


A woman with long, wavy brown hair is smiling. She is wearing a light grey t-shirt. In the background, there is a white tiered stand with a round cake on top and some white flowers. She is sitting at a table with a white cup of coffee on a saucer, and a plate with a croissant is visible in the bottom right corner.

Think

Why French women
don't get fat



IS THE SECRET TO STAYING SVELTE EATING CROISSANTS FOR BREAKFAST AND THREE-COURSE MEALS AT LUNCH? IF FRANCE'S RELATIVELY LOW INCIDENCE OF OBESITY AND CHRONIC DISEASE IS PROOF, THEN IT JUST MIGHT BE. THEY CALL IT THE FRENCH PARADOX, AND WE'VE DECIDED TO WORK OUT HOW WE CAN DO IT HERE IN AUSTRALIA.

Words: **Paula Hagjefremdis**

Food in France is a national pastime. Anyone who has travelled there (or watched Sofia Coppola's rendition of Marie Antoinette) will know that decadence is also in no short supply. There is an abundance of boulangeries, charcuteries and fromageries peddling bread, deli meats and cheese (respectively), all of which are washed down with a glass or two of local wine. For dessert, there are patisseries and chocolatiers, and for everything else there are small local markets where you can pick up fresh produce that looks like it was plucked from the ground that very morning. When it comes to food, provenance, quality and taste are of utmost importance – but its effect on one's waistline? It would appear that it is minimal.

Although the French diet is high in saturated fats – given their propensity towards butter, cheese and bread – over the years the French population has exhibited relatively low rates of obesity and chronic illness. This phenomenon has earned the name the French paradox, and has raised serious confusion among nutritionists and scientists who have studied it. Political Agnes Poirier wrote in a 2010 article in *The Guardian*, "Growing up in France, I never thought about food in those clinical terms, and even as a teenager concerned with my looks. Food, to most of my compatriots, is a matter of colours, savours and flavours."

While many cultures quickly became obsessed with fat-reduced foods after links were made between

fat, cholesterol and cardiovascular disease in the '60s, the story goes that the French have hardly wavered, and yet have remained healthier. "The emergence of the terms gluten free, fat free and sugar free in the 1980s was an Anglo-Saxon deformity," Poirier says. "Why would you want to eat a tasteless fat-free pizza or a sugar-free blueberry muffin? Just don't eat them or eat the real thing. The notion of pleasure seemed to have never existed."

Could eating for pleasure really be the secret to a svelte frame? These puzzling finds continue to intrigue, and have given rise to the perplexing theory behind the French paradox.

Diet versus lifestyle

Before you abandon your current eating habits and stock up on croissants and brie, there are some considerations to the French paradox that need to be realised. When it comes to the nation's gastronomic appetite, food choices are only part of the equation, the rest is governed by cultural attitudes and favouring quality over quantity when it comes to consumption.

French-American author Mireille Guiliano of anti-dieting book *French Women Don't Get Fat* claims the key element to this phenomenon is that French women have a healthy relationship with food. They don't snack or binge, and tend to avoid processed foods. "French women have a balanced and time-tested relation to food and life," Guiliano says. "This is an

approach that embraces living strategies and philosophy. They don't obsess about food or diets, nor is it ever a topic of conversation around the dinner table. Instead they discuss what they enjoy: feelings, family, hobbies, philosophy, politics, culture and, yes, even food – but never diets.”

In contrast to our modern world – where #eatclean is on trend and there's a different diet for every season, goal and constitution – it seems almost too good to be true. But the key difference that Guiliano alludes to is the manner of eating. “They eat with their heads and don't leave the table feeling stuffed or guilty,” she says.

This idea of ‘eating with your head’ has also made a recent resurgence. Mindful eating – where you pay close attention not only to the process of creating a meal, but also focus on the experience eating it – is a movement designed to improve our less-steady relationship with food. And research has proved that it works. One such study, published in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* in April this year, showed that mindfulness decreased the consumption of sweets and decreased fasting glucose levels. In the same vein, mindful eating is also emerging as a complementary treatment for eating disorders.

Mindful and pleasure-filled (but not hedonistic) eating is also encouraged by the French government, which restricts the way food can be advertised. All advertisements for processed foods must carry a generic mandatory health warning, these include ‘for your health, eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day’ and ‘for your health, avoid snacking between meals’. There has also been discussion of ditching food advertising for ‘low nutrition’ foods between 7am and 10pm.

The good fat/bad fat equation

In France, the concept of eating well is not something the French aspire to achieve, but merely a day-to-day way of life. In other parts of the world, although we now know that fat is not the only enemy of waistlines, low-fat foods are still plentiful on

What about wine?

