix series *Live to 100*, emphasis should be less on trying to prevent death and much more on learning how to live life. He believes that most of what people think leads to a long healthy life is misguided, and most of us are leaving good years on the table.

In his latest book, *The Blue Zones: Secrets for Living Longer*, Buettner revisits super-agers in the five “Blue Zone” regions – that is, places around the world that boast much higher than average life expectancies. They include Sardinia, Italy; Ikaria, Greece; Okinawa, Japan; Costa Rica’s Nicoya Peninsula; and Loma Linda, California. He attempts to better understand the foods, social structures and lifestyles that, combined, have powered up to 10 additional years of healthy living. Buettner argues that there is not necessarily anything unique about the genes or willpower of the people in these Blue Zones, they seem to thrive due to an “interconnected web of characteristics that keep people doing the right things for long enough, and avoiding the wrong things. And regardless of where you go in these regions, you witness people

living vibrant, active and happy lives – living longer without trying,” he says. “Yes, they have daily stresses like the rest of us, but they have purpose and they put their gifts to work every day and those same things they are doing to reach a healthy 95 years are also keeping them sharp to the very end.”

Dr Bruno Ribeiro believes we can learn a lot from these Blue Zones. As head of cognitive development and brain stimulation at the cutting-edge SHA Wellness Clinic near Alicante, Spain, he has analysed the health and functionality of myriad brains while also helping guests enhance their overall health and neurological performance. A macrobiotic, seasonal whole-food way of eating lies at the heart of SHA’s ethos, with Dr Ribeiro noting that up to 40 per cent of guests experience ongoing gut-health imbalance or dysbiosis, which is, for the most part, the result of eating processed foods, preservatives, dyes and unhealthy fats, all of which can lead to oxidation, inflammation and overall gut imbalance.

“Much of modern medicine is linear – but the body is not like that, every brain is different and needs to be addressed individually,” he

explains. “Since the Western world has moved from eating plants to more highly processed foods, cheap vegetable oils and sugar in all its guises, we have too much food but not enough nutrients.” The gut microbiome and brain are inseparable, with up to 90 per cent of the body’s serotonin (the neurotransmitter involved in mood, cognition and reward) being made in the gut, so it is no surprise that what we eat will dictate how we feel. “At SHA, we continue to experiment with healthy, antioxidant-rich recipes using a variety of nuts, seeds and plants etc, complemented with fermented sauerkraut and seaweed (known to help remove mercury and heavy metals from the liver),” Dr Ribeiro clarifies.

Optimising the health of the microbiome is also at the forefront of Tim Spector’s work. As a professor of epidemiology at King’s College London, he notes that generic, population-level advice is simply not working, with less than one per cent of adults in the UK following government guidelines. “Foods that support our health also support planetary health – and the world of fermented foods holds so much promise, as previously wasted foods like vegetable scraps and unwanted pizza dough are being transformed into delicious and nutritious foods through fermentation,” he says.

Spector’s top gut-health tip, based on outcomes of the American and British Gut Project, is to eat 30 different plants a week. “This is the sweet spot to get the maximum diversity of gut microbes for optimal health,” he explains. And in a world in which people are depriving themselves of essential nutrients, his positive nutrition message is catching: “Instead of changing our dietary preferences completely, we can simply add more to our plates for a healthier gut microbiome associated with better health.”

New Zealand-born Analiese Gregory has been craftily and quietly nudging the health of our planet and its inhabitants along. Hailed as one of the most exciting

chefs of her generation, Gregory swapped the dazzling Michelin stars of Paris for a century-old cottage on a nearly one-hectare plot in Tasmania’s Huon Valley (about a 35-minute drive from Hobart). Here, she has found a new rhythm to life, fishing, foraging, hunting and celebrating nature and the slow-food life on this rugged and often wild island. “Food wastage has long weighed on my mind, and I wanted to get my hands into the soil to learn more about where what we eat has come from,” she explains.

Realising the hard way that she could not do everything herself, now Gregory only does what she can do well: “I raise my own chickens and pigs and I keep bees for honey, and goats – mostly for entertainment!” When she craves a particular food, she will get it from nature and, “when I don’t know much about a particular food system, I try to do it myself in a way that better aligns with my values”. For example, after reading about how Hawaiian sea gardens are preserving native plant species, Gregory created her own, drying and preserving local seaweed like wakame to use as the key source of umami in her cooking. “It might be called foraging now, but it’s still just collecting stuff,” she adds, wryly. And it is the freedom that this resourceful creativity brings that others are on a mission to emulate.

“This is not anti-meat, but pro-planet,” Humm clarifies, back in New York. “Our approach to cooking should be a pathway to the future. So much of what we eat is part of our identity, and my wish is that people will open their minds to creating new traditions for a better future.”

As the global food movement subtly edges closer towards a more harmonious symphony with the natural world, many of the world’s leading restaurants are following suit by inventively amending their storylines, so instead of using seasonal vegetables to accompany animal proteins, the season itself is becoming the main event.



Dr Bruno Ribeiro

SHA Wellness Clinic’s head of cognitive development and brain stimulation contends that omega-3 fatty acids in fatty fish are critical for brain health. “If you’re not a fish lover,” he recommends, “choose terrestrial omega-3 sources like flaxseeds, avocados and walnuts. And don’t forget the berries.”

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– Chef Daniel Humm