

Epicurean

Gut, Brain, Health



Rose Margesson has lived on Waiheke for three years and, as well as teaching yoga at Palm Beach Hall, teaches nutrition and weight management to private clients and wholefood eat-well classes at Waiheke Adult Learning Centre.

After years of travel and plenty of life experiences in which food played a major role, she says she's fascinated

by the science of food and how it influences the body and the mind. She says she'll never stop researching and experimenting.

In this first of a series of three Epicurean features, Rose explains her personal story of learning the link between what you eat and how you feel and why good mental health can be firmly rooted in vegetables.

Dear Epicurean Reader,

Let me tell you a story about food and mood. When I was a young woman my family fell apart. It was like living in a Greek tragedy. My once-ambitious businessman Dad joined a hippy commune. My mother ran off to California with a guru's accountant. In the midst of this 1970s mayhem, my younger brother developed schizophrenia and was hospitalised.

An auntie swooped in from Ireland, gathered me up and took me back to her village. There, I discovered the joys of homemade soda bread baked daily in an Aga oven and slathered with lashings of butter and jam. For me, it was "comfort food".

A year later and a stone heavier, I lumbered onto an aircraft bound for America. I hadn't gotten over the shock of what had happened to my family. But I did know one thing. Those soda bread pounds had to go.

So, I threw a white sheet over the stove and vowed to live on a raw food diet. As radical as the regime was, it worked.

While the pounds slipped away, something magical happened. I entered one of

the happiest, most focused periods of my life. I did this for three years. I awoke before the sun rose, meditated and practiced yoga for a couple of hours before I breakfasted on live food sprinkled with edible flowers.

I now realise that the instinct to use food to change my mental outlook has more and more scientific credibility.

It seems there is a link between a healthy gut and the brain with a new field of nutritional psychiatry emerging and it's firmly rooted in vegetables.

Denkins Food and Mood Centre published a controlled trial showing that 33 percent of those on a dietary regime went into remission for their depression, compared to only 8 percent who had social support alone.

Given that New Zealand today has one of the worst mental health records among developed nations, Denkins' findings are food for thought. Food is not the whole story though, but it is a big part of it.

The rise of fast and packaged food appears to be on par with the rise of depres-

sion and anxiety. Only half of New Zealand households are now enjoying cooking at home. There's got to be a link.

The good news is that no matter what diet you prefer, vegetarian, vegan or omnivore, it's proven that people who eat more than four plant foods a day have a significantly more diverse gut microbiome than those who don't.

Most of us have heard of the happy hormone, serotonin. What may surprise you is that 90% of serotonin receptors are located in the gut.

There is a two-way communication system between the brain and the gut via the vagus nerve. It makes sense and science tells us that it is possible to eat your way out of feeling depressed or anxious if you're willing to eat more plants.

It's alarming that only one in four people eat their recommended five a day. That is why I routinely ask my clients to note how many plant foods they consume on their meal plans. It's also a fun thing you can encourage your children to do with colour pencils.

I will leave you now with a quote from a renowned ethnobotanist, Dr Mark Plotkin:

"Many factors conspire to reduce the diversity of the bacteria that live within us. These include the use of antibiotics, other medications such as acid blocking drugs, stress and various environmental toxins. But far and away the biggest factor is the choices we make each and every day when it comes to the food on our plate.

"The diet we choose is the most influential factor in terms of the health and diversity of the hundred trillion microbes that live within us. To be clear, these microbes play a pivotal role in determining our health and our destiny."

So, if you want to create your own story about the link between mood and food, throw some more greens in your trolley and learn to create a new form of comfort food.*

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