

CHAPTER SEVEN

ZEN AND THE ART  
OF MINDFUL EATING

# 18 Tips to Eat More Slowly and Mindfully

## 1. Practice

Eating quickly is a habit that needs to be broken. Make a point to practice mindful eating by scheduling it into your day. Write it in your calendar, leave notes on your fridge, and send yourself reminders before meals until your new habits become automatic.

## 2. Chew twenty-five times

Chewing is probably the simplest and most effective way to develop the habit of eating mindfully. There used to be an entire dieting movement, led by the late Horace Fletcher, based on the idea that chewing more helped you eat less. Though Fletcher took this idea a little far (and was arguably a little crazy), there is reliable scientific data that extra chewing results in less overall food intake.

You might think that you chew your food, but there's a good chance you are swallowing a lot of it whole. Take smaller bites and chew your food thoroughly. Notice the texture of what you are eating and appreciate what it adds to your meal. This is something I need to remind myself of directly before I eat, so I keep this on my to-do list. Once the habit develops, you will feel uncomfortable swallowing large, unchewed hunks of food.<sup>\*</sup> I recommend twenty-five chews per bite, but likely anything over twenty chews will provide a benefit. The most important part is that you choose a number and count your chews until you reach it. The number itself is less consequential.

## 3. Put down your fork

The classic recommendation to put down your fork (or sandwich) between bites has stuck around for one simple reason: it works. When we are not eating mindfully, our hands go into shoveling mode; our fork is primed with another bite almost instantly after popping the last one in our mouth. Putting your fork down forces you to relax a bit and focus on chewing what you already have.

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<sup>\*</sup> This is actually the reward for your chewing habit—I told you they were subtle.

#### **4. Drink**

Another way you can force yourself to slow down is to consciously sip your drink throughout your meal. This requires you to put your fork down, chew, and swallow before eating more. It also adds liquid to your stomach and can help you feel more full. Water is a perfect choice, but even sipping wine can slow down your meal (though it may decrease your inhibition when the dessert menu gets passed around).

#### **5. Feed yourself with your nondominant hand**

Making things more difficult is a great way to force yourself to pay attention to what you're doing. One simple way to do this is to force yourself to eat with your nondominant hand, which for 90 percent of us is our left hand. It might be too much to do this for every meal, but trying it for breakfast and snacks is a good place to start. Be careful, though; if you get too good at it, you can slip back into your mindless habits.

#### **6. Eat everything with chopsticks for a week**

Even if you grew up with chopsticks as your primary utensil, you've probably never used them to eat a sandwich or a bag of chips. I once heard a story about a local tech company that asked a bunch of its employees to use chopsticks exclusively for a week as a mindfulness exercise. Although weight loss was not the goal, everyone in the office lost weight and several reported life-changing realizations as a result of the project.

One person dropped his morning bagel habit when he realized that the chopsticks prevented him from experiencing the part of the ritual that he enjoyed the most. Apparently the taste of the bagel was not as appealing as the act of ripping the doughy bread apart with his hands. Once he realized that actually *eating* the bagel wasn't important to him, he decided to give it up.

#### **7. Take your first bite with your eyes closed**

I once went to a restaurant where the entire dining experience, including being seated at the table, occurred in the pitch dark. The idea was to focus exclusively on the experience of eating, without

the distraction of vision. Unfortunately, the food at this restaurant was terrible, and focusing on it only made this point more obvious. But it was a good lesson, and I was certainly not tempted to overeat as a result. Eating all of your meals in the dark or even with your eyes closed is not very practical, but taking the time to taste your first bite with your full attention can help you eat the rest of your meal more mindfully. Focus on all the flavors in your mouth and how they interact as well as the smells and textures. This will help you both appreciate your food and eat more slowly.

## **8. Eat with other slow eaters**

We all have an unconscious tendency to imitate people we are near. If you are dining with ferocious eaters, you might find yourself mimicking their bad habit and eating quickly just to keep up. To train yourself to eat slower, try finding slow eaters to influence you instead. If your rapid dining partner happens to be your spouse,\* try asking politely if he or she wouldn't mind enjoying the meal with you by taking it a little slower. I've had nothing but positive responses to such requests.

## **9. Try to identify every ingredient in your meal**

Trying to taste and identify all the different ingredients in your meal is another great way to focus on the present moment and eat more mindfully. This is particularly fun at restaurants, when you didn't make the food yourself. Check your answers by conferring with the waitstaff or asking to see the menu again. An added bonus of this technique is it can also help you become more creative in the kitchen.

