
THE

psychology

BEHIND EATING RIGHT—

in Buffalo

by Ryan Rose Weaver

WITH ITS REPUTATION for bad weather and fattening food, Buffalo can seem like a hard place to stay healthy. But it's not impossible. For this new year's issue, we interviewed local eaters and experts on the real factors—biological, psychological, social—that inform our food choices here. These are their stories.

A nutritionist's task begins at home

Obesity seems to run in Jennifer Temple's family, but she's determined to stop it in its tracks. Temple is an assistant professor at the University of Buffalo's Department of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences. She can tick off all of the unconscious biological factors that govern what we eat. There is our body's evolutionary impulse to scarf down every food in sight. There is the spike in happy hormones we receive from substances like fat, salt, and sugar. There is the weight of our parents, which seems to predict whether or not we'll become obese. Yet Temple does not believe her research will reveal an "obesity gene." She believes everyone still has choices. "I'm cynical. I come from a family of obese people, and I work really hard to not be obese," she says. "I've been overweight my whole life. I saw myself getting heavier, and I just kind of made a decision. It was completely within. No doctor told me to do it. I just started running."

Dr. Mark B. Kristal, director of UB's behavioral neuroscience program, is one of Temple's colleagues. Like Temple, he's had his own ups and downs with food and, like Temple, he believes that the brain can override the body's impulse to eat.

Kristal describes his process as more of an un-learning, a stripping away of the psychological reasons we eat, even when we're not hungry. With the help of Weight Watchers, he's lost and kept off weight, even as he moves into his late sixties. Kristal points out that animals and young kids will stop consuming nutrients when they've had enough, in response to chemical cues that tell the body it's full. But as human adults, Kristal says, "We almost lose the ability to function on those cues."

The scientist blames the food industry and its "corporate manipulation of the palate," with advertisements, presentation, and portion sizes that convince us to eat unhealthy amounts of unhealthy food. "There's little to no advertising that shows the appeal of a balanced diet with modest sizes," Kristal says. "So when kids are exposed to [fast-food advertising] and not counter-conditioned at home, things go haywire." He adds that parents too often fall victim to the same messages, and because they're in control, they exacerbate the problem.

Remember Isaac Pavlov's famous experiment with dogs, in which he trained them to connect the sound of a bell with dinnertime? When parents reward or soothe kids by taking them to the restaurants advertised on TV, they're reinforcing a powerful psychological link between sensory input, happiness, and hunger that can persist into adulthood. And as Buffalo's a "fast-food heaven," Kristal says, there

are always opportunities to indulge.

Thus, it's important for people to see how they've been "trained" over time, and to devise their own plans for eating and rewarding themselves differently. "If you save money on food, spend it on something else," he tells his friends at Weight Watchers meetings. "Buy those new shoes! It doesn't have to be all deprivation."

The diet coach

This concept—that eating well is not about superhuman self-control, but conscious eating and pragmatic planning—is not one you'll hear from the lose-weight-quick diet industry. But it's gospel among eating experts like Kelly Cardamone.

Cardamone has worked as a personal diet coach at places like Buffalo's tony Saturn Club, as well as a registered dietician serving some of Buffalo's poorest at Buffalo General Hospital. "Everybody self-medicates with food. Everyone," she observes. "People have a fear of loss. They don't want to lose that thing that they enjoy."

She knows these feelings will trip her clients up if they don't have a strong motivation to change—and a plan for doing so. First, she asks a client to pick a primary goal, whether it's to live longer or simply look better. Then

Eliza Schneider of Merge restaurant;
Dr. Mark Kristof of UB's behavioral neuroscience program.



Cardamone breaks this down into SMART objectives: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound behaviors. For example, a specific goal might be: "I'm going to have a piece of grapefruit with my breakfast, and a banana after dinner." It's measurable if you know when you've done it. It's attainable if you can realistically do it. It's relevant if it helps you accomplish your larger goal. And it's time-bound if you know when and how often you'll do it. Cardamone cautions all her clients to start small. Once they taste success, she says, they can apply what they've learned to bigger behavioral changes. "Just start with two glasses of soda a day instead of four," Cardamone advises. "That's better than nothing."

The last crucial aspect of behavior change, say the experts, is support. "If the people around you aren't ready to make a change, don't use it as an excuse," Cardamone says. "You really have to want to do it, and then there are other people and resources out there." Friends, co-workers, Weight Watchers, or even an online dieting community can all provide reinforcement.

Growing a healthier community

Another useful resource may be the Buffalo Vegetarian Society, which recently drew seventy-five attendees to a screening of *Forks Over Knives*, a documentary that outlines the health benefits of eschewing animal protein. Afterwards, attendees milled around a potluck spread piled high with vegan cookies and soy ice cream. Tracy Murphy, the society's softspoken founder, appeared thrilled about the turnout. "There's actually a lot more of us than we think," she says. "But I think we've still got a long way to go." Murphy introduced me to several attendees via email, most of whom felt grateful to the group for offering them a social and nutritional alternative to Buffalo's bar culture.

"I think there are a lot of food shops selling yummy chicken-wings, pizza, and subs that throw a lot of people's diets way out of whack," writes Bill Janowsky, a middle-aged runner. "[Attending the screening and potluck] made me want to see what vegan foods I could add to my food options." Eliza Schneider, a co-owner of Delaware Avenue's vegetarian-friendly Merge Restaurant, has also found that by socializing with healthy eaters, she's become more open to new foods. "[Before Merge opened,] I was a chicken wing lover. I would occasionally eat salads, but I rarely even made food for myself," Schneider says. But when a group of vegans organized through Meetup.com began gathering at Merge, she began learning more about the origins of her food, as well as interesting meat alternatives.

After that, she says, "I just started transforming what I was eating." Since then, Schneider has added raw food to her diet, taken nutrition classes, and, with Merge, organized food "cleanses" with the Buffalo Yoga Center (the next one will be held from January 9 to 15). Sara Schneider, Eliza's sister and restaurant co-owner, has enjoyed the role Merge has taken on as a healthy-eating resource. "We get lots of questions, which is encouraging," Schneider says. They also seem to be getting more business these days, suggesting that Buffalo itself may be undergoing a behavioral change. Yet a popular pick remains their Buffalo "wings," which are made of seitan (textured wheat gluten), but nevertheless come in either hot or BBQ flavors. "We're using new things and applying them in traditional ways," Schneider says. "Buffalo's a changing community."

Ryan Rose Weaver is a freelance writer and editor and a recent Buffalo re-pat.

