

SOUTH FLORIDA'S DIETARY UNIVERSE IS AS VAST AND COLORFUL AS ITS POPULATION.

One thing South Florida is not is stagnant. It moves and changes with time and its residents, and its cuisine and diet are no exception. Twenty-five years ago, when Miami Beach was still mostly a retirement community, diners were open, Southern fare and New York nosh were abundant, and Italian American restaurants like Joe Sonken's Gold Coast were de rigueur – holdovers from the heydays of the Rat Pack and friends.

Today, South Florida is perhaps one of the most diverse regions in the nation. Our Latin and South American, Caribbean and European communities provide multitudes of authentic dishes to enjoy. We are a veritable melting pot of culture, personalities and cuisines, replete with variety, spice, tradition and identity.

Yes. Identity. Is a café con leche not identifiably Cuban? Is caipirinha not distinctively Brazilian? Is sancocho not quintessentially Dominican? And is Segafredo not inherently Italian? And hence, chances are these foods conjure up a pride and nostalgia for heritage, family and home. We are as proud of our sofrito and empanadas as we are of our reputation for being home to the city with the most attractive people in America.

But looks can be deceiving. Research has shown that, compared to the state and nation, South Florida is not fairing well in terms of overall obesity, incidences of diet-related disorders such as diabetes and cardiovascular

disease, and simple nutritional indicators like how many fruits and vegetables we eat per day. Perhaps the truth is our gastronomic links to our homelands are preventing us from eating and living healthier.

The good news is that South Florida, with all its diversity, actually is in a distinctive position to be healthier. We are in a food, diet and fitness Mecca. Not only is South Florida one of the few places in America to find fantastic arroz con pollo, but we also hail as the home of the ever-popular South Beach Diet and the Miami Mediterranean Diet; we are a living inspiration for the new Hot Latin Diet and offer countless health and food movements; and of course, we have ideal weather for fitness activity.

BREAKFAST: BREAK THE FAT

So how does this Mecca manifest? Well, first things first. Café con leche and tostadas for breakfast, while certainly tasty, are not extremely healthful. But how many of us are willing to give them up? And what about those guava pastelitos...

Recent data from research on foreign-born Latino Americans shows more acculturated individuals are more likely to have higher fruit consumption and relatively lower consumption of starchy foods such as rice and viandas, or traditional starchy root vegetables. But not so for breakfast. Apparently, many of us don't like giving up the starchy breakfasts in favor of healthier options like fruits and cereals. And not surprisingly, this rice and viandas

pattern has been associated with a significantly higher Body Mass Index (BMI) and waist circumference.

Indeed, our relationship with food has come to mean much more than simple nutrition, and our options, portions and waistlines have proportionately expanded. As a country, 66% of us are either overweight or obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Factor in the stressful and sedentary lifestyle of the average American citizen and it is not hard to understand why we have an obesity epidemic. Globally, we are perhaps the fattest country in the world. For instance, when looking at BMI, approximately 72% of U.S. men 15 and older are overweight or obese, or have a BMI equal to or greater than 25. Comparatively, only about 44% of men in France and Brazil, 52% of men in Italy, and 55% of men in Spain and Cuba have BMIs 25 or higher. Our nearest compatriots are Venezuela and Argentina, with 65% and 70% of the adult male population, respectively, having BMIs of 25 or greater.

And Florida, despite its notoriety for svelte physiques and successful commercial diets, is only marginally better. According to the Florida Department of Health, about 61% of us are overweight or obese. For South Florida, only 38.5% of us were of a healthy weight in 2007.