## **10. Use a plate**

It may sound obvious, but eating out of a bag is not a very mindful practice. Get in the habit of placing even small snacks and desserts on a plate before you eat them. This will force you to acknowledge exactly what and how much you will be eating.

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\* Welcome to my world.

### **11. Sit at a table**

Once your food is on a plate, you may as well go the extra mile and sit at a table. Sitting at a table to eat tells your brain you are having a meal. If you eat while running errands or standing at a counter, you can quickly lose track of how much you've eaten. Even if you've eaten a fair amount of food while standing, you may still feel as though you haven't had a meal and want to eat more later. Formalizing your dining experience can help draw your attention to your food and your eating habits.

### **12. Remove distractions**

Put away your phone, turn off the TV, step away from the computer, put down your magazine, hide your kids, hide your wife. If you are doing something else, you are not paying attention to the food you are putting into your mouth. I know you are busy and want to multi-task, but resist the urge for fifteen minutes and eat a real meal. I admit I'm bad at this one, but I always eat less if I go off-line while I eat.

### **13. Eat in silence**

Although going through an entire meal in pure silence may be a bit much for most of us, designating the first three to five minutes of a meal for quiet and mindful practice can be an effective strategy. Alternately, you can use a single meal each day (like breakfast) to eat without extraneous sounds.

### **14. Serve small portions**

A clean plate is an incredibly powerful cue that a meal is finished. For this reason, large portion sizes often lead to overeating simply because of our tendency to eat what is in front of us. Serve yourself smaller portions as a reminder to take your time and savor each bite. Use small plates, so your brain doesn't perceive the portions as skimpy.

### **15. Have a conversation**

You only have one mouth, and if you are using it to talk, it's really difficult to shove food into it. Though this is the opposite of eating in

silence, enjoying a meal with friends and having a great conversation is a fantastic opportunity to slow down your meal. Just remember to chew, so your mindfulness doesn't get thrown completely out the window.

### **16. Don't eat when you're starving**

Nothing makes us more likely to eat quickly than being famished. We may try to eat at regular intervals, but sooner or later circumstances get the better of us, and we end up hungrier than we should be. I always carry almonds or other nuts around with me for times like this, and I eat exactly ten nuts to tide me over for an hour or so. After about fifteen or twenty minutes, my hunger subsides enough for me to regain control of my eating speed.

### **17. Dim the lights**

Research has shown that people eat more in rooms with brighter lights. Set your dinner mood by dimming the lights or lighting candles. This will induce an inner calmness and make it easier to slow down. On the flip side, be careful when eating under bright fluorescent lights, as they can spur frantic overeating.

### **18. Play mellow music**

Slow, mellow music can also help set an appropriate eating pace. Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* is one of my favorite dinner albums. However, this trick only works if the music is truly slower than your natural, silent eating pace. If your music is any faster, you may experience the opposite effect.

## 5 Things to Consider Before Eating Something Naughty

Sometimes foods are super unhealthy, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't eat them. Life should be awesome, and the purpose of food should be to optimize the quality of yours. Food is delicious, it makes you healthy, and it brings you closer to friends and loved ones. At any given meal, I try my best to maximize each of these goals. And if it falls short in one, I try to make up for it in another.

Inevitably, there are situations in which the best option is not particularly obvious. For example, how important is it to eat healthy on vacation? Consider dessert. By no stretch of the imagination do we need dessert to live, and if we are being honest with ourselves most of the time we probably shouldn't eat it. But sometimes (er, often) we want to anyway.

Ideally, you should get your healthstyle to a place where you can occasionally go a little wild without it significantly impacting your health goals. But getting there takes practice and a healthy dose of self-awareness.

Here are five questions to help you make the right decision before letting loose.

### **1. What else have you eaten today? This week?**

To be able to indulge occasionally, you need to understand what "occasionally" really means. Depending on your body size and activity levels, you can get away with maybe one or two treats a week. If you find yourself giving in once or more a day, it may be time to reevaluate your definition of "special occasion."

### **2. Have you been to the gym?**

Using the gym to justify a bad diet is a losing battle. But if you do eat a few too many quickly digesting calories, it's much better that they go to fuel your muscles rather than your waistline. I've found that some of my best runs at the gym are on birthday-cake days at the lab.

