

Oh, go ahead: Eat, drink and, yes, be merry

December 15, 2007

Last week, at a holiday lunch, I sat beside a lovely young woman who appeared to find the food on her plate potentially dangerous. Gingerly shifting each baby vegetable with her fork as if it were a grenade and lifting underneath to check for signs of anthrax or perhaps weapons of mass destruction, she had barely lifted a morsel from her plate in the time it took me to lick my own clean.

"I'm not vegan or anything," she explained. "It's just that sometimes I can't eat if I don't feel comfortable with what I'm eating." Which pretty well sums up the mass neurosis of our lactose-intolerant, allergic, chemical additive and trans-fat free age. Food has become the enemy, full of hidden lurking dangers. And if you go anywhere near it, you might get sick - not to mention fat.

We are what we eat, so our bodies should be temples, the logic goes. Want to live longer without any signs of aging? Don't ingest any "toxins" such as red meat or dairy, just say no to wine or coffee, hey, don't even cook your food. Better yet, don't eat anything at all. Indulgence, along with fun, is out of fashion. Self-improvement is the new name of the game and the surest path to perfection is through denial.

With the holiday season, of course, this mass hysteria comes to a fizzy head. Nutritionists must be exhausted what with those 24-hour hotlines issuing red alerts on What to Avoid at holiday parties and How Not to Pack on those Unwanted Holiday Pounds. As we wheel our holiday shopping carts spilling over with cheddar, foie gras and shortbread through the checkout aisle, we must run a gauntlet of magazines and tabloids with too-fat, or scary-thin bikini-clad starlets on their covers promising Flat Abs by New Year's.

Yes, it's a minefield out there, but particularly at this celebratory and spiritual season, I ask you to consider this tasty nugget: What if food is not the enemy, but actually our saviour? What if eating is good for us in ways beyond the purely physical? Stop worrying about the cozy pooch below your waistline for just one moment, and ask: Could the preparation and

sharing of food with others be in and of itself a redemptive and healing act?

Certainly the latest research confirms that much does depend on dinner. Studies of family eating habits from the University of Minnesota, Harvard and Rutgers have consistently determined that children who regularly sit down at a table to eat with their parents eat healthier, perform better at school and are less at risk for smoking, and drug and alcohol abuse. What's more, what's being served and how doesn't really matter. The most recent survey, from the University of Minnesota, found that these benefits were the rule even for those who eat takeout together in the blue glare of the television.

"Obviously, we want people eating healthy family meals and we want them to turn the TV off," Shira Feldman, a public-health specialist and author of the research, told the International Herald Tribune. "But just the act of eating together is, on some level, very beneficial even if the TV is on."

Making food is good for us too. A leitmotif of celebrity chefs from Nigel Slater to Anthony Bourdain, as recounted in their oddly parallel memoirs, is one of having lived at the brink of disaster in their youth before finding salvation behind a hot stove. Jamie Oliver, in particular, has taken on the idea of the redemptive power of food as a near-mission. He is doing his bit to save Britain with his "Feed Me Better" school lunch campaign and his Fifteen Foundation, which aims to turn the lives of disaffected youth around by tutoring them in the culinary arts.

In films, from the classic *Babette's Feast* to the recent *No Reservations* starring Catherine Zeta-Jones in an unlikely turn as chef, food is characterized as a powerful agent for both personal and social change. A new show on the Food Network called *Chef School* chronicles the personal growth of a real-life group of aspiring chefs at the Stratford Chefs School. While the brilliant English writer Rose Tremain's latest novel, *The Road Home*, offers food - and the preparation and sharing of it with others - as nothing less than a healing balm for the humiliations of those who lived through East Bloc communism and its fall.

All this to back up my prescription for a happier, healthier world: When gathering together to celebrate the season, how about we park our food issues at the door and partake with enthusiasm? Crazy as it sounds, perhaps the most positive move we can make in this seemingly relentless struggle to become a better person is to eat, drink and, yes, be merry.