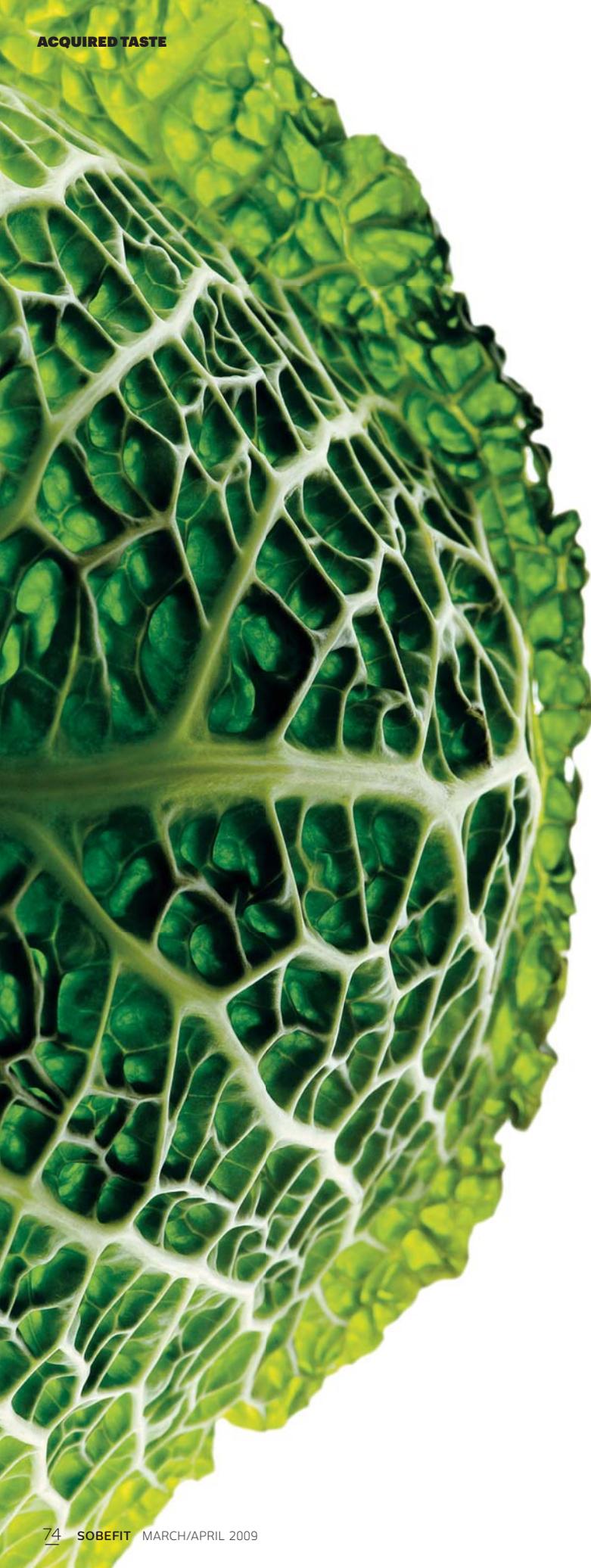
As the breakfast research shows, part of this epidemic is clearly related to nutrition and food choices. In 2007, only about 27% of Florida ate the

WE ARE A VERITABLE MELTING POT OF CULTURE, PERSONALITIES AND CUISINES, REplete WITH VARIETY, SPICE, TRADITION AND IDENTITY.

recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables per day, according to the CDC. Numbers vary, and reasons why do too, but locally, trends show that only 25% of us (same as the national average) managed to get our share in. Let us remember that often it is a bit more expensive to buy fresh fruits and vegetables, but we do have access to some of the best crops like bananas, oranges, grapefruits, peaches, guava, papaya, lychee, mangos, tomatoes, eggplants and peppers. Shopping local markets for sales on native crops may be an inexpensive way to get our five-a-day in.

YOU GET WHAT YOU GIVE

Even if we manage to eat a mango now and again (which are antioxidant-rich!), and maintain a healthy weight, most of us probably don't remember the biologic processes we learned in nutrition class. Essentially, what we eat falls into two categories – macronutrients and micronutrients. Macronutrients are carbohydrates, proteins and fats and provide the body with energy. Micronutrients include



vitamins, minerals and water, and while don't provide energy, they serve essential roles in our bodily functions. Water especially, while not nutritive, should be consumed regularly as part of a healthy diet. Most experts still recommend eight, 8-ounce glasses a day, and more if you exercise or live in a hot climate like ours.