Low levels of heart disease are not due solely to the ingestion of saturated fats. Drinking red wine plays a vital role in how we process these fats in the body. The secret lies in the fruit's naturally occurring chemical called resveratrol. High in antioxidants, resveratrol contains anti-inflammatory effects and has been linked to cancer prevention and long life spans. As the French consume much higher quantities of wine, the effects of the chemical through the winemaking process have been known to counteract the effects of saturated fats.

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supermarket shelves and food fads are at epidemic proportions. In spite of the promising ‘healthy’ attributes of many of these products, looking at health and obesity statistics you'd assume a world in crisis. How come?

Journalist and renowned food activist Michael Pollan attributes the current state of our ‘eating disorder’ as a result of having lost touch with the basics of eating well while disregarding the wisdom of our ancestors. Instead, we favour quick fix solutions to answer our health woes. Pollan's research into the health debate has found an interesting correlation between the time people were told to banish saturated fats from their diets and the rise of obesity and type

2 diabetes. “Low fat campaigns emerged around the start of the '80s, but taking the fat out of food actually caused an increase in weight issues amongst the American population,” Pollan says. “A decrease in fats made people consume a higher quantity of carbohydrates, which the American Heart Association claimed to be better for us and that's when bingeing on carbohydrates started.”

Studies conducted by leading nutritionist John Briffa drew the correlation between the percentage of saturated fats consumed in more than 40 countries as well as the rates of death due to heart disease in those countries. Briffa's findings concluded that countries



How to eat like the French

1 Eat for pleasure

For the French, food is often a social activity. Many, if not all, meals are taken sitting at the table with family or friends; and so engaging in sharing a meal becomes an extension of social connectedness. There's an unhurriedness to dining, and multiple courses are common. As are smaller portion sizes and a leisured eating pace with breaks between bites, which – unsurprisingly – enables the physiological feedback of digestion to signal contentment before you are overfull.

2 Buy good produce

“Handcrafted quality has been at the heart of French gastronomy and culture,” Giuliano says. “Food shopping is also a vital social occasion – market day is a huge part of French culture. On certain days of the week you’ll see trucks in local squares hauling fresh produce – the best of the season, from meat and game to fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices.” This not only brings a level of respect for what you’re eating, but also how you eat it. French cooking never shies away from flavour, but they also know how to let fresh produce shine – *crudités*, for example.

3 Don't avoid fats

One scientific theory behind a healthy fat-rich diet is that it stimulates the production of cholecystokinin – a satiety signal that prompts an extended sense of satisfaction even after eating only small amounts of high-fat foods, eliminating the need to snack between meals or overeat during meals to compensate a low-fat diet. Food choices – whether it's a square of chocolate, a loaf of bread or savouring a mouth-watering pastry – can be some of the most important decisions of the French woman's daily ritual.

The birth of trans fatty acids (TFAs)

One of the most popular products of the anti-fat boom was margarine, which actually brought about an even more dangerous type of fat: TFAs. A by-product of hydrogenated vegetable oil – now found less commonly in margarine, but still evident in milk creamers, ready-to-use pastry and fried foods – TFAs are technically monounsaturates, but have proven to have negative consequences for our health. In the 1970s researchers discovered how damaging TFAs were. Not only lowering your ‘good’ cholesterol level, they simultaneously raise the ‘bad’. The most important research began in the US in 1976 and ran for 13 years. It found that a two per cent increase in TFA calories would bring a 23 per cent increased risk of heart disease. So, in terms of heart health, consuming 25 g of TFA is equivalent to eating an entire 227 g block of butter. And something like a take-away pie could easily contain 15 g of TFA. The moral of the story? Avoid processed foods.

consuming high percentages of saturated fats resulted in lower incidents of death from heart disease. “It seems that this ‘paradox’ is not limited to France, but is alive and well in several other countries too, including Germany, Austria, Finland, Belgium, Iceland, the Netherlands and Switzerland. The phenomenon of low heart disease rates in France despite a diet rich in saturated fat is not a paradox at all. It's only a paradox if one believes saturated fat causes heart disease. The thing is, there's really no good evidence that it does,” says Briffa.

Fats are an important part of our diet. Each cell in the body requires fatty acids to absorb

vitamins A, D, E and K. Not only an important energy source, we need it to support our natural growth, keep skin healthy and taut, to protect our vision and boost our immune functions, but it's only through ingesting a healthy balance of naturally occurring fats that we can experience these benefits. 