

The Other Atkins Revolution

Atkins and the Shifting Culture of Dieting

OVER THE PAST COUPLE OF YEARS, the Atkins diet and other high-protein/low-carbohydrate regimens have moved from trendy cult status to the mainstream of American weight-loss programs, and in so doing they have transformed the food landscape with breathtaking speed. High-protein energy bars and carb-lite chocolates rival Snickers and Trident for candy-shelf space; low-carb sports drinks and ready-made meals are ubiquitous. Not about to miss out on a good thing, the food industry in 2003 churned out six hundred low-carb products, including catsup, beer, lattés, pasta, ice cream, orange juice, and even dog food (costing more than their regular-carb counterparts, of course). The tally for new products in 2004 promises to be even higher. Grocery and drug stores offer entire low-carb departments, and every week shops devoted solely to low-carb products open across the United States, many of which have begun selling franchises.¹

Restaurants and caterers have gone from removing a hamburger bun at an individual customer's request to creating menus featuring Atkins-like meal options. After fast-food chain Hardee's announced in November 2003 its new Thickburger, a hamburger or cheeseburger wrapped in lettuce leaves instead of a bun, burger joints all over the country have followed suit. The "casual American dining" chain T.G.I. Friday's has partnered with Atkins to offer such Atkins-approved menu options as Tuscan Spinach Dip and Buffalo Wings and Sizzling N.Y. Strip with Bleu Cheese to the estimated one-fifth of its customers on Atkins. One Baltimore restaurant encourages customers to tell their servers to "Atkins it" if they want the bread and pasta left in the kitchen.²

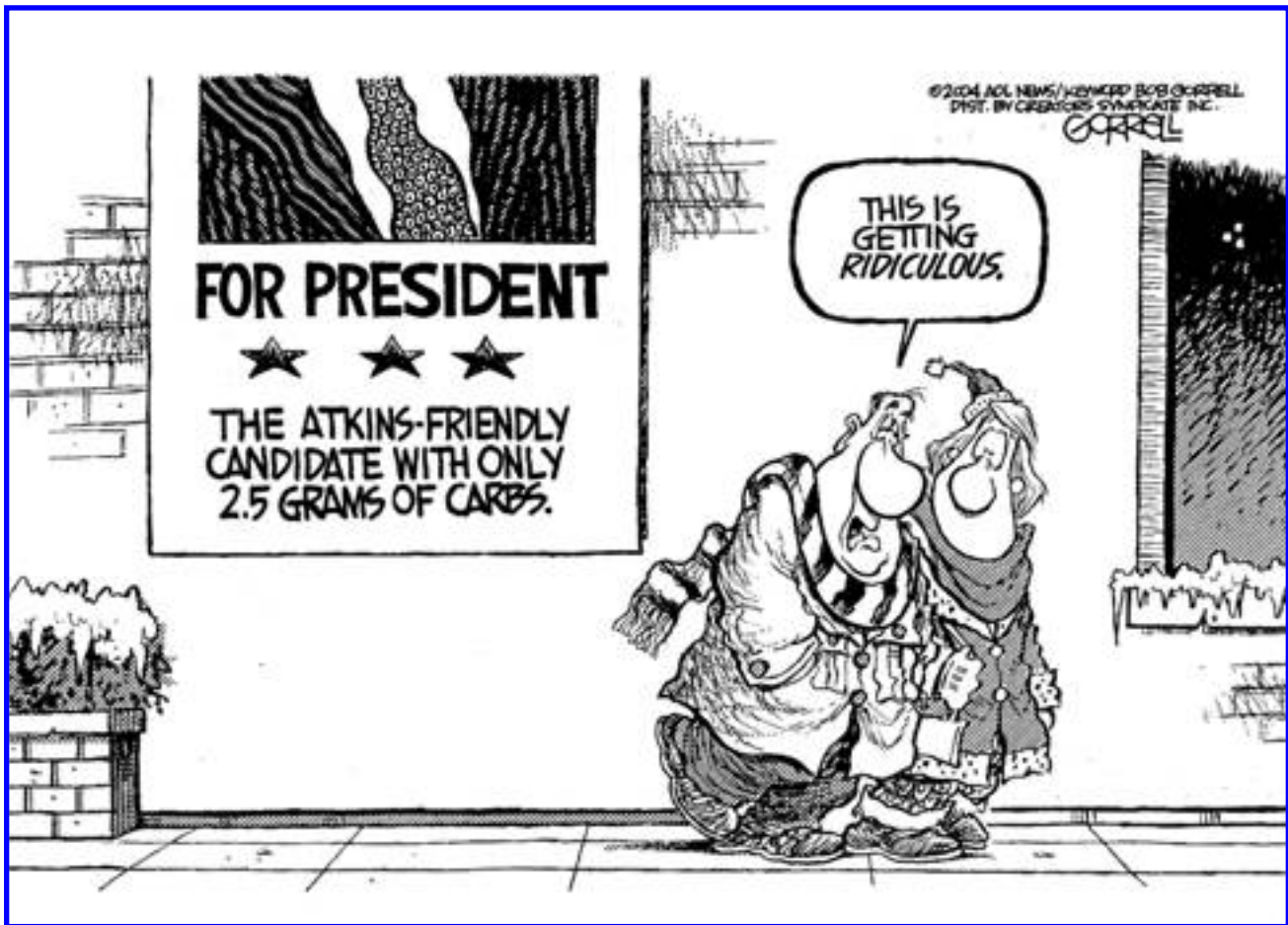
Bread, cereal, rice, potatoes, and orange juice sales are down; bacon, pork rinds, beef jerky, egg, and sausage consumption are up. Until a mad cow found its way south from Canada, beef consumption was up as well, though it's not clear that the scare will have a long-term effect on the beef industry. Those food producers and retailers featuring grain-based products are hoping to ride out the current anticarb swell. Pizzerias are trying to figure out how to offer their own low-carb versions. Italian restaurants hide their linguini and farfalle specials and instead feature cuts of beef or salads in