Ideally, adults should aim to consume 20-35% of energy (or calories) from fat, 45-65% of energy from carbohydrates and 10-35% of energy from protein. According to the American Diabetes Association (ADA), this will minimize your risk of chronic diseases. But trends over the last 15 years show that Americans are continuing to consume more and more calories, and derive more and more energy from fat.

Fatma Huffman, PhD, RD, and professor of Dietetics and Nutrition at Florida International University, believes that when looking at diets in culturally-rich communities, it is best to fit dietary guidelines within one's cultural habits. "Changes will be a lot easier to make and to keep when they are not disruptive of long-held cultural practices," Huffman says. That means taking a close look at the foods we like to eat and making sure they fit in the recommended percentages. If they don't, perhaps switch them out for a food that is still from our homeland, but is a bit healthier.

ABOUT 61% OF OUR FELLOW FLORIDIANS ARE OVERWEIGHT OR OBESE. FOR SOUTH FLORIDA, ONLY 38.5% OF US WERE OF A HEALTHY WEIGHT TWO YEARS AGO.

Huffman, is looking at dietary patterns in South Floridian Latino women with type 2 diabetes, an emerging health problem for our area, compared to the ADA dietary recommendations. Huffman hopes to identify barriers preventing better eating habits. In her study, the women's macronutrient intake patterns compared with ADA guidelines were 90.9% of recommended percent caloric contribution from carbohydrates, 120% for protein, and 107% for fat. Essentially, the women were getting too much of

their energy from protein and fat.

Most of the participants reported eating a typically South Floridian Latino diet, and said that the most significant change made to their diets was not to its quality, but quantity. Notably, the women said it was inconvenient to cook differently for "the rest of the family," so their own diet composition remained unchanged. Given that we have access to so many interesting and native foods, looking at how we eat may be as important as what we eat.

RAW FOODS, COOL FOODS

At the other end of the fruit and veggie consumption spectrum is the raw food movement, which makes good use of the plethora of fruits and vegetables available, but does so in a way that is probably new to most of us. Long viewed as an anti-aging nutrition regimen popular with Hollywood stars such as model Carol Alt and actors Mel Gibson, Demi Moore and Uma Thurman, the raw food diet promotes consumption of uncooked, unprocessed and often organic and vegetarian foods. Specifically, raw foods cannot be heated over 115° F based on the belief that doing so minimizes the food's nutritional content. And it has now officially arrived on the South Florida scene with the opening of several raw food establishments and a raw food meet-up group with more than 300 members.

However, Huffman urges caution. Not only is there an increased risk of food-borne illness, she says, but eating an all raw food diet may not be nutritionally sound in the long term. "I am not advocating that every food needs to be cooked, but many nutrients are better absorbed if they are cooked," she says. One example is the antioxidant lycopene, which is more bioavailable in cooked tomatoes than in the raw variety. "A combination of fresh fruits and vegetables eaten raw and cooked is the best way to ensure that all nutrients are consumed."

A recent international study published in the *Journal of Nutrition* found that long-term consumption of a raw food diet lowered plasma total cholesterol and triglyceride concentrations, but also lowered serum HDL (good) cholesterol and resulted in vitamin B-12 deficiency in some subjects. Another study also showed low bone mass in subjects on long-term raw diets, but without impaired vitamin D status. However, local proponents of raw food, like John Schott, owner of Miami raw food restaurant Lifefood Gourmet, and Mariela Rodriguez, owner of raw foods

catering and food delivery company VeggieMunn, believe the benefits go beyond basic nutrition. "There is an abundance of energy, maintenance of ideal weight, more overall balance, great immunity and a sense of ultimate health that is priceless," says Schott, who got into raw foods about four years ago. Indeed, Lifefood Gourmet's menu offers a color-coded legend for each food item noting what part of the body the food may benefit. For example, the "Mother of all Lasagna" (with sun-dried tomato life bread "pasta," pumpkin pesto, baby spinach, arugula, Portobello mushrooms, macadamia pine-nut Alfredo sauce and fresh tomato), aids the kidneys, muscle tissue and bone structure, according to Schott.

