

"Banting" in Chinese

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Here's the problem: I like to eat and I like to cook – but I have no desire to assure Messrs. Lee & Chu (tailors *extraordinaire* of Baxter Street) an overly-comfortable old age. I haven't got room for two sets of clothing ("short" and "portly short"), anyway. Dieting is a problem: Most diets are utterly unrewarding; weight loss is difficult to achieve and more difficult to recover, after the inevitable relapse and frankly, the meals range from boring to downright unappetizing.

The answer appears to be a low-carbohydrate diet. Currently fashionable as The Atkins Diet, a low-carbohydrate approach to weight-loss has been around since the middle of the 19th century. (See sidebar [1](#))

OK, so here is a program that works. But Chinese food is a favorite (I live in New York, about 10 minutes' walk from Chinatown – and Mrs. Jenner is Chinese). Can one eat a good range of Chinese dishes if following a low-carb dietary regimen?

After careful consideration – including substantial risk to my now-somewhat-reduced waistline (about two inches thus far...) in the experimental phase, it seems that many of my favorites fall right in line. Those that don't – well, one cannot appreciate virtue without sinning occasionally. [This seems consistent with the low-carb regimen. Its 19th century exponent, William Banting, adored peas – a low-carb no-no. He indulged anyway, during the season – and shed the couple pounds gained after.]

Restaurant Dining

It is not possible to live in the United States without going to a Chinese restaurant. Even as a lad, in a form of exile (my father took a job in Minneapolis), my mother considered it essential that we go from time to time for what passed as Chinese food in Minnesota. Live in New York, and one would be foolish not to "eat Chinese" often; even Chinese think the food here is good.

Cantonese restaurants offer a wide range of dishes that are *ideal* for low-carb devotees. Early on in the process, I went to our favorite Chinese restaurant, the Pacifica in the Downtown Holiday Inn (138 Lafayette Street at Howard Street) for a business luncheon. I ordered a half salt-baked chicken, two different preparations of pork ribs (braised and in black pepper sauce – this from the restaurant's luncheon *dim sum* menu), some meat balls with cress, and Pu Erh tea to wash it all down. This made a nice luncheon for three. What did I sacrifice? Rice. Fond as I am of a nice fragrant bowl of rice, I hardly felt deprived without it. I might easily have had a lovely fish steamed

with ginger and soy sauce or a duckling (no buns, perhaps, or maybe only one portion with the bun...).

What about Shanghainese cooking? That's currently quite popular. I confess, this is harder for me; I am fond of soup buns and scallion pancakes. But places like Yeah Shanghai Deluxe, New Green Bo (both on Baxter near Elizabeth), and Goody's (right at Chatham Square) have lovely versions of braised belly pork served in a rich brown sauce (sort of a poor man's Tung Po Pork), for example. This is a hearty and satisfyingly rich dish – and no great violation of the low-carb regimen.

[Careful, though: Mrs. Jenner and I went recently to a charmingly appointed, popular restaurant in Chinatown featuring Shanghai cooking and were disappointed. I sinned and ordered scallion pancakes; they looked store-bought and were not at all well cooked. We had the braised pork belly; the sauce looked to be out of a can and sweetened. Two sins where I expected one – and both of them disappointing. The Devil surely chuckled.]

One of the delights of Shanghai-style restaurants ~~are~~is the cold *hors d'oeuvres* – sliced cooked beef, drunken chicken and so on. Allowing for the fact that some sugar is used in each of these, still, a small portion is not a great sin. Many restaurants will do two or three such goodies on a single plate, and one gets a taste of each without overly upsetting the dietary regimen.