their advertising. Bakeries as well as potato producers are launching campaigns to fight against the low-carb tide—even as bakers rush to develop their own versions of low-carb breads, rolls, and muffins. Many are still scratching their heads over the dramatic shift in what is now considered diet food: low-carb dieters consume large quantities of Atkins-sanctioned bacon and pork rinds, now that pretzels, carrots, and grapes are off-limits.³

As Americans continue to lose the battle of the bulge, more and more people are turning to the once-scorned high-protein diets with, it appears, surprisingly successful results, at least in the short term. Those on high-protein regimens have not yet exhibited the skyrocketing cholesterol levels, heart disease, and kidney problems experts predicted. Although several studies show that those following a traditional low-fat diet have the best chance of keeping weight off in the long term, the verdict is still out on the ultimate effects of "Atkins," as these low-carb diets are often collectively called. The few studies that have been conducted so far seem to indicate that low-carb diets may be at least as effective as any other diet. Thus, Americans in increasing numbers flock to Atkins—or South Beach, the Zone, Protein Power, or Sugar Busters—as their savior; the latest survey estimates twenty-four million Americans are on some form of low-carb diet, with another thirty to forty million contemplating doing the same. "If this is a fad," suggested one food industry executive, "it's the biggest fad that I've ever seen in my life."⁴

Of all the popular high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets, Atkins is the most well known—the most notorious, some would argue. In 1972 cardiologist Robert C. Atkins published *Dr. Atkins' Diet Revolution*. In 1992 Atkins reissued the book, and in 2002, just before an accidental fall that killed him, he published an updated version, *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution*. Together the books have sold over fifteen million copies and have been read by perhaps three times that many people. "Atkins has become [to low-carb diets] something like Kleenex is to facial tissue," one industry watcher surmised.⁵

Although low-carb diets have been popular in the past, this current cycle seems qualitatively different. Not only



are record numbers of overweight and diabetic Americans desperate to lose weight, but men in particular seem drawn to such diets. What is more, Atkins allows men to feel comfortable admitting in public that they are dieting. One hotel chain catering to the (predominantly male) business traveler estimates that a quarter of its clientele is on some form of high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet.⁶ Anecdotal evidence bears this out as well. Each week I hear more stories about a friend, or someone's brother, partner, or husband, dropping pounds after being on Atkins for only a few weeks. Indeed, companies such as Atkins Nutritionals, the parent company of Atkins books and products, appear to be courting the male dieter with resolve.

That Atkins has allowed men to come out of the closet with regard to dieting has interesting implications for food in our culture, including the masculinization of dieting—or, at least, a tempering of its strongly traditional female persona. Further, because of the centrality of animal foods in the diet, Atkins transgresses traditional boundaries of class and ethnicity to construct new notions of what constitutes an acceptable meal, even as it rehabilitates traditional class-bound foods such as pork rinds. My observations, based on over two dozen interviews with men and women who

have tried or are currently on Atkins or some other low-carbohydrate/high-protein diet, comprise a solid basis for argument when combined with other contemporary data. Though it is difficult to capture the cultural implications of Americans' attitudes toward diets and dieting, it is nonetheless an intriguing and important exercise in this era of rapidly changing food-consumption habits.