THE HOT LATIN DIET'S RESEARCH UNCOVERED A SET OF SEVEN "POWER FOODS" BELIEVED TO POSSESS EXCEPTIONAL ANTIOXIDANT, METABOLIC AND FAT-BURNING ABILITIES.

HOLD THE COLD, PLEASE

Perhaps you want to achieve the same health benefits but want to keep a little heat in the kitchen? No problem. Just because we South Floridians may not be up fully to snuff yet when it comes

to managing the scale doesn't mean there is a lack of information or options.

In fact, two of the nation's most popular diets – the South Beach Diet and the Miami Mediterranean Diet – were initially designed with our community in mind by local cardiologists. And while we may not choose to use them, if inadequacies in our local dietary patterns are spawning nationally-recognized commercial diets, perhaps we should take notice. The Miami Mediterranean Diet, formulated by cardiologist Michael Ozner, MD aims to bring the same goodness of whole foods, fruits, vegetables to our tables, only European style and with a little red wine.

Ozner, who is the medical director of Wellness & Prevention at Baptist Health South Florida, originally created the plan for his patients to prevent cardiac disease and heart attacks. He took the traditional diet and adopted it to his Miami practice, updating certain food items and practices based on new research. "It has been a road map for literally thousands of individuals, both with heart disease and those that are healthy now and want to stay healthy." And according to Huffman, among non-Latinos living in South Florida, this diet is receiving the most awareness.

Certainly, many studies have shown the health benefits of a traditional Mediterranean diet consisting of whole grains, fresh nuts, fruits and vegetables, fish, olive oil and moderate consumption of red wine. But Ozner believes the diet also lowers the risk of many chronic diseases, including asthma, allergies, diabetes, cancer and depression. A recent study published

last year in the *British Medical Journal* showed that in 13,000 healthy subjects in Spain who were tracked over eight years, those who followed the Mediterranean diet most closely had an 83% relative reduction in the risk of developing diabetes.

One reason for this may be the high amounts of beneficial omega-3 fatty acids found in the diet, something that tends to be lacking in traditional American diets laden with red meat and fats. According to Ozner, this pattern is directly contributing to cardiovascular disease states like heart failure, hypertension, stroke and diabetes. The typical American diet, rich in animal meats and saturated fats, Ozner says, creates a chronic inflammation in the body based on the arachidonic acid pathway. "This chronic low-grade inflammation drives a lot of heart disease. And the Mediterranean diet decreases this inflammation." Research shows that omega-3 fatty acids, like those found in salmon, nuts and flax, fight for space in this process, thereby disrupting the inflammatory pathway.

Additionally, Ozner believes Americans are omega-3 deficient as a result of the mass commercialization of our foods, requiring added preservatives, and the diminishing amounts of free-range, grass-fed meats.

Determined to bring back the "old-fashioned way of raising cattle," Miami-based Gaucho Ranch imports natural grass-fed beef from the Pampas region of Uruguay. According to studies, grass-fed beef is not only lower in saturated fats compared to high-carbohydrate corn-fed cattle, but

is also slightly higher in omega-3 fatty acids, conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), and vitamins A and E.

And such meats do have a place in the Miami Mediterranean diet, just sparingly. The Miami Mediterranean diet pyramid's foundation is made of daily exercise, relaxation and smoking cessation, after which the mainstays of whole grains, fruits and vegetables of wide color variety, nuts and beans and fish make-up the bulk. In moderation, Ozner recommends olive oil, low-fat dairy products, skinless poultry and one to two small glasses of red wine a day. Red meats are to be consumed weekly or monthly, not daily. This may be difficult for some however, according to Huffman, who notes that many Cuban-Americans are consuming more pork and red meat than the general U.S. population, which already consumes a lot.

