

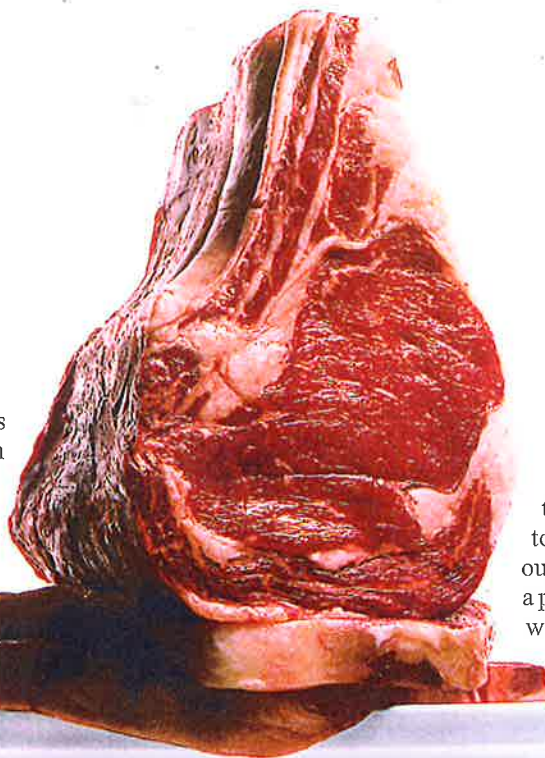
Steaking Your Life on It

A 30-year-old diet has become the new driving force behind menus at top restaurants all over the country. **Does Atkins work?** Who knows? Just pass the prime rib

By MICHELLE STACEY

PORK BELLY is one of nature's lowlier creations. It is bacon before it becomes bacon, the fattiest part of the mature hog, raw and uncured—basically just a slab of fat with little streaks of meat running through it. For generations pork belly was one of two things: a commodity traded by brokers, and a source of down-home flavor for those who couldn't afford any other cut of meat to add to their pots of beans or greens. But in recent years pork belly has begun to turn up on some of the most refined menus in the country. Jar, in Los Angeles, offers it as a first course with maple syrup, apple cider, and black kale; San Francisco's Fifth Floor poaches it with black truffles. At WD-50, in New York City, Wylie Dufresne serves it with turnips and tops it with a thin layer of pure fat; Julian Alonzo at Brasserie 8½ garnishes it with American sturgeon caviar and cauliflower foam; and at Daniel Boulud's db bistro moderne it comes with frizzled leeks and shavings of black truffle.

What could possibly account for the unlikely ascent of pork belly? Very simply, the primacy of its essential nutrients—fat and protein—combined with the tendency of restaurants to push every food trend to absurd extremes.



Just a few years ago, such a celebration of fat would have been considered beyond foolhardy, approaching the realm of suicide by ingestion. But we now live in the world according to Dr. Robert

Atkins, and in Atkins-land, fat and protein rule, and carbohydrates are the enemy. The question for those of us who still prefer to take our pâté on toast points and our burgers on buns is whether this is a place anyone who loves food would want to inhabit.

Atkins-land is the result of the astonishing success of *Dr. Atkins' Diet Revolution*, which at the time of his death last April from a head injury had sold, in various editions stretching over three decades, nearly 15 million copies. (That makes it, by the way, one of the best-selling books of all time.) In Atkins-land, the "acceptable foods" include fish, fowl, meat, eggs, and limited quantities of cheese. In its strictest, "induction" phase, the Atkins diet forbids all fruit, bread, pasta, grains, starchy vegetables, and most legumes, and allows a total of just 20 grams of carbohydrates a day (less than is in one English muffin). Such a diet, Atkins insisted, is the key to health and longevity, not to mention leanness. (His many critics, meanwhile, have held that such a diet lacks essential nutrients and can lead to heart and kidney problems.)

The pressure to bow to the Atkins imperative has created a peculiar new culinary landscape, in which, as one socialite explained to *New York* magazine, "it's almost hostile to serve pasta." Last year,

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flour consumption in the U.S. fell below 140 pounds per person last year for the first time in nearly a decade, while bacon sales went up 21 percent between 1999 and 2001. And this year there has been a serious shortage of prime beef, due as much to a soaring demand for marbled, top-grade porterhouse as to a rough winter out West.

IT IS IN RESTAURANTS that the Atkins way finds its most explicit expression. Even far from New York City, the apex of lard worship, chefs are bending over backward to please Atkins devotees. Houston chef Charles Clark has not only put several starchless Atkins-style dishes on his menu at Ibiza, but he sets out celery along with the bread basket for dipping in olive oil. "It's crazy," he told the *Houston Chronicle*. "In school you're taught to put starch on the plate." At Chipotle franchises around town you can get a Burrito Bol, which packs the meat and cheese ingredients of a burrito into a dish rather than a flour tortilla. Shawn Bell, executive chef at McCormick & Schmick's, in Phoenix, created an Atkins-style meal for an article in *The Arizona Republic* that included a side salad of chopped romaine with generous amounts of olive oil—a salad with 660 calories and 64 grams of fat per serving (the same fat content as two Big Macs).