An Atkins Primer

The Atkins diet, in a nutshell, can be summed up this way: Most carbohydrates = bad, protein = good, fat = underrated. The basic underlying premise of Atkins is that an excess of carbohydrates—starches and sugars—is the main culprit in preventing weight loss. As spelled out in the friendly, accessible language of *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution* (Avon, 2002), our body, needing energy to function, burns glucose (also called blood sugar) made from carbohydrates. Limiting the number of carbohydrates we consume allows our bodies to burn energy from stored body fat and thus lose weight. Further, limiting carbohydrates—"carbs" in Atkins parlance—also helps to stabilize and limit the production of insulin, the glucose-regulating hormone in the body. Not only can too much

insulin in the bloodstream prevent weight loss, Atkins argues, but it can also lead to a medical condition, hyperinsulinism, which can contribute to a whole host of health problems, including diabetes (pp.51–54). Though Atkins distinguishes between healthy and unhealthy carbohydrates—fiber-rich whole grains are better—the book confidently lists the offenders: “those [carbohydrates] lurking in the sugar bowl and the bin of white flour, along with milk, white rice and processed and refined foods of all kinds...[and] fruit juices” (p.22). Also off-limits are caffeine (said to induce sugar cravings) and alcohol, most fruits, and many vegetables. Whereas carbohydrates are vilified, Atkins seeks to rehabilitate fat’s sorry reputation. “Contrary to what you may have heard,” he explains, “fat can be good for you!” (p.55). Dieters are especially encouraged in the first few weeks “to be unafraid of natural fat,” which is defined as butter, cream, hard cheeses, olive oil, and the fat in meats, poultry, and fish (pp.138–139), but they are warned to stay away from “evil trans fats.”

With Atkins, taboo foods are those that register too high on the glycemic index. The glycemic index, devised originally for people with diabetes, gauges how fast a food item containing a specific amount of carbohydrate (usually 50 grams) breaks down into glucose in the bloodstream after it is eaten, in comparison with standard, usually white, bread or pure glucose (p.78). Foods are ranked on a scale from 1 to 100; carrots, for example, come in at 71 (high), whereas peanuts are at 14 (low). A baked potato is even higher, at 85 (pp.80–82). Although Atkins calls the glycemic index “a beautiful tool” (p.78), many health professionals are skeptical of its primacy for weight loss. Further, they consider the index controversial in that it ends up throwing out nutrient-rich carrots, for instance, because they are high on the glycemic index, even though it would take a garden full of carrots to equal 50 grams of carbohydrate. They also point out that the index fails to take into consideration the total number of calories in foods. A bowl of Haagen-Dazs ice cream, for example, raises blood glucose at a lower rate than a baked potato because the fat in ice cream functions to lower the glycemic index level (though Atkins prohibits Haagen-Dazs anyway).⁷ Although Atkins claims to be vegetable friendly, many vegetables are clearly off-limits, and those that are allowed must be eaten in combination with protein. As for fruits, after the first two weeks lower-carb berries (a half cup) or melon (a quarter slice) are permitted, but overall fruits are highly marginalized.

As one might imagine Atkins is not for anyone squeamish about animal flesh. The book admits that strict vegetarians probably could not adhere to the rigorous two-week Induction phase, though later phases perhaps could be managed. “In

general,” it notes, “[Strict vegetarians] find [Atkins] too boring”—as well as ethically distasteful, no doubt (p.149). Similar to mainstream low-fat diets, Atkins forbids highly processed foods, especially foods laden with processed sugar and flour. Atkins urges dieters to “be food aware” and to eat the foods “nature intended you to eat [i.e., unprocessed]. That packaged refined carbohydrate stuff in the supermarket puts money in somebody’s pocket. And it puts garbage in your stomach” (p.221).

