

A diet centred on plant-based foods and wholegrains helps people around the globe live healthily into their nineties and beyond

SECRETS OF THE SUPER-AGERS

From Okinawa in Japan to the Ogliastra region of Sardinia, the world's most long-living people have one thing in common. They all eat a hugely more varied diet than most of us do in the West, and they base their diet around plants. It's time to take a lesson from the world's super-agers and shake up our meals, says **Louise Atkinson**

RECIPES **ANNIE BELL** FOOD PHOTOGRAPHS **STUART WEST**

There are many cultural differences between the world's healthiest hotspots or 'blue zones' – areas where an unusually high percentage of the population is blessed with good health and longevity – but one aspect of life is consistent: the food that they put on their plates. From a village in Sardinia to a Japanese island via a Costa Rican peninsula, these farflung communities share a love of plant foods and wholegrains – and they are living into their nineties and beyond, free from chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer and obesity.

The blue zone diet is built around 95-100 percent plant-based foods with very little sugar, dairy products and meat, but plenty of fibre-rich pulses, fruit, vegetables and wholegrains. 'People in the blue zones eat an impressive variety of garden vegetables when they are in season, and then they pickle or dry the surplus to enjoy during the off-season,' says Dan Buettner, the *National Geographic* journalist and researcher who first discovered the existence of blue zones. 'The best-of-the-best longevity foods are leafy greens such as spinach, kale, beet and turnip tops, chard and collards. Combined with seasonal fruits and vegetables, whole grains and beans, they dominate blue zones meals all year long,' he adds.

This health-supporting, diverse diet rich in fibre and micronutrients also happens to be a diet that feeds the good bacteria in our microbiome – the trillions of bacteria that live in our gut that scientists now believe play an important role in our health. In fact, recent studies of the exceptionally long-lived found their microbiome to be healthier than those of younger people elsewhere – particularly notable as the health of your microbiome declines with age.

Compare the plant-dense blue zone diet to the typical British daily menu of a bowl of cereal or toast for breakfast, a sandwich for lunch and meat and two veg for dinner, and you can see why our microbiome may not be in the same blooming health as our super-ageing counterparts.

Experts used to think the microscopic population of bacteria, fungi and yeasts just chomped their way through fibre to ensure an efficient 'throughput' – but fast-evolving research now shows this vast internal ecosystem actually works very hard on our behalf. Amazingly, the 'good' bacteria in your gut manufacture 95% of your body's serotonin (the 'feel-good hormone'), which impacts mood, appetite, digestion, sleep and sexual desire. But unfortunately, our guts also harbour plenty of 'bad' microbes which create inflammation, contributing to anxiety and weight gain as well as many modern ailments such as diabetes and depression. The key to good health, say experts, is feeding the good bacteria to get the balance right.

Although our microbiome becomes less diverse as we grow older, you can rectify the situation rapidly. Professor Tim Spector of Kings College, London, author of *The Diet Myth: The Real Science Behind What We Eat* (W&N, £8.99) says: 'Microbial

diversity is achieved by eating a wide array of real and fermented foods. Every food you eat and every drug you take will have an effect on the gut microbiota – it can be changed in as little as three days.'

SO, WHAT SHOULD YOU EAT?

Spector joins the ranks of eminent gut specialists who consistently recommend a Mediterranean-style diet, which boosts our intake of plant-based foods (fruit, vegetables, pulses and wholegrains) to effectively feed the 'good' bacteria. Gut specialist Dr Megan Rossi, author of *Eat Yourself Healthy* (Penguin, £16.99), recommends her patients aim to eat 30 different plant-based foods a week – that's nuts, seeds, wholegrains, legumes and fruit and vegetables. She also recommends mixing up your 'diet staples' to

'Studies of the long-lived found their microbiome to be healthier than those of younger people'

move away from a reliance on wheat (cereal, bread, pasta...) and regularly switching between rice, quinoa and buckwheat instead.

