



Food for Thought

HAVE YOU FED YOUR BRAIN TODAY? A DIETITIAN OFFERS UP A TASTY MENU OF FOODS THAT MAY MAKE YOU SHARPER AND MORE FOCUSED—OR AT THE VERY LEAST, LESS FORGETFUL.

BY MARIA LAPIANA

Wonder how the humble blueberry got so big? Why all those pint baskets have taken center stage at the supermarket? And what all the fuss is about?

Every week, it seems there's more evidence to back up findings that blueberries are not only delicious (that, we knew) but rich in special nutrients that increase the production of brain cells, improve learning and motor skills and help reverse age-related declines in cognitive thinking.

Pass the pie?

Not so fast. While blueberries are among the so-called "brain foods" whose efficacy is pretty much undisputed, it's important to look at nutritional studies with a critical eye, says May Harter, MS, RD, CD/N and president of the Connecticut Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

"Nutrition is a science, and in science things are always changing," says Harter, a registered dietitian at The Hospital of Central Connecticut in New Britain. "There's always research being done on what we eat and drink, and how much we eat and drink, and often there's conflicting information or, worse, misinformation."

As advocates for nutrition education throughout the state, Harter and her colleagues "rely on evidence-based information that has been thoroughly researched. We look at the number of subjects in a study and the scientific method, among other considerations."

By that measure, Harter says there's proof positive that many foods really do improve

memory and enhance concentration; some have been shown to slow the cognitive impairment that comes with age; a few may even stave off symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.

We asked Harter recently to share her insights on the foods most often touted as good for our gray matter, and she had a lot to say.

"As a registered dietitian, I always go back to basics. You can never, ever go wrong by eating foods that are unprocessed and naturally bright in color," she says. "You should always think of a rainbow when you look at the food on your plate."

What does she think about mom's old "don't skip breakfast" adage? "It's absolutely true. Breakfast really is one of the most important meals of day," she says, "and it should include carbs. People make a big mistake, in weight management sometimes, and reduce or eliminate carbs from their diets, but we need them for fuel. It doesn't matter if they come from whole grains, like whole wheat bread or brown rice, or low-fat dairy products. We all need them for our brains to function properly."

Here are a few more essentials Harter says to put on your shopping list:

FISH

Why: For years we've known that fish is brain food. It's rich in eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), omega-3 fatty acids that combine to help with brain function.

How much: A 3- to 4-ounce serving of cold-water fish, like salmon, sardines, albacore tuna or mackerel twice a week. Wild-caught fish

are healthier than those that are farm-raised; and fish-oil supplements are acceptable for those who don't like fish or are allergic to it.

BERRIES

Why: Blueberries, blackberries, strawberries, raspberries, cranberries and red grapes are packed with antioxidants that protect the brain and are thought to reduce the risk of disease and illness.

How much: Half a cup to a cup a day can help with short-term memory and balance. More is better, because they're also high in fiber, low in calories (and they taste so good).

GREEN TEA

Why: It's high in antioxidants that lower the amount of protein that builds up plaque, the kind linked to memory loss and nerve damage in Alzheimer's patients.

How much: One to two cups a day will boost memory and the ability to concentrate.

DARK CHOCOLATE

Why: Harter says she's always believed that dark chocolate should be part of a healthy diet. The darker the better, because it's the cocoa and flavonoids that are most beneficial, counteracting damage done by inflammation, and boosting the circulation of blood to the brain.

How much: A small amount works wonders: Four to six Hershey's Kisses or squares of dark chocolate per week will do the trick.

LEAFY GREENS

Why: Dark, leafy greens like spinach, kale, bok choy, arugula and collard greens are high in iron, which produces red blood cells that carry oxygen to the brain.

How much: The USDA Food Pyramid recommends three cups of dark green vegetables per week, but many experts think we should eat at least five servings per day.

AVOCADOS

Why: Avocados are an excellent source of monounsaturated fat that promotes blood flow (plus oxygen and nutrients) to the brain, helping us to think and remember details. They can also help prevent high blood pressure, which may put us at risk for cognitive decline.

How much: Up to one a day—in salads, on sandwiches or in dips.

COFFEE

Why: Contrary to popular belief, the caffeine in coffee is beneficial in that it increases alertness and enhances brain function and focus. In addition, studies have shown it improves memory in older subjects.

How much: A cup or two a day is fine; be wary of the added calories that come from adding sugar and cream.

APPLES

Why: High in flavonoids and antioxidants that reduce inflammation and damage to healthy cells, apples are exceptionally healthful.

Now in her 20th year at the helm of the nature center, Maggie faces a far more complicated challenge than rehabilitating raptors. For a little over a year, Denison, The Trust For Public Land and over 60 influential volunteers have been working tirelessly to save the 372-year-old Coogan Farm. Already, they've raised over \$2.5 million of the \$3.5 million needed to purchase and restore 34 acres of heritage farmland—a spread that serves as a buffer between Mystic's heavily commercial "Golden Triangle," Mystic Seaport Museum and Downtown Mystic, and a perfect insulator from the comings and goings of one of the busiest exits along I-95's nearly 2,000 miles.

"We've got to do this!" Maggie tells me during an autumn hike at the farm. "This is the only undeveloped piece of land along Route 27 on the Stonington side of the Mystic River. The family that owns it has already lopped off one parcel and sold it to a developer who's approved for elderly housing. Developers are licking their chops, hoping we miss our goal!"