The budget doesn't extend to the \$20-for-two restaurant tab? Try one of the four-dishes-four-dollars places – we like the one on Center Street, opposite the end of Henry Street. Skip the rice and get *five*

dishes for four dollars. Add a can of sode if the seaweed soup is not your beverage of choice for another dollar. Clearly, one has to be careful: Fried gluten in sweet-and-sour sauce is not a good choice. That still leaves several kinds of fish, several variations using chicken, and some pork dishes to choose from (often including a surprisingly tasty braised belly-pork). Unlike many places with steam tables, this restaurant has sufficient business that food is usually very fresh from the kitchen; things get replenished every 10 or 15 minutes during peak periods, so far as I can tell. [Later in the day, when thing wind down, the restaurant reduce the price to *three* dollars; the food is still fresh and tasty.]

None of the dishes I have eaten are specifically low-carb (and they sure aren't low-cal). On the other hand, I don't do this three meals a day, five or seven days a week. Because a low-carb regimen allows for some carbohydrates, this is not a problem. Even a bit of the really forbiddent carbohydrate – sugar! – can be tolerated in small amounts without the scale remonstrating the next day.

Home Cooking

Cooking Chinese-style is a challenge. First, my stove's burners simply don't generate the kind of heat a Chinese cook commonly uses. My mother-in-law's stove, e. g., produces a much larger fire. New stoves seem worse than old ones (I like my new stove's enamel top – easy to clean – but it takes forever to heat a pan). Second, an awful lot of Chinese cooking involves techniques that create an aerosol of oil-laden steam – oil on everything, impossible to clean, absent a really good range hood with a serious exhaust fan (my mother-in-law's old house had

an exhaust fan that would do credit to some smaller restaurant kitchens in New York – but was commonplace in Taipei).

Then too, there are the ingredients. We live in New York, and have a good number of large Chinese-oriented supermarkets not far away. I can get authentic ingredients more readily than some. But some of those things simply aren't in the cards for low-carb cooking.

Finally, some of the dishes in my favorite Chinese cookbook (*Lin mere & fille, Chinese Gastronomy*, various imprints) are absurdly complicated if one is not absolutely given over to keeping an entirely Chinese kitchen – which is my case exactly.

My answer to this is, be eclectic. Say then, what I do as "Chinese" is not entirely authentic. On the other hand, I test things not only on my palate, but that of my wife, and she grew up eating my mother-in-law's really very tasty Chinese cooking. [My ma-in-law does things with a fish that are pure heaven – and I am no fish-afficionado.]

So, some generalities: Where a recipe calls for sugar, I substitute saccharin, using a bit less than the package's specified sugar-equivalency. I find this makes things just about right, and the result seems to be correct. The hint of sweet that brings out some flavors happens just as I expect it to. Sauces have the right overtones. [I have used Equal, which is available "bulked out" to allow for direct substitution; the Atkins folks think Equal (aspartame) interferes with the metabolic process their version of the low-carb regimen aims to engender. Since I can find no effective difference, I

see no reason to pay the higher Equal price. By the bye, the preferred Atkins sweetner is branded Splenda.]

When a recipe calls for brown sauce or something like that, I use the *demiglace* I commonly make by the quart every couple weeks.

[*Demiglace* is a rich brown sauce, essentially a basic brown sauce *Espagnol*, to which additional stock and red wine has been added, and the whole thing reduced again to the right consistency. It has a wonderful flavor and color.] Want to perk up a hamburger *sans* bun? Cook the burger; take it out and de-glaze the pan with a little red wine and beef broth (use the canned kind, without sugar and generally with less salt than most bouillon products), then add a quarter cup of *demiglace*.] If anything, the resulting sauce is more robust and intense than what one commonly encounters in a Chinese restaurant, and stands up well to Chinese palates, so it seems (my test subject is Mrs. Jenner...).

If the Lin ladies are to be believed, it is essential to use vast quantities of corn starch to bind ingredients for meat fillings and so on. Interestingly, their favorite gastronome probably never experienced corn starch; Yuan Mei, living in the Chienlung period, probably had other binding agents (e. g., water chestnut powder, or lotus root powder, both of which seem stickier to me). I find a little egg (white only, if one wants to avoid the yolk flavor) works well. When I have used corn starch, I commonly used a good deal less than their recipes coll for.