And research supports this moderation. In a study of 90,000 American women, those who consumed one-and-a-half servings of red meat a day had double the risk of developing breast cancer compared to women who consumed three servings or less per week.

WHERE'S THE BEEF?

South Florida is known for its hot, hot, hotness and certainly the success of the South Beach Diet stokes the flames of debate. While the South Beach Diet also was formulated for patients by a South Florida cardiologist – Arthur Agatston MD – it doesn't restrict red meat, but recommends eating it in moderation. "Tenderloin, flank steak and round steak are all good choices," says South Beach Diet Nutrition Director Marie Almon, MS, RD. But ditch



the skirt steak – too much saturated fat.

This isn't just about cutting fat to drop a skirt size, though. The three-phase plan focuses on eating the "good" unsaturated fats (unsaturated, e.g. nuts, avocado, olive oils) and the "good" high-fiber carbs (whole grains, high in fiber and low in refined sugar) and for a good reason. Studies show that the body reacts to a diet high in fats, sugars and refined food as if it were being injured, calling on inflammatory processes to intervene. Dietary disorders, such as hyperglycemia, prediabetes and arteriosclerosis, are actually cascades of injury taking place in the body. "We are overfed but undernourished," Agatston says.

He is in agreement with Ozner; our lack of omega-3 fatty acids, which have an anti-inflammatory effect, is doubly assaulted by our overconsumption of omega-6 fatty acids, which have a pro-inflammatory effect. Both are essential and must be consumed through diet, but omega-3s compete for synthesis in the body with omega-6s, which means that the simplest way to control the negative inflammatory effects of too many omega-6 fatty acids is to consume more omega-3s. "We need both, but our ratios of omega-6 to omega-3 are way off," Agatston says. Hence, the diet also promotes grass-fed meats and oily fish such as salmon, herring and sardines.

According to Agatston, chronic inflammation can start just by having processed or fried foods, and a lack of fiber. Agatston says, "Just adding fiber to your diet can decrease C-reactive protein (CRP)," a marker of inflammation in the body that is produced by the liver and fat cells and is often used as an indicator of cardiovascular disease. Research has shown that high levels of trans fat consumption are associated with significantly higher CRP levels. And like the Mediterranean diets, Agatston's South Beach diet aims to lower chronic inflammation in the body. "The same diet that is good for the heart, we have now found out, is also good for the brain, the eyes, the colon," Agatston says. "We have had many cases of intestinal bowel syndrome that go away on the diet." Behavioral disorders, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), have also been shown to improve when diet changes to decrease inflammation through increasing omega-3 intake.

Still, the first step of the South Beach

Diet is the hardest for many. In the first two weeks of the diet, all starches (including bread, rice and pasta) and sugars (including fruit, juice, alcohol and sweets) are off-limits. This is meant to stabilize blood sugar levels, which in turn will minimize cravings for sugar and refined starches. This first phase may be the hardest for South Floridians, since popular drink offerings like a trigo batido (wheat milkshake), Guaraná soda from Brazil, sweet and tasty Jupiña pineapple soda, and Materva soda are packed with sugar.

And what you drink is critical, according to Agatston, because it requires so little digestion. A sugar-laden drink will go right into your bloodstream, causing a spike in insulin that will lead to cravings later on. So in the first two weeks, you can also forget most things that involve sweetened condensed milk. Ditto for that mojito, Cuba Libre or caipirinha. But according to Almon, it's not forever. "You can have something comforting and familiar, especially in phase two." For example, that mojito can be adapted by using Crystal Light Ready-Made Lemonade mixed with a diet lemon-lime soda, such as Fresca or Diet Sprite, and then add the bruised mint. And for that café con leche,

"OUR FOOD DOMINATES OUR SOCIAL LIVES, WHICH MAKES DIETING AND CHANGING FOOD HABITS EVEN MORE DIFFICULT."

F. HUFFMAN, PHD, RD

Almon recommends using frothed skim milk and Splenda. Eating whole foods with fiber also slows the body's ability to immediately process sugar, and reduces inflammation. According to Agatston, the faster your body can digest sugars and starches, the fatter you will get. That fat, especially belly fat, translates into serious health risks. Why?