When most of us are falling woefully short of the recommended 'five a day' and getting nowhere near the recommended daily fibre intake of 30g, the idea of 30 different plant-based foods could seem an insurmountable challenge. If your pulse and veg repertoire rarely extends beyond baked beans and peas, Dr Rossi recommends tricks like sprinkling mixed seeds on your breakfast, buying a mixed leaf salad instead of a solo iceberg and having a tomato with your fry-up, or a handful of spinach leaves.

Dr Michael Mosley, author of *The Clever Guts Diet* (Short Books, £8.99), advises 'eating a rainbow' of different colours; when it comes to plants, colour is a great indicator of nutritional diversity. 'Greater diversity builds a more capable and resilient microbial community, and creates a hospitable environment for a variety of microbes with important chemical talents to flourish,' he says. For instance, blue and purple foods (such as blackberries, blueberries, red cabbage and aubergines) get their colouring from a phytonutrient called anthocyanins which appears to encourage the growth of 'good' bacteria; white foods (such as garlic, onions, leeks) are rich in allyl sulphur compounds which can kill off 'bad' microbes; yellow, orange and red foods (bananas, melons, tomatoes, peppers and squash) contain carotenoids; leafy greens and brassicas are microbiome superfoods, containing important sulphur compounds.

If the thought of breaking out of entrenched vegetable habits seems too tough, why not try adding just one new variety of fruit or vegetable to your shopping basket each week? Take things slowly, one kumquat, kohlrabi, artichoke or radish at a time, and you'll give your growing population of 'good' bacteria the time to process and digest these deliciously health-giving new foods. ►

DR ROSSI'S GUT MAKEOVER PLAN

- 1 Think diversity.** Eat as wide a range of plant-based foods as possible. Aim for 30 different plant-based foods a week.
- 2 Eat fibre-rich food** to feed the good bacteria in your gut.
- 3 Include healthy fermented food** in your diet every day, like yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut and kombucha.
- 4 Always buy live yogurts.** Look out for the cartons containing live cultures.
- 5 Avoid artificial sweeteners** if you can – they may destroy the diversity of your gut microbiome.
- 6 Swap your diet staples around regularly.** Try to get more ancient grains on your plate, such as quinoa and spelt. Also try wholewheat and lentil pasta.
- 7 Eat like a Mediterranean** to boost your mood. Studies suggest that eating a high-fibre, Mediterranean-style diet can improve depression scores.
- 8 Don't go low carb.** In the short term you might lose weight, but you can also damage your gut bacteria.

CAPSICANA

LATIN FLAVOUR

NEW!



Venison stir-fry with miso and cashews

SERVES 2 DF HANDS-ON TIME 30 MINS TOTAL TIME 30 MINS

- ◆ 150g venison steak
 - ◆ 2½ tbsp groundnut or rapeseed oil
 - ◆ 40g cashews, roughly chopped
 - ◆ 1 garlic clove, finely chopped
 - ◆ ½-1 tsp finely chopped red chilli
 - ◆ 300g thinly sliced mixed vegetables (we used red pepper, mushrooms, pak choi and beansprouts)
 - ◆ ½ x 400g tin black beans, rinsed and drained
 - ◆ 125g cooked freekeh or other wholegrains
 - ◆ a handful of coarsely chopped coriander
 - ◆ tamari or soy sauce (optional) to serve
- For the miso dressing*
- ◆ 1 tsp finely grated fresh ginger
 - ◆ ½ tbsp concentrated miso paste (we used Yutaka)
 - ◆ 1 tsp sherry vinegar

- 1 Slice the venison into thin strips, 4-5cm long, and toss with ½ tablespoon of oil to coat. In a small bowl, whisk the ingredients for the dressing together with 1 tablespoon of the oil and 1 tablespoon of water, then set aside.
- 2 Dry fry the cashews in a wok or large nonstick frying pan until toasted, then tip into a bowl. Turn the heat up high, add the venison and stir-fry for 2 minutes; it should be sealed on the outside and slightly pink in the centre to leave it tender. Transfer to a plate.
- 3 Add 1 tablespoon of oil to the pan, and then add the garlic and chilli, spreading it over the base. Immediately add all the veggies, and stir-fry for 2 minutes,

stirring every 10-15 seconds. Add the black beans and freekeh and cook for another minute. Return the venison to the pan and mix everything well.

