



“Vegan,” “Plant-Based,” “Starchivore”: What Do You Call Yourself?

You might consider it unwise to take advice on what to call yourself, dietarily speaking, from a writer who titled his latest book, *The Starch Solution*. After all, starch is a distasteful word, more often associated with laundry, Wonder Bread, and fattening foods than with health and attractiveness.

You may ask, “Why didn’t he take an easier, less reader-offensive route?” I could have called my book: *The Vegetarian Solution*, *The Plant-based Diet Solution*, or *the Complex Carbohydrate Solution*. But these non-descriptive titles fail to clearly explain what I advise people to eat: starch.

Almost daily I receive an e-mail from someone struggling with a diet they describe as “vegetarian,” “vegan,” “nutrient-dense,” and/or “plant-based.” Fortunately, their struggles can be eliminated by one simple inexpensive exchange of foods. After adding starch into their diet—bread, pasta, rice, corn, beans, and/or potatoes—in generous amounts, they communicate a sense of relief, feelings of wellbeing, and a mind-set of self-control.

I am Not a “Veg” Anything

Don’t call me a “vegetarian” or a “vegan doctor,” even though, for all practical purposes, I am one. To avoid misnomers, I claim to eat a thinly sliced two-inch-square piece of turkey every other Thanksgiving. Whether or not this is true, or on which Thanksgiving I eat this ceremonious bird, I will never reveal. Until the day comes when thin vegans outnumber the fat ones, the turkey and I will continue our biannual sacrifice.

Avoiding meat (vegetarian) or all animal foods and products (vegan) is not necessarily healthful. Cakes, candies, cookies, French fries, pies, and potato chips can all qualify as vegan. Painlessly, one can become an ethical vegan, overnight, by replacing beef with soy burgers or mozzarella with soy cheese. All four of these foods are high in fat and/or protein and none contains the health-supporting ingredients that are required for strength, good looks, and longevity.

I am More than a Plant-Eater

“Vegetarian” was fashionable in the 1970s and “vegan” has been growing in popularity. And the labels “plant-based” and “plant-food-based” are now becoming trendy. But don’t forget; Coca Cola is entirely plant-food-based and could fit under any of these labels. Okay, that’s an unfair example. My concern is really for well-intentioned people wearing message-board T-shirts with “Plant Based” on the front side and “Powered by Kale” on the back.

When I think about plants, I immediately think of “greens” like broccoli, cabbage, celery, kale, and lettuce. This category of foods is also known as “green, yellow, red, and orange non-starchy vegetables.” These foods are chock-full of vitamins and minerals but are deficient in calories. “Powered by Kale” is mathematically near impossible. An average man would need to eat 75 cups (that’s 11 pounds) of leafy kale greens daily to meet his energy needs. Beriberi, scurvy, or pellagra (all diseases caused by severe vitamin deficiency) would be of no worry as this plant-based dieter starved to death.

To compensate for the missing energy in a diet dominated by salads, people add concentrated sources of calories found in olive or other vegetable oils. Unfortunately, these purified oils also lead to obesity, greasy skin and hair, type-2 diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. (Note: These oils are an isolated ingredient, consisting of empty fat calories; lacking in fiber, carbohydrate, protein, vitamins, and minerals.)

The newest label I’ve heard is “whole-food, plant-based diet (WFPBD).” Because “whole-food” excludes empty calories from pure oil, white flour, and refined sugar, we are moved toward better food choices. But this collection of words still fails to identify the

source of the most essential ingredient in our diets: calories.

What to Eat for Energy

The first purpose of eating is to obtain energy (calories) to run the body's machinery. We do not eat to satisfy a need for any other nutrient: not for protein, calcium, or vitamin C. While animal foods (like meat and cheese) can provide energy via the metabolism of animal fat and protein, educated people know that animal-derived foods should be avoided for health, environmental, and animal rights issues. That leaves the plant kingdom. Three categories of foods from plants—fruits, nuts and seeds, and starches—can effectively satisfy the energy needs of humans. (As mentioned, “greens” alone cannot.)

Fruitarian diets have been a passing fancy. (Apple's co-founder, Steve Jobs, ate only fruits for a short period of his life.) Fruits are plentiful in calories because of their simple sugars, like glucose and fructose. Unfortunately, because simple sugars digest rapidly, they provide little long-term, between-meal, appetite satisfaction. This is the reason apples are never referred to as “comfort foods.”

High-fat plant foods, like nuts, seeds, olives, and avocados, are loaded with calories. Unfortunately, these calories are almost exclusively from fat. Our appetite is insensitive to fats consumed because of the lack of regulatory feedback mechanisms. From fats we receive no reliable signals that we have eaten enough and now it is time to stop. As a result, nuts and seeds consumed at one's pleasure translate into excess weight gain.

The appetite is highly sensitive to sugars, especially sugars found in the complex forms, called starches. A precise feedback mechanism between the appetite and sugars insures satisfaction without overconsumption. This is why rice, corn, beans, potatoes, breads, and pastas are known as “comfort foods” and the reason why historically people who have followed starch-based diets have always been trim and hardy. (Remember: rice and Asians, corn and Mayans, potatoes and Incans, wheat and Egyptians.)

To Move Forward, Think Starch

The third and most important category of calorie-sufficient foods from the plant kingdom is starch. Scientists freely use the word “starch,” and the scientific journal *Starch* is where articles about the food and commercial uses of this basic foodstuff are published. So why do lay people shun this proper verbiage when describing their diets?

In an effort to sanitize and separate this noun from the laundry room, “starch” became known as a “complex carbohydrate” in 1977 during the writing of “The Dietary Goals of the US.” That was a big mistake. When was the last time you ate a plateful of complex carbohydrate? The effect of this name change was that the proper word for the primary source for calories consumed throughout all of human history—starch—vanished from our dietary vocabulary. The confusion that followed contributed to the doubling of obesity and diabetes over the past half-century.

For more than 35 years I have referred to the McDougall Diet as “starch-based with the addition of green and yellow vegetables and fruits.” Based on my extensive medical experience, your goal when asked, “What do you call yourself,” should be to answer: a “starchivore,” or a “starchitarian.”