



The Athena Wellness Podcast

Episode 019 – What Our Ancestors Can Teach Us About Healthy Eating

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Welcome to the Athena Wellness podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that prides itself in supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

Hello, and welcome to Episode 19. Thank you so much for joining me. Today is the continuation of a series of discussions on more traditional wellness topics. In Episode 17, we talked about the three components of vitality, one of which was nutrition. But there's so much conflicting information out there. How can we think about eating healthy and approach it in a practical manner?

As I was preparing for this episode, I realized that much of what I learned about healthy eating came from my grandmother's kitchen. My grandmother lived to be 96. She was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1904. Her mother emigrated from Southern Italy through Ellis Island by herself at age 18 to marry and begin a new life in America. I remember my great grandmother, she lived to be 88 herself, sitting in a rocking chair that I still have, and rattling off Italian that I didn't understand. What was the secret to their longevity?

Today, we'll be talking about looking back and seeing what we can learn from our ancestors. And then we'll talk about the challenges of eating in the 21st century. We'll end with some simple but practical suggestions on eating healthier. I'll share three



things that have made the biggest impact on my health that were easy to implement, even on my busiest days. So sit back, take a nice long breath to ground yourself in presence, and let's get started.

Lessons learned from our past... My great grandmother brought the ways of her upbringing with her when she came to America. In the early 1900s, she and my great grandfather actually grew their own food in a small yard in Brooklyn, on 65th Street. Together they grew grapes for wine, figs and other fruit, tomatoes, olives and vegetables that they would enjoy not only in the summer, but they would preserve the surplus for the winter. And they did that by canning and storing the jars in a root cellar. That neighborhood is completely urban now but my grandmother used to tell stories of walking across big open fields to get to school among horses and wagons making deliveries in the neighborhood.

When my grandmother married, she cooked simple one pot meals to feed her growing family. They had limited resources and they used to refer to the food as peasant food, meaning hearty staples that were made from inexpensive ingredients. The meals included dishes like polenta, which is cornmeal and red gravy, aglio e olio, which is macaroni with garlic and olive oil, and pasta fagioli, made with ditalini pasta and cannellini beans, olive oil, garlic, onions, carrots, celery and tomato sauce. You sense a theme here, olive oil and garlic.

These simple dinners kept her family fed in a healthy and an economical manner. And if anybody's listening to this in Italy, my apologies for my Italian. As my grandmother used to say, we speak Brooklyn Italian. Back to the story.



Sunday's were different. I have fond memories of my grandmother coming home after church and cooking up a storm. The legions of cousins and nephews, siblings, children, grandkids that would all visit her three room apartment. The tomato gravy on that day would have meatballs and meat. There would be Italian bread and rice balls. We'd always start off with tomato, onion and lettuce salad with oil and vinegar. The red wine flowed. And for dessert she'd make black coffee and a homemade treat, maybe a pie or donuts or, if we were lucky, zeppoles.

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There was something else my great grandmother brought with her when she made her way to Brooklyn. Her love of swimming. She was born in southern Italy in Calabria, in a coastal town located on the soul of the iconic boot-shaped country on the Ionian Sea, which is where she swam when she was a kid and a teenager. Decades later, I remember stories of her bringing her kids and grandkids to Coney Island, a few subway stops from where she lived in Brooklyn, and swimming out beyond the breakers until all you could see was her white bathing cap bobbing up and down. They would arrive early, she'd get in her swim, and then they'd "Leave before the people arrived."

My grandmother, her kids and their kids, meaning my generation, didn't share the same love of swimming as my great grandmother. My grandmother never learned to drive, but she walked her beloved Bay Ridge neighborhood every day to church, the bread store, the cheese store, the butcher, the supermarket, pulling her groceries behind her in a metal shopping cart, and then lugging that cart up four flights of stairs to the top floor of her walk up apartment - The ultimate Stairmaster workout.

She knew where her food came from, even in a city of 8 million people. These were long established relationships because she was born and lived within a one block radius her



entire life. Her healthy eating patterns came out of necessity, not from being health minded. It was a sign of those times, small portions and no snacking came from limited resources.