### **3. Will you be drinking later?**

Alcohol fuels weight gain in a number of ways. Sugary drinks add hundreds of calories to your day and should be considered an indulgence in their own right. Alcohol also has a way of convincing you to opt for late-night burritos and greasy weekend brunches. If you're heading out with friends later, you might want to skip the after-dinner cheesecake.

### **4. Are you trying to lose weight?**

Believe it or not, asking yourself your health goals before you eat something can really help you make better decisions. I don't recommend strict diets when trying to improve your healthstyle, but if you still have weight to lose, desserts and heavy meals won't make your life any easier. If you'd still like to drop some pounds, it pays to be picky with your indulgences.

### **5. Is it worth it? Really?**

One of the best things about avoiding diets is you have the freedom to fit your favorite foods into your life. But one of the downsides is that you need to be able to make good choices for yourself, which isn't always easy. It can be very tempting to consider every cupcake that is brought to the office a special occasion and lose track of the truly valuable indulgences that actually make your life better. Birthdays, anniversaries, and meals at great restaurants are things you will remember for your entire life. Junk food at the office is rarely more than an excuse to avoid work for another half hour. Be honest with yourself about the true value of a food before inviting it into your life.

# Gateway Vegetables

## My Story as a Born-Again Foodist

*Summer Tomato* reader Cheryl-Ann Roberge was a lifelong vegetable hater until one fateful afternoon in July. Her story is not unusual, but it is incredibly inspiring. She tells the story best, so I'll let Cheryl-Ann take it from here.

BY CHERYL-ANN ROBERGE

If you had told teenage me that I would one day be a vegetable lover, spice fanatic, and adventurous eater, I would have sent my canned ravioli flying toward your face. My name is Cheryl-Ann Roberge, I reside in Seattle, and I am a born-again foodist. This is my story.

The 1990s were an underwhelming time in my food life. Eggs were one of the few things I enjoyed eating that didn't come from a box or can. Even at a young age I tried to pick all of the oregano out of my spaghetti. I hated fruit and veggies. I tolerated apples and canned vegetables when required. At age seventeen, I proudly declared that I would never learn how to cook and that I would live solely on canned ravioli. It was simple: I didn't like anything that had real flavor.

## Epiphany

Two years into my "adult life," I was existing on a steady diet of Easy Mac and cafeteria food. Vegetables were the most difficult for me. But, ironically, veggies were also the key that would open the door to foods I would never have been interested in otherwise.

I went on about my business of eating meat with noodles or meat with rice or meat with bread, and I was pretty happy with the rotation. I worked in the dorm cafeteria circuit at the university I attended in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and I liked telling people I was a lunch lady.

On a hot July day, my world was changed. A special picnic for new student prospects was being served outdoors, and I was scheduled to work it. The picnic served food much different from the typical cafeteria fare. After the new students had been served,

cafeteria workers were given a break for a meal together. I loaded my plate with a burger and whichever pasta salad I knew I wouldn't eat much of.

I made my way to the grill and found it covered with a vegetable medley that I'd never seen served before. I kept walking. Mike, the chef, called me back and stuck veggie-filled tongs toward me.

"I don't do veggies, Mike," I said.

"These are different," he explained. He was excited that he'd been allowed to make food he thought tasted good. Mike had once opened his own restaurant, but failed and ended up as a chef at the cafeteria, where creativity was always superseded by budget. This was his banner day.

I declined once more before he gave the overhaul speech that broke me down. He lowered juicy, grill-marked asparagus, onion, zucchini, and squash onto my plate as I shot him a look of disinterest. The veggies were cooked very simply, tossed with oil, salt, and pepper and flung onto the grill. I'd never had anything like this before.

I didn't come away with a huge affinity for onions that time, but I had my first ever delightful experience with something I'd always found disgusting. I suddenly loved the squash and zucchini and thought asparagus was okay too.

Mike told me that I'd made his day. I raved for a week. My whole idea of food turned upside down, and it was just the beginning of a ten-year revolution. I've since learned to like onions, spinach, fish, shellfish, beets, and strawberries. After discovering sushi, wasabi became my gateway into loving spicy food, which I'd never been able to tolerate.

My journey hasn't ended. Last fall I took my first trip to Italy, where I discovered cantaloupe served alongside dinner entrees. I had always been lukewarm about the fruit, but something about having light, juicy melon after a slice of delicious lasagna made me appreciate its sweetness in a way I never had before. Now my least favorite fruit salad element has become a favorite.

It is difficult to express to you just how surprising and lovely these realizations can be. I live for them, and I try every new food I can. I plea-bargain with other picky eaters I meet. I pester them to try new things. I invite them over for dinner and try to introduce them to something they'd never otherwise try.