The Atkins diet is divided into four phases, Induction, On-going Weight Loss (OWL), Pre-maintenance, and Maintenance. Reminiscent of military boot camp, the two-week Induction period limits carbs most severely, forcing the body into what is called “ketosis” (the 2002 revised version of *Diet Revolution* also uses the term “lipolysis”). Ketosis, said to jumpstart weight loss, also has the infamous side effects of bad breath and constipation (p.57). During Induction, in particular, because so many foods are off-limits, it is easier to talk about what is allowed rather than what is verboten. Permitted are fish, fowl, shellfish, red meat, eggs, hard cheeses, butter, and vegetable oils and in restricted amounts cream, olives, avocados, and dark-green vegetables. Thus, during Induction a suggested day’s breakfast menu might be a three-egg omelet with avocado, mozzarella cheese, and tomato and decaf coffee with cream; for lunch, an eight-ounce beef round steak, spinach, and a mixed-leaf salad (two cups) with mushrooms, onions, celery, and parmesan cheese; and for dinner, nine ounces of broiled salmon and kale (one cup) topped with garlic, lemon, and sesame seeds (p.133).

Although it is true that a dieter on Atkins is not told to count calories and to “eat until full,” Atkins points out that dieters should try to avoid overeating (p.138). After Induction dieters move into On-going Weight Loss (OWL) until they are within five to ten pounds of their weight goal. Then they progress to the Pre-maintenance phase, which gradually moves them into the more regular Maintenance phase—the so-called Atkins for Life eating pattern. Each phase adds back some foods with higher carbohydrate counts, including seeds and nuts, limited quantities of vegetables, and some fruits and whole grains, but still dieters are warned that it’s best never to have another slice of pizza or bowl of ice cream—or even a baked potato (pp.220, 254). Throughout the diet Atkins recommends a variety of supplements, including a vitamin/mineral pill, omega-3 fatty acids, L-glutamine tablets to ward off sugar cravings, and a fiber supplement to prevent constipation (p.136). Though exercise is highlighted—chapter 22 is entitled “Exercise: It’s Non-negotiable”—its discussion is contained and kept separate from the book’s main focus on food consumption.

Whereas Atkins is famous for its stringency, most other popular low-carbohydrate diets, including the South Beach Diet, Sugar Busters, Protein Power, and the Zone, take a more moderate approach. Nearly all ascribe to the glycemic index theory, yet these other low-carb diets allow more unrefined carbohydrates and more fruits and vegetables, legumes, and dairy products. They also restrict saturated fats more than the Atkins diet does. Bacon and butter are not staples, for instance, on South Beach, as they are on Atkins.

2002: The Tipping Point

Although the Atkins diet, along with other low-carb diets, had an earlier surge of popularity in the 1970s, in light of studies showing links between fat intake and heart disease and arteriosclerosis, it was ultimately dismissed as a fad diet by most of the medical and nutritional community. Through the ensuing couple of decades, however, the Atkins diet maintained a modicum of popularity, largely due to the tireless promotional efforts of its founder.

In 1992 the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) replaced the traditional Four Food Groups (meat, dairy, vegetables/fruits, and grains) with the current Food Guide Pyramid, which privileged grains and produce above meat and dairy. In so doing it helped to solidify low-fat diets as the dominant form of sanctioned dieting. Americans' rates of obesity and overweight kept increasing, however, due in part to ballooning portion sizes, substitution of sugars for fats in processed foods, and lack of exercise. In the early twenty-first century obesity reached epidemic proportions, according to the US Surgeon General. By 2001 over 60 percent of Americans were overweight, a third of those being obese, and the number of adults and children contracting diabetes was at an all-time high.⁸

By the late 1990s journalists began noting a subtle shift from low fat as the dominant approach to weight loss and healthy eating to an emerging emphasis on low carb. One noted that an increasing number of business travelers, for example, were requesting low-carb meals on airplanes or in business hotels. Another focused on the number of restaurants altering menus to accommodate high-protein/low-carb diners. The commentary reached an apex in July 2002, when science journalist Gary Taubes published an article, "What If It's All Been a Big Fat Lie?" in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. Taubes questioned the validity of low-fat diets and, in fact, blamed the low-fat gospel preached in the 1980s and 1990s as one of the catalysts for rising levels of obesity and diabetes.⁹ Taubes wondered—provocatively—whether Atkins was on to something.

