

B A Z A A R

Harper's



WHICH DIETS WORK?

Emily Prager scours Bazaar's archives to discover what we can learn from decades of dieting advice. Photographed by Hiro

There is one American pastime that has never gone out of fashion, and that is dieting. In the first issues of *Bazaar*, we looked at food as our best source of health. Articles from the late 1860s and '70s reveal a world where adults and children frequently died of illness and women served a serious nursing function in the home. Thinness was associated with death, disease, and poverty. Even high-class ladies scanned magazines looking for healthful diets.

Consumption, or tuberculosis, was a deadly killer in those days. One of the first *Bazaar* diets was in the article "How to Ward Off Consumption," in an 1883 issue. The writer advised eating fish for breakfast, taking cod liver oil supplements, and engaging in Turkish baths.

I called **Oz Garcia**, author of *The Healthy High Tech Body*, to ask him what he thought of this advice. "Fish is lean protein and very good for healing," **Garcia** told me. "Cod liver oil is still an amazing source of vitamins, antioxidant compounds, and essential fatty acids, and we know now that saunas strengthen the immune system by speeding up toxin removal and improving circulation. The diet makes excellent sense today."

By the end of the 1800s, articles in the magazine were proclaiming that food should be combined with exercise as the way to perfect health. "The athletic girl has become a dominant figure in the feminine world," chirped a *Bazaar* writer in the April 26, 1890, issue. "Fragility" was now a "reproach." That year's

supermodel was "a buxom jade, whose cheeks are red as the dawn, with brown, muscular hands that stop runaway horses." Readers of the same issue were advised that they could look like Hippolyta merely by spending 30 cents (!) on a set of women's five-pound dumbbells to "fine away too lavish outlines, or fill up hollows."

"Eating like a bird" was déclassé. "We expect our young women and girls now to eat, and to eat a good deal," declared an 1897 writer who trumpeted with joy that modern girls now bathed daily, rode bicycles in the fresh air, and ate.

As time went on and nutrition became a more exact science, *Bazaar* let us know about it. "White bread is a very great mistake," Louise Fiske Bryson, M.D., warned in one of her Food Values columns of 1904, heralding the importance of fiber in the diet, while Mary Kelley Dunne stated in 1905, "The woman who caters for her husband so intelligently that his working capacity is kept up to the top notch, literally earns at least half the family income."

It is interesting how health and feminism began to bind together in this period. The idea of the healthy, fit woman being the independent, fully realized woman resounds today.

In her column, Dunne offered *Bazaar* readers their first meatless health diet, in large part because "the various investigators of the meat trust have shown us the unwholesomeness of much of the meat now in the market." As Dunne's diet seemed a bit rich in cream sauce, I called Lisa Powell, R.D., director >

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of nutrition at Canyon Ranch in Tucson, to get her opinion of this 97-year-old vegetarian diet. "It is quite high in saturated fats," she confirms. "They didn't know then of the links with heart disease. It's not a terrible diet, but it would benefit from more vegetable protein, beans, soy products, and fish."

Around 1910, "flesh reduction" for the sake of beauty appeared. At first it was not necessarily associated with fashion. Susanna Cocroft was, evidently, the author of one of the earliest diet tomes. There were ads for her consulting services in the 1910 and 1911 issues, where she promised that "you can weigh exactly what you should weigh" so that you "radiate health" and "improve your figure." She would also, while she was at it, instruct you how to walk and stand correctly. Your figure, yes, but health and character remained the draw.

Times, however, were changing. And in the October 1910 issue, an article linking weight loss with looking good in clothes finally cropped up. "How to Reduce Flesh" began with the now all-too-familiar lament, "What could be more impossible for a plump person than the new hobble skirt?" As the voluminous skirts of the 19th century narrowed, they sounded the knell for the robust, voluptuous girl as an icon.