- 4 Divide between 2 bowls and serve drizzled with the miso dressing, scattered with plenty of fresh coriander and the cashews. You may like a splash of tamari or soy sauce as well.

■ 521cals; 27g fat (6g sat fat); 32g protein; 14g fibre; 30g carbs; 5g total sugars; 0.8g salt ▶

» NUTRITION NOTES

This stir-fry has a rainbow of vegetables, as well as whole grains, pulses and the probiotic benefits of miso. Any lean cut of steak, such as rump or sirloin, will stand in for venison if you prefer.



The Premium Spanish Chorizo



Chorizo from the Spanish Chorizo Consortium is certified with a quality seal, which means the product is made using 100% Spanish premium quality ingredients.

The Spanish Chorizo Consortium is made up of 22 members who produce authentic, high quality chorizo – a product that is differentiated by its appearance, texture, aroma and flavour and its impeccable presentation.

Their labelled chorizo gives a unique aroma, which comes from a combination of ingredients such as garlic, pepper, cumin, bay leaves, thyme, onion, paprika and oregano. Producers are fastidious about getting the ingredient balance just right.

Creating natural product lines without preservatives, additives, lactose, gluten, soy and reduced salt, are particular measures that producers within the consortium are taking, to respond to consumer demand for healthier products.



Look out for the Consorcio del Chorizo Español label when making your next chorizo purchase.

SPANISH CHORIZO AND MUSHROOM SAUSAGE ROLLS

SO DELICIOUS! (YOU MIGHT WANT MORE THAN ONE!)

- 100g Spanish chorizo labelled with the Consorcio del Chorizo Español seal
- 1 red onion, finely chopped
- 2 celery sticks, finely chopped
- 500g mushrooms, finely chopped
- 2tbsp fresh parsley, finely chopped
- 1tbsp fresh thyme leaves
- 50g dried breadcrumbs (Panko)
- 1 egg, beaten with 1tbsp water
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 500g pack ready-to-roll puff pastry

1. Put the chorizo into a large frying pan and fry gently for 2-3 minutes until the fat runs. Add the onion and celery and cook over a medium heat for about 6-8 minutes, stirring often.

2. Add the mushrooms and cook for a further 4-5 minutes, stirring often. Remove

from the heat and stir in the parsley, thyme and breadcrumbs. Mix in 2tbsp of the beaten egg. Season with salt and pepper and leave to cool.

3. Preheat the oven to 210°C, fan oven 190°C, Gas Mark 6. Line 2 baking sheets with greaseproof paper.

4. Roll out the pastry on a lightly floured surface into a rectangle measuring 28cm x 40cm, trimming the edges to neaten. Cut into 2 strips measuring 14cm x 20cm. Divide the filling into two, and roll each portion into 2 long sausage shapes to fit the length of the pastry strips. Brush the edge of the pastry with beaten egg, then fold over to encase the filling. Use a sharp knife to cut into individual sausage rolls.

5. Arrange the sausage rolls on the baking sheets and brush with the remaining beaten egg. Bake for 15-20 minutes until risen and golden brown. Serve hot or cold.



Find more information about this unique and delicious product at: <https://chorizo.espanol.es/en/>

DID YOU KNOW?

The arrival of paprika in Spain from America in the XVII century saw the beginnings of chorizo as we know it today, a spice that gives it its distinctive reddish colour and sharp flavour.



NUTRITION NOTES

Minestrone lends itself to a wide range of veg, whatever the season. Here the inclusion of some pulses, and a mixture of nuts and herbs broadens out the range of nutrients. If you serve the soup with thick slices of wholegrain toast, rubbed with garlic and drizzled with oil, you will be getting all four plant food groups into one meal.