The article unleashed a floodgate of discussion about conventional notions of dieting and weight loss. While journalists, academics, and medical doctors seized upon Taubes's work and found flaws in both his article and in the scientific research that informed it, radio and television programs debated low fat versus low carb.¹⁰ Several months later a handful of preliminary studies seemed to validate the Atkins approach. The studies found that people on the Atkins diet lost as much or more than people on a low-fat diet, at least in the short term. At the same time, the Atkins group experienced no change in LDL (bad) cholesterol, an increase in levels of HDL (good) cholesterol, and a drop in triglycerides (blood fats). These benefits disappeared within a year, however.¹¹ Yet the fierce refutations of Taubes's article, combined with the results of the studies—deemed insufficient by many health professionals—seemed to stimulate even more public interest in Atkins and other low-carb regimens, and sales of low-carb diet books and products rose significantly. Sales of the Atkins Nutritionals line of food products, including a low-carb bake mix, pasta, shakes, candy bars, and granola, doubled in just one year. By early 2004 Atkins was offering a door-to-door prepared-meal service in both Los Angeles and New York City. All over the United States entrepreneurs opened low-carb retail stores to brisk business, and chefs and home-meal-replacement companies found success offering low-carb menu options.¹²

At least a few *New York Times Sunday Magazine* readers, inspired by Taubes's article, lost weight by foregoing bagels, pasta, and rice and by consuming more meat, nuts, and eggs. Experts debate whether the weight loss is a result of ketosis or of a simple reduction in calories thanks to the fact that entire groups of foods are off-limits, especially those that include foods such as pretzels, popcorn, ice cream, and cookies, which seem the easiest to consume in large quantities. The result, however, is the same: pounds off, at least in the short term. Interestingly, a significant number of those influenced by "What If It's All Been a Big Fat Lie?" are men. Women and men alike have remarked that men, especially, began to lose weight quickly when they "went low carb."¹³

The Masculinization of Dieting

The hypermasculine ideal has always been defined in opposition to and in dominance over what is regarded as feminine. Thus, as one scholar relates, the first rule of traditional American manhood was "no sissy stuff: men can never do anything that even remotely suggests femininity. Manhood is a relentless repudiation of the feminine."¹⁴ Since large size is emblematic of power, for men the physical ideal



depended on being larger, having a greater physical presence. Though a muscular body was preferable to a rotund physique, men have traditionally been able to get away with a measure of portliness, as large size still adhered to this standard. Given the emphasis on slimness for the female body in American culture, along with the fact that the fundamental purpose of dieting is to deprive oneself, to make one's self smaller, it is not surprising that since the early twentieth century in the United States the public face of dieting has always been predominantly female. Thus, for a man to embrace dieting wholeheartedly potentially contained some element of threat to his masculinity; to declare that he was dieting left a man open to possible ridicule about his virility.¹⁵ So while men in some number have always intentionally tried to lose weight, they traditionally have avoided publicly acknowledging dieting in the same way as women. Of course this does not apply to all men equally. Gay men and so-called metrosexuals (heterosexual men who are comfortable engaging in traditionally female behaviors) may not have experienced this typecasting to the same extent as most heterosexual men, particularly those from the

Supermarkets have bought into the low-carb craze.

COURTESY OF AMY BENTLEY

working class and from certain ethnicities. Similarly, for body builders, wrestlers, and other serious athletes who have always rigorously controlled food intake as part of their training, publicly discussing their dieting habits has been less threatening to their masculinity largely because their activities have marked them as especially masculine.

Both men and women still regard slimness as more important for women. Yet in today's world, where equality means in part that the popular media scrutinize men's and women's bodies alike, men are being subjected to, and are responding to, social pressures to maintain fit, lean (though muscular) bodies. Like women, they have turned to dieting as a way to achieve and maintain this body image, as well as to maintain health. Atkins has helped to masculinize dieting, allowing men a greater level of comfort in the world of dieting. Men on Atkins regularly comment that what they value about the diet is how "easy it is to eat out." They do not have to feel self-conscious ordering a large piece of

animal flesh, as they might when ordering “just a salad.” Not only do men feel more comfortable admitting they are on a diet, Atkins allows men to discuss dieting with enthusiasm. In fact, the discussion of a group of low-carb male dieters resembles typical female chitchat about food, dieting, and health: what to eat, what to avoid, what to do about portion sizes, what to do when clothing doesn’t fit anymore, and so on. For many men dieting clearly has become a pleasurable topic of conversation.