In an Atkins world, restaurant semantics and vocabulary have also shifted, so that the menu designation of choice is no longer the heart-shaped pictograph that points out dishes low in saturated fat, but the letters "LC," signifying a low-carbohydrate creation. Some restaurants have instituted separate "Atkins menus" unsullied by a single grain of couscous; at Douglas Rodriguez's new restaurant, OLA, in New York, for example, asterisks designate low-carb items, and there is a "pure protein" section featuring, among other things, grilled lamb chops served with chicken sausage, grilled tuna, langoustines, and scallops (there are also no bread baskets or chips in sight). And waiters everywhere are learning how to answer a new question: not whether a soup or sauce contains cream, but whether it contains flour.

What has brought millions of Americans to this protein-logged pass? Certainly disenchantment with the apparent failure of the high-carbohydrate

"heart-healthy" diet—and the most obvious sign of its failure, the ever-increasing national girth. Perhaps there is also a psychology at work here, more ancient and enduring than the simple matter of numbers on a scale, that has to do with longing and frustration and a need for pleasure and comfort. For eating is not just a physical act, but a social and psychological one as well.

The roots of the current fascination with high-protein weight-loss diets reach back much further than 1972, when Atkins' first *Diet Revolution* was published; they can be traced, in fact, to the mid-19th century, when the Industrial Revolution made a steady supply of food a reality for most of the population.

At the best restaurants, diners began eating the **BACON, STEAK, PORK CHOPS**, and cream sauces they had denied themselves.

In those early days of plenty, excess personal bulk became for the first time a negative, even a *déclassé*, attribute. So when a certain English undertaker named William Banting found, in the early 1860s, that he was carrying around 202 pounds on his five-foot-five-inch frame, he was very unhappy. His doctor devised a dietary plan that included lean meat, dry toast, soft-boiled eggs, and green vegetables—and Banting went on to lose more than 50 pounds. Banting's account of his success, *Letter on Corpulence*, essentially became the first best-selling diet book, with more than 58,000 copies sold by the time of his death in 1878. By then, Banting was so popular that his very name had become a verb, and for years afterward, *banting* was a synonym for *dieting*.

Banting's ideas were furthered in America by Dr. James Salisbury, who suggested that the healthiest reducing diet was made up simply of three pounds of lean beef and six pints of hot water daily. The meat should be "the muscle pulp of lean beef made into cakes and broiled" (soon, and ever after, to be known as Salisbury steak). A century later, in the late-20th-century age of way more than plenty, Salisbury's and Banting's diets were back. This time they were promoted by Atkins' immediate predecessor, Dr. Irwin Stillman,

whose Quick Weight Loss diet called for protein sources plus at least eight glasses of water a day.

Atkins' diet debuted in an article in *Vogue* in June 1970 as the Super Diet, and was so popular that two more articles later he had parlayed it into his first *Dr. Atkins' Diet Revolution*. "Super Diet is different," *Vogue* crowed in October 1971. "Somehow Super Diet is *lovable* and such popularity must be observed.... The people who are into Dr. Atkins' theories and Super Diet can not only eat deliciously, they can stave off depression and solitude out at the Great Places." The magazine went on to recommend how to follow Atkins while eating at La Côte Basque, La Car-

avelle, La Grenouille, Orsini's, the Russian Tea Room, Luchow's, and other New York hot spots. And therein lies one of the enduring allurements of Atkins: It feels like the high life rather than deprivation.

THE SPECIAL SECRET of Atkins' diet was that it appealed to the *sophisticated pig*," wrote Grace Lichtenstein in *Esquire* in 1973, in an article that characterized the Atkins diet as "what looms as biggest of all" in an era in which "dieting has become our number-one participatory sport." On Atkins, wrote Lichtenstein, "No cheapo bouillon or tomato aspic, no plain-Jane lean ground-beef patties ... not celery, carrot sticks and rabbit-food snacks, but imported cheese, stuffed olives, caviar, crabmeat.... By the time you're through with Chapter Two, you're making plans to kick off your diet at Lutèce."

But Atkins' original *Diet Revolution*, popular though it was, faced considerable social odds in the 1970s. His book was published within a year of Frances Moore Lappé's best seller, *Diet for a Small Planet*, which extolled an anti-theoretical food revolution—one that would replace a costly, environmentally damaging meat-centered diet with a healthier one that is "plant centered." I was one of the millions of college stu-

PHENOMENON

dents who lived by Lappé's doctrines, cooking my first meals from the subsequent *Recipes for a Small Planet*, by Ellen Buchman Ewald (the yellowed, \$1.95 paperback edition still resides in my basement).