According to the cardiologist, long ago there was a survival advantage to storing fat, especially in the belly. That fat produces pro-inflammatory chemicals that were released when we were injured. But now, we have too much fat, and thankfully few injuries. This means that our bodies are able

to produce certain inflammatory chemicals chronically and at will, which is slowly killing us. "Walking around with these big bellies is hurting us in so many ways," says Agatston. "How much belly fat and inflammation you have is related to what you eat and affects not just heart disease, but arthritis, cancer and many other diseases."

Beyond the first phase, the diet does become more of a lifestyle, which is the key to any successful diet plan. And it doesn't require counting calories or fat. So how easy is it to work into our South Florida cuisine choices? Well, it is called the "South Beach Diet," and it allows for many options. "We are all about good eating, and every culture has a basis for that. It just takes a little tweaking." So Almon has worked hard to find familiar adaptations, from a flan made with fat-free evaporated milk and sugar-free maple syrup instead of the caramelized sugar, to salted codfish with brown rice, to a traditional Spanish tortilla, where she has substituted artichoke instead of potatoes. And she is quick to point out that some foods – like ropa vieja – fit naturally into the plan. "Ropa vieja calls for flank steak, which is naturally a lean cut of meat," says Almon. "Just don't use the white rice." Instead, she recommends brown rice or quinoa. "And Cuban sofrito is a wonderful sauce and great base that can be used just the way it is."

And if you do fall off the wagon, the latest edition of the South Beach Diet - Super Charged - has a new, three-phase exercise program that includes interval training and core functional training that can get you back on track. "I was doing Pilates for several years and I became a big believer in core training. And I was doing elliptical work for cardio, but I was noncompliant," Agatston confesses. Once introduced to interval training, Agatston claims, he was hooked. The strategy involves intervals of high intensity bursts of exercise followed by an easier recovery period, completing several intervals each session. For Agatston, the time flew by, his fitness level improved, and he more easily maintained his weight loss. "I wanted to take interval training and apply it to everyday use," Agatston says, noting that he wanted to share the concept with his readers. "Once I did it myself, I thought 'This is really magical.'" Super Charged also reflects the latest nutritional research. "Most of the recent research has just been reaffirming that the days of low-fat versus low-carb are over," Agatston says. "And data on good fats has continued to be more and more impressive."

HOT TOMATILLOS!

If giving up malta is just not an option, the tailored Hot Latin Diet from Cuban-American obstetrician and gynecologist Manny Alvarez, MD offers familiar fare but focuses on eating what he calls the seven Latin powerfoods – tomatillos, garbanzo beans, avocado, garlic, cinnamon, chiles and cilantro. Lean meats and seafood, vegetables, fruits, nuts and whole grains also help round out the diet.

Alvarez, who is also Chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology and Reproductive Science at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey, developed his diet for moms and moms-to-be to help shed pregnancy pounds. But he has also seen many families who emigrate from Latin American countries healthy and fit, only to find themselves severely overweight and facing chronic diseases such as diabetes just a few years after moving.

His research, both into his own Cuban heritage and even why so many Miss Universe winners come from Latin countries, uncovered a common culinary tapestry that included certain foods, which have come to make up his seven powerfoods that he believes have exceptional antioxidant, metabolic and fat-burning abilities. Tomatillos are rich in vitamins A and C, folic acid and potassium. Garbanzo beans are high in fiber, complex carbs and protein, and low in sugar. Avocado? It's rich in monounsaturated oil, vitamins C, B-6, calcium, iron, manganese and potassium. Garlic has long been touted as an immune booster, an antimicrobial and generally positive food. Cinnamon, you may ask? Studies show cinnamon may prevent diabetes as it lowers blood sugar levels, and it is high in antioxidants. Chiles are high in minerals and antioxidants, and according to Alvarez, have a cooling effect on the body and can boost your immune system. Finally, Alvarez says tasty cilantro accelerates the excretion of toxic metals from the body and has antibiotic properties, and who doesn't love a great appetizer of fresh ceviche and cilantro?