One all-male group of business-school professors at a prestigious university has found a new camaraderie over low-carb dieting. Dining out together several months ago, they realized they all were following some form of low-carb/high-protein diet, with apparently great success. “We had all lost about thirty pounds,” one related later. When the animated conversation turned to ordering, they decided collectively which high-protein appetizers they would order to share among the group. Spurred on by their collective low-carb experience, the group, which one refers to as his “diet-talk friends,” continues to discuss food health and dieting, trading stories and food tips, even keeping weight and exercise charts on their computers. Nearly all agreed that Atkins and other low-carb diets seemed particularly inviting to men. The active athletes of the group noted that they have always had to be meticulous about their diets and have always discussed food, nutrition, and dieting with fellow athletes or coaches. Still, replied one athlete, “Eating a steak sounds more masculine than eating carrots.” One has even prepared a somewhat tongue-in-cheek lecture for his MBA students comparing Japanese theories of work productivity to low-carb dieting; he feels comfortable enough to include a Power Point slide of his weight chart as part of the lecture.¹⁶

Because of dieting’s largely female aura, traditional diet foods such as vegetables, fruit, fish, and low-fat salad dressings—and salads in general—have long been regarded as female foods, while meat has been squarely in the masculine category.¹⁷ Real men did not eat quiche, and they certainly avoided “rabbit food.” Strictly gendered notions of some foods may have softened, however, now that Atkins has deemed a big red steak diet food. In contrast to the salads, steamed vegetables, and broiled fish of low-fat diets, the prototypical Atkins meal sounds like something right off a steakhouse menu, oozing with testosterone: bacon strips for an appetizer, then steak, creamed spinach, and a small salad with Caesar dressing—but hold the croutons, and ditto the foil-wrapped baked potato. “There occurred a weird power imbalance when my husband, dieting on Atkins, sat down across the table from me, a vegetarian, with his ‘diet food’ plate full of steak and hunks of cheese,” one woman related.¹⁸

To some extent Atkins makes meat safer for women to consume openly and with relish—something that has not always been the case. Over a decade ago psychologists found that both men and women regarded a woman eating a small salad and seltzer as more feminine, more socially appealing, and more attractive than the *same* woman eating heavier meals containing meat.¹⁹ Although these perceptions no doubt still exist to some degree, restaurateurs are finding many more women ordering steaks and other large cuts of meat than just a few years ago, and the restaurateurs relate the change directly to Atkins.²⁰ Women may enjoy partaking in this still fairly masculine act of consumption in a way they could not, for example, comfortably smoke an after-dinner cigar, which is still deemed off-limits to women. Although Atkins may be softening the social stigma of women who consume meat in public, the relaxation of the even stronger taboo against associating men with such female activity as dieting is the more prominent effect of the two.

Also contributing to the masculine persona of Atkins is its close identification with its founder, Dr. Robert C. Atkins. In fact, most of the high-protein gurus tend to be men, thus increasing the male friendliness of low-carb dieting. Both Atkins and Arthur Agatston, MD, of the South Beach Diet began their careers as cardiologists, one of the most male-dominated medical specialties.²¹ By contrast the most prominent figures fronting low-fat diet empires are women, including Jenny Craig and Duchess of York Sarah Ferguson as the spokeswoman for Weight Watchers. Although low-fat diet promoter Dean Ornish, MD, is probably the popular equivalent to Atkins and Agatston, Ornish lacks the same cult status, in large part because his persona is not marketed along with his diet in the same way as is Atkins’s. There is no discussion of “doing Ornish,” for example, as there is of “doing Atkins.” Though Richard Simmons is one of the most public of the low-fat gurus, he seems to have a predominantly female following, perhaps because of his more fey persona. Conversely, Suzanne Somers and Susan Powter, more popular a few years ago, are two of the few women celebrities promoting a high-protein/low-carb regimen.

Indeed, it appears that Atkins capitalizes on its male-friendly persona and does what it can to make its diet, its promotional materials and Web site, and its products accessible to men.²² For example, the Atkins Web site lists dozens of “success stories”: photos and narratives of real people who have lost weight on Atkins. Of the forty-three recent Web profiles, nearly half are men, a high ratio when compared with the “success stories” at the Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig Web sites. Of the over two hundred stories posted on the Jenny Craig Web site, only sixteen are men’s. Men