The Lin ladies also seem mighty fond of MSG. Now, that is patently absurd; MSG was synthesized only a few years before the first

World War, and by a Japanese. It is neither authentic nor necessary, and it doesn't really add anything to food that proper cooking won't accomplish much more effectively.

As to vegetable flavorings: Onions are nice; shallots give more flavor-bang for the buck, I think. Small amounts of chives and the like (Mrs. Jenner grows them in her "Schräbergarten") seem to be OK, and add authenticity as well as intensity to foods.

What works well?

Consider that quintessential Chinese food: Dofu. I have no idea what the Atkins folks think about it, but the labeling suggests it's about as low-carb as one might want, so that in reasonable portions, dofu is acceptable. I prefer pressed dofu, over the usual, softer types; I like the texture better (this seems to mean, I really am stuck being a Western Devil). Some (not all) Chinese grocers have this ready pressed; one can press it oneself, but the process is both tedious and not very successful. Commonly put up in shrink-wrap packages, I think one cake is enough per person, and I get two nice dishes from that amount.

First, I make what the Lins call "The Hill of Beans". I sliver a cake of pressed dofu by slicing into eighth-inch slices, then taking stacks of three or four slices and cutting them into eighth-inch slivers. Blanch the slivers in boiling water to get any excess starch out (if the water is cloudy, there was starch; do it a couple times). I put the slivers on a plate and drizzle with a sauce made of about three tablespoons of soy sauce, a teaspoon of sesame oil and about a quarter-

or third-teaspoon of saccharin. Great for a starter, or as one of several small dishes to comprise a meal.

The Lins also recommend heating the slivers in a rich stock (their "cream stock"). Make the stock their way, or make a rich Western style stock – either seems to work well. I have also heated a portion of *demiglace* thinned with some beef stock, then warmed the slivers in that. The sauce coats the slivers, and the slivers provide an agreeable texture and attenuation of the richness of the sauce.

Switch to the end of the meal: Dessert. By Chinese restaurant standards, dessert is either fruit or sweet soup. Both are problems: Oodles of sugar. I have noticed, though, that Chinese are fond of mousse. Chocolate mousse. Fruit flavored mousse. And so on. So, I make a sort of simple mousse – nice texture, lots of taste and sweet enough even for Western Devil. [\(See Sidebar 2 for the recipe\)](#)

I could go on. The principles are clear, though: A low-carb Chinese diet is entirely possible. The range of possibilities is not greatly restricted. Where ingredient compromises must be made, they need not affect the resulting flavor. Simplifying tricks for a "mixed kitchen" are eminently possible. Best of all, it works even when going out.

Chinese will be more difficult about this than Western Devil physicians. ["Want to lose weight?" says the butcher. "Eat vegetables." He'd probably add rice. Naaaaahhhhh.] Chinese mothers will be horrified; their ancient injunction – "Eat your rice!" – may not work for their Chinese-American offspring.

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Sidebar 1: A little history, a little science

I became interested in The Atkins Diet because I watched Rich Hasselbach, who number-one's for the president of the college where I hang my mortarboard, lose a recognizable amount of tonnage. I am generally not convinced about dieting programs. People have been nagging me about my corpulence for decades; I have tried various programs and the simply have not achieved the requisite result. Here was I guy know, fighting the same fight I do, for reasons that seems similar to mine, successfully. "Aha!" says I.

Then too, the pop-science crowd (a demonic organization whose medical affiliate is named "Legion") has begun discussion corpulence as a "metabolic syndrome". This language is congruent with the Atkins crew's approach.

I looked the Atkins diet up on the web. The Atkins establishment maintains a substantial web presence at www.atkinscenter.com. The late Dr. Atkins and his colleagues have decided not to be greedy; the basics of the program are all there on the web, along with supporting documentation for how-it-works. The best part of this for me: All the things I like to cook (stuff my wife tells me has to be unhealthy, it tastes so good) fits right into the program.