My grandmother did enjoy her little sweet treat in the afternoons with a cup of decaf coffee, though. I loved those coffee breaks. Food was seasonal, meaning on sale, and locally sourced, since airfreight didn't exist back then. They ate whole foods before both words came to be capitalized. The food was homemade and prepared with love and eaten in community.

And there was gratitude as well. A moment to say grace to be thankful for the food we were about to eat. Because the adults at that time could remember what it was like to grow up during the Great Depression. And now that I think about it, this was mindful eating before there was such a label.

Now let's fast forward to the 21st century and talk about some of the challenges that we face today. I know how lucky I was to grow up as I did. We didn't have much but we had all we needed and love was plentiful. Today, I'm very mindful that food that is accessible, affordable and sustainable is not a given. There's a growing number of people today in the US and globally where food insecurity is a real issue. Food deserts are increasing in number with millions of people who do not have access to healthy, affordable food. And even those who do have access and the means, if they follow a Western or a standard American diet, there's a good chance they aren't making the healthiest food choices.

In a talk given to CDC scientists in 2009, food author Michael Pollan offered this observation: "The Masai subsist on cattle blood and meat and milk and little else. Native



Americans subsist on beans and maize. The Inuit of Greenland subsist on whale blubber and a little bit of lichen.” He said, “The irony is the one diet that we have invented for ourselves, the Western diet, is the one that makes us sick.”

I’ll tell you, as I was preparing for this episode and doing research on our diet, the food industry and how our dietary guidelines are developed, it was sobering. I decided to forgo the links to the studies because you, like me, already know the scenario. Too many of us eat a diet high in processed foods, which means we get too much sodium, too much saturated fat, we eat too many refined grains and carbs, and get too much excess sugar. Add to that food chemicals, crop pesticides and animal hormones and antibiotics. I could go on, but I don’t want to belabor the point.

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But what Michael Pollan was alluding to was that the proliferation and availability of less expensive packaged and convenience foods is collectively killing us.

So what do we do? Thankfully, the human body is a miraculous machine that adapts quickly. Within days and weeks of adapting the way you eat, you could see health improvements ranging from better concentration, consistent energy, less bloat, better sleep, less cravings, and a strengthened immune system. All without making radical changes.

I did find some helpful guidance on improving eating habits on the CDC website. It encourages a thoughtful approach by making changes by **reflecting, replacing** and **reinforcing**. I’ll put a link in the show notes to the CDC guidance. But here’s the idea. And I’m paraphrasing here.



The first is **reflecting** and this includes a review of our habits, identifying the ones that aren't healthy, creating a list of eating cues and triggers, and then developing ways to either avoid them or ways to make a different choice. Here's a little bit more detail.

The first step of reflect is keeping a food diary for a few days to track what you eat and when you eat it. And I know this sounds laborious, but just stay with me here. They have a link in the guidance to a food diary template that you can use, so it doesn't need to be exhaustive. But I can tell you, I found it incredibly useful when I was trying to figure out what was causing me to gain weight in my mid 30s. What I discovered was what I thought was a light dinner when I got home from work was actually almost half my calories for the day, given the portion size that I was consuming.

So you can choose to do this as an experiment or as a tool over a longer period of time. A phone app that I used to use is called Loselt!. I used that for a long period of time when I was training; it's super easy to use.

Once you have a few days of your eating patterns documented, review what you have and take a look at the habits. Maybe the meals are eaten quickly. Or maybe they're mostly comprised of fast food. Or maybe you're eating when you're not hungry, as a couple of examples.

Select one that you'd like to work on first, let's say eating when not hungry. The next step is to keep a running list of all the triggers that cue you to eat even when you're not hungry. For example, it could be that you're winding down the night watching TV, or not being able to say no when somebody offers you something, or maybe it just comes out of boredom, you know it's a task that you're doing, or it could be that you open up your kitchen cabinet and you see a favorite food or a snack.