profiled in the Atkins success stories often note that they heard about the diet from other men or watched another man lose weight on Atkins, which made them willing to try it. For some, dieting commences as a competition against another male to lose weight. Terry Free, for example, writes: “In February of 2002, two friends told me they had started doing Atkins. I had never heard of it, but they were losing weight so I thought I’d give it a try. I asked another friend, who only needed to lose 10 pounds, to try Atkins with me, if only for two weeks. ‘Let’s show these other two guys up,’ I said. He agreed, so I went to the Atkins website and bought a copy of *Dr. Atkins’ Diet Revolution*.”²³ Similarly, Bob Keown explains that “[A]round the time of my 36th birthday, my wife had bumped into a guy she used to work with. He’d lost 30 pounds in three months doing Atkins. I bought *Doctor Atkins’ New Diet Revolution* that afternoon.”²⁴ Others mention that part of their attraction to Atkins had to do with the foods allowed. James Guilbeaux reveals that “I’m not a big vegetable guy, and that makes it hard to go on most diets.”²⁵ One of Doug Berry’s strategies for success is, “Any time you feel hungry or tempted, make yourself a great low carb meal like a juicy rib-eye steak with asparagus drenched with butter. How can you feel deprived when you can eat like this?”²⁶ Another man summed up his attraction to Atkins by noting, “It’s a pretty cool diet. You can eat bacon and eggs and all kinds of great stuff, and get away with it.”²⁷ By contrast, one woman who tried Atkins remarked of the experience, “I know it sounds stereotypical, but when I was on Atkins all I wanted was a big fruit salad.”²⁸

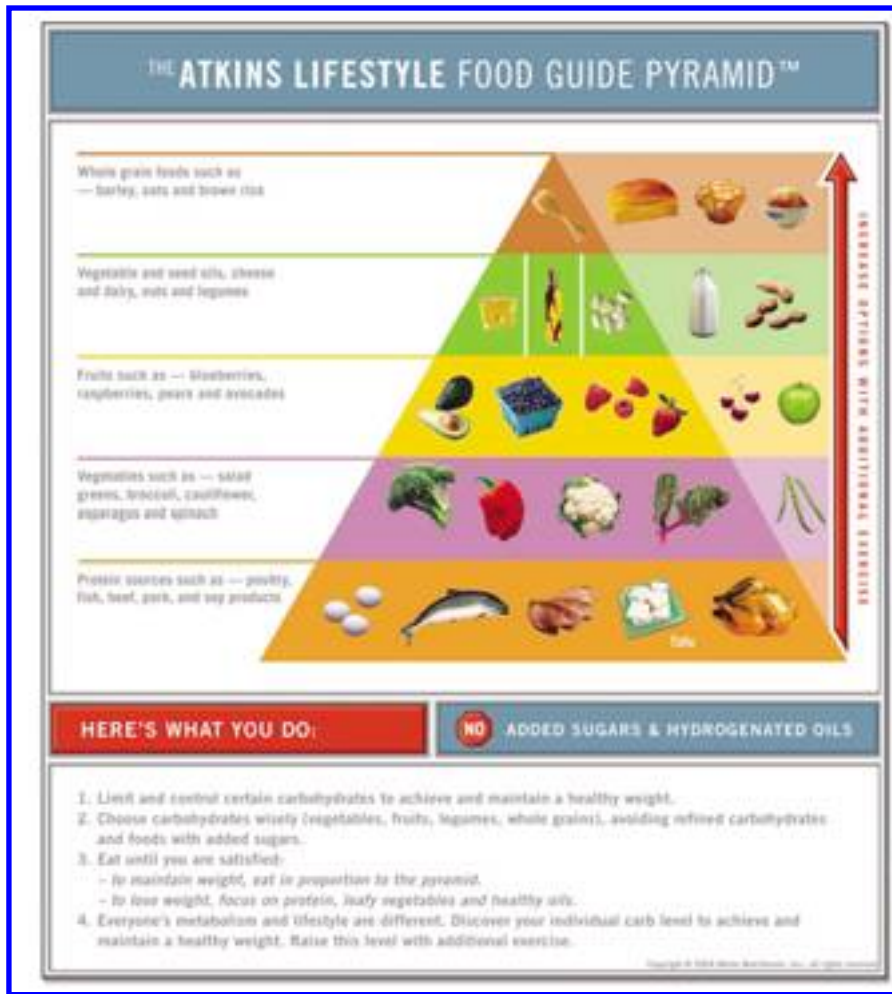
Transforming Meals and Snacks: The Disappearing “b,” White Food, and Pork Rinds