The diet of the following decades was a further challenge to Atkins' ideas: It was low fat and high carbohydrate, and its most extreme expression was the Dean Ornish 10 percent fat regimen. Grains became glamorous, and we had, in the words of *New York Times* food writer Molly O'Neill, entered an era dominated by "low-fat theology" in which "a taste for fat is immoral." The theology was backed by both science and government: epidemiological studies supported the notion that lower-fat diets were healthier, and the new USDA Food Pyramid put the commandments in graphic form: a huge base of grains and carbohydrates, topped by a smidgen of protein and fat.

Whether the ballooning of the American obesity epidemic in the last decade is a result of such advice is debatable. Did we gorge on bagels and low-fat sweets, throw off our insulin balance, increase our appetite, and make the whole problem worse? Possibly. What is clear is that our emotional connection with food suffered—as did our food itself—as flavor became secondary to nutritional statistics. Every chef knows that fat is necessary for flavor as well as for the act of cooking itself, and that fat-free sour cream, among other such inventions, is an abomination.

THE MORAL, even religious, superiority described by O'Neill was, finally, not enough to sustain the extremes of the low-fat regime—even joined as it was by the social pretentiousness that began to attach to "eating right." In one of the last statements of its kind before the second onslaught of Atkins, O'Neill wrote in early 1996 that "the amount of fat you eat and the form in which you eat it say more about who you are than the car you drive, the clothes you wear or the neighborhood where you live." Shortly after those words appeared, the siren song of Atkins' second best seller—his *New Diet Revolution*, published in 1992—had seduced another generation of eaters to the joys of fat. To put it once more in moral terms, by the mid-1990s Americans wanted to sin again—and to be thin. Atkins seemed to promise both.

Backlash is at the heart of the Atkins resurgence. Author and physician Steven Bratman coined the term "orthorexia nervosa" to signify an obsession with eating healthfully; a recent study of attitudes toward food found that the more confused people felt about what they were "supposed" to eat, the more likely they were to eat more fatty foods and fewer fruits and vegetables. In 2001, *The New York Times* proclaimed that books about food had replaced books about sex on the best-seller lists. Low-carb dieters told *Newsweek* in 1999 that eating out was fun again, that it was a way to have your steak and eat it, too.

AMONG DIET EXPERTS there is a phenomenon called the "blown-diet syndrome," in which someone who has been chronically restricting his or her food intake falls briefly off the wagon and throws all restraint to the winds. When the Atkins diet resur-

looked at the long-term scenario—which may turn out to be the Atkins diet's Achilles heel, in both a dietetic and a culinary sense. Because, just as something atavistic in us seemed to be yearning for fat in the 1980s, something in us may now yearn for starch and sweets.

Never mind that *The Washington Post* calls the Atkins diet "a classic" and "practically gospel" among the fashionistas, or that *The New York Times* claims that a "healthy slice of New York's high society is hooked on Atkins," or that *New York* magazine has declared a general "carb panic," or that your best friend lost 25 pounds on Atkins. Our bodies don't read magazines, and our taste buds aren't style conscious. Maybe on some cellular level we want slices of baguette on which to place our chèvre, potatoes with our marbled steak, a *tarte Tatin* to finish a great meal, and the occasional bagel or bowl of cereal for breakfast. There must be

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LANDSCAPE, one in which, as one socialite
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in the early '90s, it was as if we experienced the blown-diet syndrome on a cultural level—especially, rather ironically, among society's elite, the very people who had turned their noses up at butter a few short years before. At the best restaurants (and in the best-equipped kitchens) diners began eating the bacon, steak, pork chops, and butter-rich sauces they had denied themselves for so long. Passing up the wonderful artisanal breads—*focaccia*, rosemary and olive oil, Kalamata olive, sourdough—and ignoring the lobster risotto has apparently been a small price to pay.

This time, though, the rebound from self-imposed deprivation has had an unexpected consequence—many people appear, at least initially, to lose rather than gain weight on the meat-without-potatoes plan. Some research is beginning to bear out the anecdotal buzz, with short-term studies showing that dieters lost more weight on high-protein, Atkins-style programs than on high-carb diets. But no one has yet

reasons why man cultivated grains and created dessert—reasons both cultural and purely physical. (One newspaper columnist wrote earlier this year, only half tongue in cheek, that "the reason the economy has gone to hell is the Atkins diet" because it starves us of serotonin, the brain chemical that induces pleasure and calm—and that is released in most of us when we eat carbohydrates.)

The body also craves sweetness—the first taste a newborn human recognizes—which is only one reason why Paris without patisseries is unthinkable. If the Atkins juggernaut ends up slowing America's mindless pursuit of tasteless carbs—the nonfat frozen yogurts, the pillowy muffins and cinnamon buns and hubcap-size pretzels that line deli windows—it deserves its place in culinary history. But for the sake of our national cuisine, and of our chefs, let's hope it is accompanied by the return of the risotto, the yeasty bread, even the silly slice of toast under the poached egg, that we're born to love. ☞