## **Why Should You Try and Try Again?**

As children, most of us are naturally averse to beer, coffee, and wine. A sip might be granted by a grandpa wearing a grin, which of course is followed by a grimace from the grandchild. So how do most of us end up liking all three beverages despite the horrible trials we go through?

Practice, exposure, and repetition are the keys to comfort. I expanded my taste in music the same way. I started listening to any music I could get my hands on and, as with food, I started having mini music epiphanies too. Consider this: Why did most of us enjoy listening to the radio when we were children? We knew the songs, and they were comforting, like canned ravioli. How do country music haters end up enjoying Neko Case or Ryan Adams? It's fresh and it didn't come out of a can. You get the point.

## **A Simple Request**

As a born-again foodist, I sit here in Seattle writing to you, Picky Eater. I'm late to work, because I care that much about your palate. I want you too to discover the pleasure of new foods. It has changed my life and given me unforgettable experiences with old friends and new.

As a bonus, it's easier to get out and exercise, because I'm not so weighed down by the processed junk food that I used to love. And my waistline is trim now.

Change your ways for those last two reasons if you must, but try new foods because they will eventually taste good and the rest will follow. Just don't expect it all to happen overnight.

## How to Make Brussels Sprouts That Aren't Gross

This is the recipe that finally made me love brussels sprouts. Bacon makes anything taste good, but these days I appreciate the sprouts even without it.

Buy the freshest sprouts you can get your hands on (hint: they're in season in autumn), preferably from your local farmers market. Like any vegetable, the fresher it is, the tastier and more nutritious it will be. I usually buy a pound or so. The smaller they are, the sweeter and less bitter they taste.

The secret is to halve and blanch the sprouts before cooking them with other ingredients. This helps them cook through and gets rid of the nasty, bitter taste that can be so characteristic of brussels sprouts. The other trick is to balance the remaining bitter flavor with an acid like lemon juice or red wine vinegar. Oh, and did I mention bacon? I prefer to purchase my bacon from a local butcher. Get two slices, but for a larger batch of sprouts increase it to three.

This recipe is delicious with either walnuts, pine nuts, or hazelnuts. If you decide on hazelnuts, try them toasted. I like to bake them in the oven (350°F) until the skins start to turn dark and crack, about 10 to 15 minutes. I then roll them in a paper towel or plastic wrap to separate the skins from the nuts. Don't worry if all the skins don't come off; they'll still taste good.

Brussels sprouts pair beautifully with almost any protein. Pork, chicken, and fish work especially well.

### **Pan-Roasted Brussels Sprouts with Bacon**

SERVES 3 TO 4

- 1 pound brussels sprouts, cleaned and halved**
- 1 cipollini onion (or shallot or leek)**
- ½ cup walnuts or hazelnuts**
- 2 slices bacon**
- 1 tablespoon butter (preferably from grass-fed cows)**
- Sea salt and pepper, to taste**
- 1 tablespoon fresh oregano leaves, finely chopped**
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar or lemon juice**

To blanch the brussels sprouts, bring water to a boil in a medium saucepan and add a few pinches of salt. When the water comes to a rolling boil, add the sprouts and set a kitchen timer for 5 minutes. Important: do not rely on yourself to remember, as overcooking at this stage will ruin your dish. Boil the sprouts exactly 5 minutes, rinse with cold water, drain, and set aside.

In the meantime, chop the onion and nuts. Stack the bacon and slice into ½-inch pieces. Heat a large sauté pan on medium heat and add the bacon pieces. Allow the bacon to cook about 4 to 5 minutes, until the fat starts to render in the pan. Add the nuts and stir. If you are using cipollini onions or shallots, add those too (wait if you are using leeks).

Cook the nuts and bacon until the bacon is almost done; then add the butter. You can add leeks at this point. When leeks just begin to soften (about 1 minute), add the sprouts, sea salt, and pepper.

Stir the sprouts and turn most of them so the cut faces are down. I strongly recommend using tongs for this. After about 2 minutes, stir the sprouts and sprinkle on the oregano. Continue to cook, stirring every 2 minutes or so until the faces of the sprouts are all browned and onions begin to caramelize, 8 to 10 minutes. In the last 3 or 4 minutes, add the vinegar or lemon juice. This step is essential to cut any last bit of bitterness remaining in the sprouts. Use the taste test to determine precise cooking time (depending on the size of the sprouts).