There are sacrifices, to be sure: I am more than mildly fond of crusty breads, crêpes filled with currant jelly, pasta with various sauces (my wife – a Chinese – makes a pesto sauce that surpasses most stuff I had in Europe). This diet even allows an occasional sin – and tells how to fit it in.

But: A nice *hamburger de luxe* (cut in a little kosher salt, some freshly ground pepper and some minced shallot and grill) with a dollop of *sauce béarnaise* is some compensation. So was the ~~14-17~~ pounds shed with relatively little pain, in a matter of weeks, without boredom.

The diet works. How about nutrition? It turns out – I got this directly from Dr. Newman, whose credentials extend beyond the merely academic – there is excellent evidence from other than Atkins sources this is can be a nutritionally acceptable regimen. First, there is its earliest provenance (cf: <http://www.lowcarbining.com/llc/banting.htm> for Banting's own account, also Barry Grove's article, at <http://www.second-opinions.co.uk/banting.html>). This regimen has a long history of nutritional respectability, in short. The view is distinctly "minority opinion" – that just makes it more interesting.

What of the majority view, that this is an undesirable fad diet? First, consider the source: Physicians. Sorry, guys: An M.D. (or equivalent) is not a *scientific* credential. The medical perspective just isn't the same as that of science; on *prima facie* grounds, the received opinion of the medical fraternity is suspect. Second, beyond anecdotal evidence, there is very good empirical data – what physicians call "clinical studies" – to support the idea that this is actually a very healthy diet. For some people (me...), cholesterol drops, and "good cholesterol" rises relative to "bad cholesterol". There seem to be other plusses (e. g., lowered blood-pressure); you can read them for yourself.

Are there problems? Sure. The Atkins Center crew itself acknowledges this, and has a variety of answers for them – e. g.,

people whose reponse to the program is not ideal, or whose attendant medical conditions dictate different approaches. This is no one-size-fits-all program; that itself suggests this is not a bad medical practice, including as it does, the skills of the artful medical practitioner in the mix.

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Sidebar 2: A simple mousse, er, chiffon, er, whatever...

Ingredients:

- Two envelopes Knox unflavored gelatin
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of very hot water; 1 cup of ice and water (mostly ice)
- $\frac{1}{3}$ rd cup cocoa, maybe a bit more (say, "heaping"?...)
[There is no reason why one couldn't use melted baker's chocolate, say $2\frac{1}{2}$ squares; cocoa is neater and easier to use in this case.]
- The equivalent of $\frac{2}{3}$ cup of sugar, in no-cal sweetner (the actual amount varies on by brand and so on)
- 1 8oz. package of cream cheese (or Neufchatel - same results, lower calories).

Put the cocoa, the sweetner and gelatin in a blender (mine is an *original* Waring...). Add the hot water and pulse the blender to dissolve everything thoroughly. Add the ice/water to the mix, and again blend thoroughly, so that the ice is completely mixed in and the whole thing is homogenous. Then put in the cream cheese, cut in to three pieces to make it easier to blend. Blend very completely and pour into a container, or *pots de crème* or whatever. Or let it thicken a bit and use with, say, orange or cherry versions to make parfait or.... Well, you get the idea. The whole thing ends up tasting somewhere between an egg cream and chocolate cheese cake.

One could do traditional chocolate mousse, actually, just substituting no-cal sweetener for sugar, but that's more involved (egg

whites, whipped cream, and so on). This is really very satisfying, I think.

Fruit-flavored mousses are easier still. I dissolve a package of no-cal fruit gelatin (lime is great, cherry is lovely, orange gets kids' attention) in three-quarters cup of hot water in the blender, then add the cup of ice-cubes-and-cold water for the quick-setting method. Hit the blender briefly, then add an eight-ounce package of cream-cheese (or Neufchatel - save some calories, with the same low-carb rating) and blend completely. Pour into dishes or whatever and chill until set. This sets better than the chocolate and could be used to make fancy Chinese-bakery style "cakes". [I'm working on that...]

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