3-bean minestrone with mint pesto

SERVES 6 V GF * HANDS-ON TIME 20 MINS TOTAL TIME 35 MINS

- ◆ 3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra to drizzle
- ◆ 1 celery heart, trimmed and sliced
- ◆ 200g trimmed celeriac, cut into 1 cm dice
- ◆ 2 leeks, trimmed and sliced
- ◆ 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- ◆ 800ml vegetable stock* (using 1½ stock cubes)
- ◆ 150g runner beans, trimmed and sliced diagonally 1 cm thick
- ◆ 150g fresh or frozen

- ◆ baby broad beans
- ◆ 100g shredded kale or spinach leaves
- ◆ 1 x 380g carton cannellini beans, rinsed and drained

For the pesto

- ◆ 50g mixed mint, basil and parsley leaves
- ◆ 15g walnuts
- ◆ 15g toasted hazelnuts
- ◆ 3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- ◆ 75g freshly grated Parmesan*, plus extra to serve

1. Heat 3 tablespoons of oil in a large saucepan over a medium-low heat, add the celery, celeriac and leeks and fry for 8-10 minutes until glossy and softened, stirring occasionally, adding the garlic just before the end.

2. Add the stock, runner and broad beans, bring to the boil, cover and simmer for 5 minutes. Add the kale or spinach and stir in the cannellini beans. Cover and cook for a couple of minutes longer.

3. For the pesto, whiz the herbs and nuts with 3 tablespoons of oil in a food processor, then add the Parmesan and briefly whiz again

to a crumbly mixture. Stir a dollop of pesto into each bowl of soup to serve, scatter with extra Parmesan and add a drizzle of oil.

*Use vegetarian cheese and gluten-free stock if required.

■ 300cals; 21g fat (5g sat fat); 12g protein; 10g fibre; 12g carbs; 3g total sugars; 0.9g salt ▶

GET AHEAD

The soup and pesto can be kept for up to 3 days in the fridge (store them separately), or frozen.



» GET AHEAD

Leftover veg purée keeps for up to 2 days in the fridge. It can be thinned down with stock to make a light soup.

Masala salmon with autumn veg purée

SERVES 2 GF HANDS-ON TIME 25 MINS TOTAL TIME 40 MINS

- ◆ about 3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
 - ◆ 10g unsalted butter
 - ◆ flaky sea salt, eg Maldon
 - ◆ 150g broccoli, in 3-4 cm florets
 - ◆ 150g slim carrots, trimmed, peeled and thickly sliced
 - ◆ 150g slim leeks (trimmed weight), thickly sliced
 - ◆ 150g cauliflower, in 3-4 cm florets
 - ◆ 1 tbsp finely chopped chives
 - ◆ 1 tbsp finely chopped cornichons
 - ◆ 2 tsp lemon juice
 - ◆ freshly grated nutmeg
 - ◆ 1 x 230g pack wild sockeye salmon, skinned
 - ◆ garam masala (or other curry spice blend) for dusting
- 1 Bring 300ml water to the boil with 1 tablespoon of oil, the butter and half a teaspoon of flaky salt in a medium-large saucepan. Add all of the vegetables, bring the liquid back to the boil, cover and cook over a medium-low heat for 10 minutes, or until tender. Meanwhile combine the chives and cornichons in a small bowl.
 - 2 Drain the vegetables and whiz to a purée in a food processor with another tablespoon of oil, the lemon juice, a grating of nutmeg and seasoning.
 - 3 To cook the salmon, heat a large nonstick frying pan over a medium heat, lightly dust the salmon fillets on both sides with masala and season with salt.

Drizzle 1 teaspoon of oil over the base of the pan and fry the top-side of the salmon fillets for 3-4 minutes until it is golden and you can see that it has cooked through by a third to a half, then turn and cook the other side for about 3 minutes, drizzling another teaspoon of oil into the pan – the exact timings will depend on the thickness of the fillet, it should have just lost its translucency in the centre.

- 4 Serve the fish with the purée, gently reheating it if necessary, and scatter with the chive and cornichon mixture.
- 478cals; 33g fat (8g sat fat); 31g protein; 7g fibre; 10g carbs; 8g total sugars; 0.7g salt ■

»
NUTRITION NOTES

Wild sockeye salmon is a fish we should make more of, it is dryer than our farmed salmon, but has hints of the meatiness of tuna to it, and it is hard not to be seduced by the sunset pink of its flesh.