From then on, writers would refer to plumpness with touches of scorn. "Woe to the short, plump girl who dons such a dress with the wrong sort of coiffure!" sniffed one 1911 staffer. For the next 70 years the silhouette would get straighter and narrower, and women would try to conform to it. That first reduction diet sensibly advised "[cutting] one's menu in half" and "[giving] up starches, sweets, and butter."

Since the writer also decried a fad of "extremists" who insisted on "fasting for a week or more at a time, or a diet of milk or buttermilk," we can assume that somewhere around this time a certain amount of dieting madness began to take hold as women grappled for the first time with showing uncorseted, exposed skin to people other than their husband.

There was, perhaps, no more radical change in the history of fashion than between 1910 and 1920. Think of it. In a mere 10 years, women went from almost total cover to bare arms, legs, and necks. They went from midcalf-length bathing dresses to tank suits. Their fashion ideal changed from Amazon to sylph. Whether it was this seismic shift that began it or simply the hobble skirt that brought it home, the balance between eating what one wanted and maintaining a good weight for fashionability would, for the rest of the 20th century, be characterized in terms of suffering, battles, and outright war.

By the '20s, strange diatribes were starting to be published, as in this 1926 offering from the Countess of Oxford and Asquith on "Health": "It is an undisputed fact," she waxed, "that the more you eat the more you want to eat, and starvation—though not recognized by doctors—is a safe cure for half the maladies that attack mankind." The countess suggested

that people should be forcibly prevented from overeating.

By April 1931, *Bazaar* writer Frederick L. Collins was suggesting, "Women wish to look fit. And to obtain that ... objective ... a smart woman will go far and suffer long." Collins claimed that "as a result of their bobbed heads and bottled complexions, women began to look so young and so healthy from the neck up that something had to be done about the part from the neck down." Women, he implied, were too flabby for the styles. They simply had to tighten up.

Thus, in the '30s, the exercise spa made its appearance. I wish I could have gone, for \$50—quite a sum in 1938—to the Dengel Institute on East 53rd in Manhattan for their package of physical exam, custom-made diet list, "five colonics, three electric-blanket séances, three massages, six sun lamps, and three exercise periods." If anyone knows what was involved in these electric-blanket séances, please write in and tell me. I'd so love to know.

In March 1941, less than a year before Pearl Harbor, the "Nine-Day-Wonder Diet" debuted. As I read it, I realized we used to call this the grapefruit diet in the '60s, because half a grapefruit is consumed at breakfast and the other half after dinner. Counting in at about 900 calories per day, this is the plan most American women would cite if you asked them to name a classic diet, and indeed, it appeared in *Bazaar* periodically, with minor changes, over the next 40 years. It's a regimen that most dieting women have been on at least once in their lives.

When I asked **Oz Garcia** about the grapefruit diet, he described it as being designed to produce "rapid weight loss. By today's diet standards," he added somberly, "it is spartan to say the least." "It's starvation," Lisa Powell said with a shudder. Not healthy, but it does result in weight loss.

There were virtually no diets in the magazine during World War II, mainly advice for cooking with food shortages. Then in 1948, the Nine-Day-Wonder Diet resurfaced as the "seven-day diet ... especially designed for the college girl," adding a Coca-Cola as an afternoon snack. The diet reappeared sporadically into the early 1980s.

By 1977, readers were out of girdles and long-line bras and into the full flush of diet fads: The low-carbohydrate Atkins Diet; the eight-glasses-of-water-per-day Stillman diet; the Save Your Life, high-fiber "bran" diet; and on and on in variations through the '80s and into the '90s.

Now, in the 21st century, there's a gym on every corner, fad diets are banned from the pages of *Bazaar*, plus-size models are considered beautiful, and health information is global. Is there anyone left who doesn't know that your basic healthful diet—fresh veggies, salads, fish, fruits, lean meats, and not too much dairy—is the sanest way to eat?

In the past 135 years, it seems, we have come full circle. Once again we're exalting health. Aren't we lucky that this time, we are doing it out of wisdom, not necessity? ■

The first reduction diet, in 1910, sensibly advised giving up starches, sweets, and butter.