**The Changing American Diet**

**A REPORT CARD**
*BY BONNIE LIEBMAN*

This isn’t a report card you’d want to post on the fridge. Fruits and vegetables have barely budged, the cheese craze shows no signs of slowing down, and we’re eating 450 calories more per day than we did in 1970. Yes, there are some signs of improvement. We’re cutting back on sugars, shortening, beef, whole milk, and white flour. And we’re eating more chicken and yogurt. But we’re moving slowly.

One way to see the bigger picture is to look at where our calories come from. Americans have gone from eating an estimated 2,075 calories a day in 1970 to scarifying down 2,535 calories in 2010. (From 2000 to 2007 we were as high as 2,600 calories a day.) Most of the increase has come from eating more flour, more cheese, and more fats, with an extra shot of sugar thrown in.

Bottom line? It’s time to eat less —less red meat, less cheese, less starches, and less sweets (and the shortening that they often contain). If Americans want straight A’s, they’ve got a little work to do.

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**Dairy:** C–

Pizza, burgers, burritos, nachos, quesadillas. There’s cheese in our salads, our soups, our sandwich, and our pizza crust. Since 1970, we’ve gone from 8 pounds per person per year to 23 pounds. That’s bad news for our arteries and waistlines. On the bright side, full-fat ice cream is dipping, and (mostly low-fat) yogurt is booming. We’re up to 65 pounds. We’re on the right track, but we’re moving too slowly away from buddies and friends.

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**Grains:** C

Breads, bagels, cereal, pasta, rice, crackers, granola bars, pizza, burritos, wraps, pretzels, paninis, cookies, scones, muffins, and other grain foods are still going gangbusters. All told, we eat 109 pounds of flour per year. Thanks to the rise in corn flour, that’s not too far from the 116-pound peak of 2000 (right before the low-carb craze).

We need to switch to whole grains...and cut back on all grains.

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**Fruits & Vegetables:** B–

We started eating more vegetables (not counting potatoes) in the 1980s, but the rise has stalled. And fruit (not counting juice) is still pretty much where it was in 1970. We need to replace sandwiches with salads, swap starches for veggies, and trade cookies, cupcakes, and chips for fresh fruit.

Potatoes have been flat (if you add fresh plus frozen). At least we’re not eating more french fries.

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**Sweeteners:** D+

Sugar, corn syrup, etc. This is a report card you’d want to post on the fridge. Low-calorie, no-calorie, and sugar-free sweeteners are on the rise. (We like the sugar alternatives that are mostly sugar and high-fructose corn syrup too much. It’s not just the juice that’s coming back.)

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**Fats & Oils:** B+

Ignore people who say that we’ve been on a low-fat diet. Total fats and oils have climbed fairly steadily since 1970. (In 2000, the number of companies reporting data to the USDA jumped, so the rise was probably less steep than it appears.) The good news: shortening and margarines now have less trans. And (largely unsaturated) salad and cooking oils have replaced (more saturated) shortening. Less shortening would be even better. Who needs all those pies, pastries, and cookies?

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**Milk:** B

In 1970, the average American drank 21 gallons of milk per year. Now we’re down to 13 gallons. And whole milk has plummeted from 18 gallons to just 4. That’s a success story. But fat-free and low-fat (1%) milk still account for only a third of the milk we drink, so we could do even better. Unfortunately, we’re still consuming much of the buttermilk we used to get from whole milk. The difference; now we get it from cheese.

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**Source for all graphs: U.S. Department of Agriculture.**