The last step of reflect is identifying how you might then avoid that situation or giving yourself a healthier alternative to choose from.

The next step is **replace**, where you substitute a healthier habit for your unhealthy one. Continuing with our example, you may choose to identify the emotion that you're feeling when you're eating and address that. So if you're eating out of boredom, you may choose to phone a friend instead of eating. Or if you're feeling worried or uneasy, you may choose to take a walk or give yourself a break.

The third is **reinforce**, giving yourself the grace to let the habit develop and learning how to play the long game for long term change. This includes compassionately getting yourself back on track if you've slipped back into old behaviors, and we all do from time to time. Habit change is not about perfection, it's about consistency.

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Now let's talk about some simple, practical suggestions to eat healthier. I tend to draw from a lot of schools of thought when it comes to all things wellness. I love to read on the topic, experiment and combine concepts and approaches until they feel right for me. And that's why I like to share so many suggestions in my writing and on this podcast. It's not about doing them all. It's about finding the ones that resonate most for you and adapting those to fit your lifestyle.

My eating habits have adapted and evolved over the decades and in many ways they've come full circle. As I reflect on this, I wonder how much epigenetics comes into play here. And what I mean by that is the degree that I've been influenced by the behaviors and the environment of my ancestors.



If you go back far enough in your personal history, you'll find a time where nutritious food was prepared simply, just like I did. It's interesting to feel the connection from those times to present day. I can feel this connection. I can feel it in my love of sharing home cooked meals, of fresh ingredients, of chatting with the folks at the market, of harvesting wild foods, living an active lifestyle. I can feel it when I enjoy a nice glass of wine. And yes, my coffee breaks - all a nod to those who came before me. It was the Mediterranean diet before there was such a thing.

And even though I primarily eat plant-based, my wellness philosophy most closely aligns with what's come to be known as the Mediterranean lifestyle. The Med diet, as it's referred to, is more about a healthy way of living rather than a diet. It's about longevity.

I found a helpful flyer on the Med diet created by an organization called Old Ways. It's a nonprofit that partners with the Harvard School of Public Health. I'll put a link in the show notes. They do a great job of summarizing the Med diet with eight simple steps for good health:

One, eat lots of veg. Two, if you eat meat, eat smaller amounts. Three, if you eat dairy, eat small amounts of Greek yogurt or traditional cheeses. Four, if you eat seafood, eat it twice a week. Five, begin cooking one vegetarian meal weekly and expand from there. Six, use healthy fats (i.e., extra virgin olive oil). Seven, switch to whole grains such as brown rice and whole grain flours. And eight, for dessert, eat fruit.

Interestingly enough, these principles also align with the populations that have been studied in what's referred to as the Blue Zones. The lifestyle habits of the healthiest, longest living people in the world include not only eating well, but also connecting with



others, moving naturally, and having a good outlook on life. From an eating perspective, those that live healthy, long lives, eat lots of plants, eat until they're 80% full, and they enjoy their wine.

If you've been eating in accordance with the Med diet and want to go a little further, the Blue Zones food guidelines are worth exploring. I'll summarize here but I'll also put a link in the show notes.

At the base of the pyramid is the premise that for longevity, an active lifestyle, eating with family and friends, and a diet that is 95% plant-based is ideal. On a daily basis, it's recommended to eat whole food, including grains and beans to accompany the veg and the fruit, drinking mostly water, with coffee, tea and wine in moderation, and snacking on a handful or two of nuts a day is permitted as well. On a weekly basis, a few ounces of fish is allowed up to three times a week, and no more than three eggs per week, if any. And it's definitely recommended to minimize any added sugar. And then on a monthly basis, it's suggested to minimize dairy. If meat is eaten at all, it's in portions of two ounces a few times a month.

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By moving directionally to this type of eating, your diet will no longer include the things that have been linked to chronic ailments. You'll naturally eliminate high levels of sodium, added sugar, saturated fat, and this will result in lower body inflammation, lower body stress and lower levels of disease.