But his first recommendation? Clean your shelves of processed foods, soft drinks, high-fat meats, white breads and other refined foods. His shopping list for restocking includes: evaporated skim milk, ají amarillo, chipotle en adobo, soursop nectar, fava beans, huitlacoche and many other interesting alternative spices, condiments and flavorings. Another helpful aid to stay

healthful when going shopping is the American Heart Association's Food Certification Program that has reviewed more than 800 products that meet the AHA criteria to be low in saturated fat and cholesterol. When at the store, look for the "heart-check mark," and create a shopping list online at www.checkmark.heart.org.

Alvarez, who also is the senior health correspondent for Fox News and an adjunct professor of obstetrics and gynecology at New York University School of Medicine, has pooled some of the nation's best Hispanic chefs (hailing from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Cuba), including Miami's own Michelle Bernstein, the chef behind Michy's Restaurant, to provide healthful Latin favorites such as torrijas, xiomara salad, churrasco and grilled salmon with green sauce and tomatillo-pineapple salsa.

Still, there is a "diet" in all of this. Alvarez recommends setting a BMI goal for women of 18.5 to 24.9 and a waist-to-hip ratio of 0.7 (divide waist measurement by hip measurement), eating five times a day (three meals and two snacks) for a total daily intake

"THE FASTER YOUR BODY CAN DIGEST SUGARS AND STARCHES, THE FATTER YOU WILL GET. THAT FAT, ESPECIALLY BELLY FAT, TRANSLATES INTO SERIOUS HEALTH RISKS."

ARTHUR AGATSTON, MD

of about 1,500 to 1,800 calories for the first two weeks and 1,800 to 2,000 thereafter, setting fat consumption at 30% of total calories and lean protein at 20%, choosing low to mid glycemic carbs, eating 28 grams of fiber a day and... drinking at least eight glasses of water per day. And, of course, exercising regularly.

DIET DILEMMA

So what is best? Especially for South Florida? There may not be one correct answer. What is clear is that whether we follow the Mediterranean diet, the South Beach Diet, no diet, raw, vegan or the meat and potatoes diet, the basics of what we need to eat and what our bodies need do not change.

"It is my personal opinion that diets like the Mediterranean diet and South Beach diet, which advocate fresh fruits, vegetables, fish, legumes and

whole grains, are nutritionally sound," says Huffman. The Hot Latin diet also recommends such foods.

Research conducted at Harvard University in coordination with Ben-Gurion University in Israel echoes Huffman's opinion. The study compared a low-carb diet, a low-fat diet and a so-called Mediterranean diet in 322 obese patients. Results showed that low-carb dieters lost the most weight (about 12 pounds in 2 years), and saw improvements in cholesterol levels, while subjects on the Mediterranean diet lost about ten pounds, and saw benefits in blood sugar and cholesterol levels. Interestingly, the low-fat diet bestowed the least benefits, with patients losing about seven pounds. What is also clear is that we are a diverse and changing community and we like our culturally-rich foods.

Giving them up completely is not realistic. "There is certainly a link to eating certain foods as a way of remaining tied to one's home country," Huffman says. "The fact that family gatherings and social events all revolve around food is prevalent. Food dominates our social lives, which makes dieting and changing food habits more difficult."

But there are trends emerging too – the more whole the food the better, the more processed the worse. Making simple, healthful changes, while retaining the integrity of our storied recipes, may be the best way for us to adopt more healthful dietary patterns. And incorporating familiar foods and spices into the diet plan may be the best way for many to follow a diet in the long term, according to Huffman.

We often forget this though in the hopes of changing what our bodies look like, making drastic dietary changes only to fall back on our comfort foods. But the variety of our foods as well as successful diets – and our willingness to try them – tells us we have real options. Whether we choose to exercise them with commitment is the real question. **S**