Alicia Betty, Connecticut director of The Trust for Public Land, concurs. "Coogan Farm is a rare conservation opportunity," she says. "It is one of only a handful of larger pieces of land along the Connecticut coast that are undeveloped and available for preservation."

The Coogan land became a farm in 1641, granted to settler/soldier Capt. John Gallup for his role in the Pequot War. High above the Mystic River, Gallup's Farm served the area's first settlers and eventually, under the Greenman Family, a large shipyard that grew up along the riverbank. Under Maggie's plan, the land's terraced meadows and shady paths will complete a network of walking trails from the nature center to Route 27.

During our walk, Maggie notes that Denison has already received 11.5 acres of Coogan Farm property as a gift from the Coogan family. "We've also applied for an Open Space Grant," she says. "State funding will be critical since we're under pressure to meet our goal by March." (The state delivered, with \$500,000 in late December, bringing them within \$350,000 of the sales price.)

"Maggie," I ask, laughing, "Twenty years! Is this how you keep it fresh?"

She chuckles. "One of the most rewarding things about a job that involves nature and the outdoors," she says, "is that there's always something new and unpredictable. You never know what's going to come in through the front door, never know what you might see outside. Nature is always changing."

Two old quarries have been found on the land. This partially explains the abundance of beautifully cut granite walls and gateposts. The stonework all around is among the most precise and beautiful one can find. With the help of slaves and indentured Indian servants, the Gallup family built magnificent

walls out of giant granite block, some over seven feet high. They planted apple and pear orchards nearly 150 years before independence was won from Great Britain.

"Why should this matter to somebody outside the Mystic area?" I ask.

"This really matters to *all* of Connecticut. Mystic is a proven economic engine to the state, and a premier tourist destination," Maggie replies. "Our history is authentic. We are a resource for filmmakers and artists of all kinds. Lots of other people come here for the aquarium and the Seaport. They also come for the quaint charm of a little town."

And because Mystic's blessed with a shoreline, people also come here from other pre-Revolutionary towns like Windsor and Farmington to play on their boats. Many come back and retire here. I'm starting to see the big picture.

"Coogan Farm is an intact, historic landscape," Maggie adds, and as if on cue, we're standing high above Mystic, with a sweeping view of backlit meadows. I can see the distant river and village below. Maggie offers that the farm's treeline alone protects the integrity of some of the most painted and photographed views of Mystic Seaport and the area along the river.

It's easy to believe in the importance of Coogan Farm because it is easy to believe in Maggie. Attractive, naturally bright and quietly competitive, she lives her role as a conservationist in simple, telling ways. For example, every day she is able, she rides her bike to and from work, and to and from the post office as well.

Maggie's knowledge of woodland flora and fauna is encyclopedic. When I point to the thousands of orange oriental bittersweet berries on vines growing on the walls she wants to clear, I wonder, "Will birds be deprived of needed food?"

Not a problem, Maggie says. "There's no harm to birds removing invasive growth. We have species of birds nesting in invasive autumn olive thickets who are just as happy in arrow wood, which is a native, noninvasive plant species." Like a naturalist innkeeper, she's ever aware of her woodland guests' unique preferences.

Maggie points to the bright goldenrod in the meadow. "Goldenrod is not the cause of hay fever as many believe," she says, adding that monarch butterflies follow its bloom sequence as they make their way home to central Mexico.

I then ask, "Do you think you have what it takes to pull off the task before you?" She bristles, and I smile meekly. "Well, I like to think that at least *some* of my excitement about this project is rubbing off," she says. "By all indications it is, because there's this incredible committee that shares my vision and has helped shape it to create a natural heritage park for our

Also a good source of vitamin C, they've been shown to possess qualities that fight dementia.

How much: If an apple a day keeps the doctor away, why stop at one? Apples are a great source of fiber, plus they provide a sense of fullness, which can also help with weight management.

BARLEY

Why: Like other whole grains, barley is one of the good carbs that helps brain cells function more effectively. By causing glucose to be released into the system, barley helps produce chemicals known to improve memory.

How much: At least a serving a day will have a benefit; consider adding cooked barley to salads or using an alternative to oatmeal.

OLIVE OIL

Why: Monounsaturated fats like olive oil are good for memory and slowing the aging process. In a study by Boston's Brigham & Women's Hospital, older adults with higher intakes of olive (and other monounsaturated) oils consistently scored better on short mental tests.

How much: Just a little, for cooking or drizzled on salads. It retains its nutrients even when heated, but moderation is still key, says Harter. ■



Organic?

Is it always better to choose organic fruits and vegetables? Not necessarily, says Harter. "When something is labeled organic, it usually means a farm has not used pesticides and has taken care to avoid cross-contamination. Unfortunately, it also usually means produce that is more expensive," she says. "The thing to keep in mind is that being organic doesn't alter the nutritional value of foods."

HELP WITH THE SHOPPING LIST?

If you're not buying organic, the "Environmental Working Group" (organic.org) has compiled the following lists of foods that have been found to be the most, and the least, contaminated.

| 12 MOST CONTAMINATED | 12 LEAST CONTAMINATED |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Peaches | Onions |
| Apples | Avocado |
| Sweet Bell Peppers | Sweet Corn (Frozen) |
| Celery | Pineapples |
| Nectarines | Mango |
| Strawberries | Asparagus |
| Cherries | Sweet Peas (Frozen) |
| Pears | Kiwi Fruit |
| Grapes (Imported) | Bananas |
| Spinach | Cabbage |
| Lettuce | Broccoli |
| Potatoes | Papaya |