So now let's get practical. Whether you decide to go toward the Med diet or not, I'm assuming that you want to make some healthy changes. We all know it takes time to make that shift to build new habits.



When it comes to our eating habits, many times we can feel confused and overwhelmed by all the information. We may feel we don't have time to do the research, to buy the groceries, to prepare the food. It can be discouraging to find a new dietary approach that you'd like to explore only to find pages of unfamiliar ingredients and dozens of new recipes that you'll need to learn.

Here are three things that have made the biggest impact on my health that were very easy to implement, even on my busiest days.

The first is **when I eat**. I've switched my largest meal from evening to midday, and I have the last solid food of the day by 6pm at the latest on most days. By having little or no food in my stomach when I go to bed, not only do I sleep better, but my body can focus on cell regeneration instead of digestion.

The second is **what I eat**. Simple whole foods in portions that make sense for me. I no longer measure or track what I eat. After years of doing that I can now visually approximate the right portions. That allows me to eat until I'm about three quarters full. When I started doing that, I'll tell you, it felt unfulfilling. But now if I try to eat until I'm full, I do feel uncomfortable. So it just takes some getting used to.

The third is **how I eat**. Whenever possible, I prepare what I eat at home. When I commuted to an office, I had a small insulated bag I would pack before I left for work with items like an apple, banana, celery, raw nuts, maybe soup or a breakfast smoothie. A small ice pack or two kept everything cold throughout the day. Even if this is not possible for you, having some healthy snacks that you can take on the go is a great habit to build.



Any one of those three things would be a great place to start. Here are two more than I'm having fun with these days that you may enjoy if you have the inclination or the time.

The first is to **try one new recipe a week**. I tend to get in a groove and cycle through the same staple meals throughout the months. But I visited a friend last Fall and she made a vegan Tikka Masala which blew me away. It was so good I make it once a month or so. And it inspired me to try other things throughout the winter. I've made a whole host of new dishes including shiitake, ginger, sesame Pad Thai, wild rice and mushrooms stuffed squash. I've made kitchari, broccoli rabe and bean soup, miso vegetable soup. I've tried new recipes for vegan lentil walnut bolognese, vegan lentil chili and what has become my famous berry crumble.

The second is something that's becoming a new passion, incorporating **wild harvested foods** into my diet. Ever since attending a wild food seminar a few years ago, I've been interested in learning more and experimenting. I believe that the closer that we can get to the source of our food, the bigger the benefit. Even though I live 30 miles away from one of the largest cities in the world, I can find dandelion, chives and garlic mustard to add to my salads in the spring. And there's a fig tree and a patch of local raspberries I get to eat right off the bush in the summer.

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I also found a local vendor who specializes in locally harvested mushrooms and other seasonal plants. And I love supporting his business and adding those forage foods into my cooking. By incorporating these foods into the diet, we're doing one better than farm



to table. We're going plant to mouth, seasonal nutrition that's untouched, brimming with nutrients.

As I searched for an appropriate quote to end this section, I came upon the work of Dr. James Duke, author of *The Green Pharmacy*. I never found the quote because I couldn't get past the first sentence that I read. Dr. Duke reminds us that "wild foods are plants that our ancestors ate." The connection once again, full circle...

To be clear, I don't want to go back to the old ways. Life was hard for my grandparents and my great grandparents. Women were expected to run the household, raise the kids. Many worked in the home as both my grandmother's did, and there were no modern conveniences. I can still remember my grandmother being so thankful for a little portable washing machine she got late in life. But she still had to lean out of her fourth floor window and wrestle with the bedsheets tangled on the clothesline.

So no, this isn't about going back. It's about moving forward mindfully. Learning our lessons from those who came before in order to live our best lives today.

As the ancient Greek physician, also known as the father of medicine, Hippocrates famously once said, "Let food be thy medicine."

And food author Michael Pollan says everything he's learned about food and health can be summed up in seven words, "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants."

Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.



If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle. If you'd like to access the show notes, have a question you'd like addressed on a future episode, or would like a transcription of this episode, visit www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast.

Until next time, be well!