Because of the centrality of seemingly unlimited portions of animal flesh (primarily red meat but also fish and chicken), the cuisine formula of the Atkins diet has a 1950s American gestalt: “A + 2b” (meat/protein center, two vegetables on the side, one of which is usually potatoes or rice)—but minus the starch.²⁹ Atkins does encourage many vegetables, particularly the cruciferous ones, and the typical meals that dieters describe usually conform to an “A + b” structure: “a steak and green beans,” “salmon with sautéed spinach and garlic,” or “shrimp with broccoli.” However, Atkins dieters, including Tom Stansbury of Clear Lake, Texas, report that they frequently resort to an “A + a” meal structure: steak and scrambled eggs, for instance, especially when they are eating out at casual restaurants such as Denny’s.³⁰ (Whereas a steak and eggs supper used to be a favorite menu item at all-night diners, in the past twenty-five years it has lost its

luster as a meal for middle-class Americans.) Steak and cheese is also frequently listed as an Atkins meal. Many Atkins dieters admit that they find it difficult to omit the “b” starch from the meal structure; others, however, find the Atkins “A + b” or “A + a” sufficient, still considering it a meal as long as the “A” remains intact. “A salad for lunch or dinner just doesn’t do it for me,” some noted, “it doesn’t feel like a real meal.” “Now,” relates veteran Atkins dieter Mark Anthony Montaquila, “the thought of eating potatoes, rice or white bread is completely foreign to me.”³¹ Because of the centrality of “A” in the American platonic notion of a meal, omitting “A,” as Mary Douglas observes, somehow diminishes the meal to the point that it ceases to be a “meal” and instead becomes a “snack.”³² It would seem that dieters remaining on Atkins for any length of time would have to subscribe to the centrality of “A”; otherwise, eating one “A + b” or “A + a” meal after another would be too difficult.

The omitted “b” starch, often rice, potatoes, or pasta, lends itself to a devaluation of white foods. Atkins followers often cite that long-held tenet of American dieting, “Avoid anything that’s white.” This includes white flour, bread, pasta, rice, soft cheeses, yogurt, milk, sugar, and potatoes. Although the Atkins diet permits tofu, it does not seem to know what to do with it (neither do most Americans). Only two recipes in *Diet Revolution* contain tofu, Tofu Stir-Fry over Baby Spinach and Strawberry Smoothie.³³ Realistically, however, the diet precludes tofu, a high-protein food derived from soybeans, because of the centrality of animal flesh and the assumption that vegetarians avoid Atkins.

Although it may be a stretch to call Atkins “antiwhite,” one could construe the Atkins “A + b/A + a” cuisine formula as antiethnic. Atkins recommends that dieters always eat vegetables in conjunction with meat, whose fat offsets the vegetables’ higher carb count, but it also warns against concoctions of meat combined with legumes, grains, or too many vegetables, as in a casserole, stew, or stir-fry. By default this proscription functions to eliminate most ethnic cuisines. Atkins old-timers commonly advise novices to avoid ethnic restaurants, especially Italian, Mexican, Chinese, and Indian, instead recommending that they stick to steakhouses or “casual American” chains where “you can always find grilled chicken on the menu.” Although *Dr. Atkins’ New Diet Revolution* includes several ethnic recipes, such as guacamole, Chicken and Beef Satés [*sic*] with Peanut Dipping Sauce, egg drop soup, and Korean-Style Skirt Steak, the narrative of the Atkins literature as a whole, as well as the Atkins “success stories,” overwhelmingly feature unadorned pieces of animal flesh: steaks, chops, and salmon and also eggs hard-boiled or scrambled, bacon, and



The Atkins Lifestyle Food Guide Pyramid.™
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the like (though the Atkins Web site paints a broader picture). One dieter told me that this was because it was so hard to find ready-made food that adhered to Atkins. “I can’t get a slice of pizza, sushi is out, even a salad with croutons and veggies such as carrots and beets is too carb-friendly.”³⁴ Better to stick to a chunk of meat or scrambled eggs than try to doctor ethnic recipes to make them Atkins acceptable.

There are interesting class implications as well. As with any diet prohibiting such large numbers of foods, particularly foods that are cheap, industrially processed, and mass produced, people of more comfortable means are the most likely to go on Atkins. The expense creates a barrier for those with lower incomes, including many ethnic minorities. Of the forty-three Atkins success stories on the Atkins Web site, for example, all except three—two African Americans and one Latino couple—are white. Yet at the same time Atkins privileges certain lower-class, “white trash” foods and foodways, a version of Southern Appalachian cooking that is stereotypically heavy on grease and pork products.³⁵ Such Atkins staples as pork rinds, bacon, and beef jerky, along with a general enthusiasm for fat and a penchant for large portions, run contrary to bourgeois ideals of food and dining.

Indeed, a surprising consequence of Atkins is the mainstream emergence of pork rinds—the scraped, deep-fried skins of pigs (*chicharrones*) once favored among only southerners and Latinos. When in 1988 the elder George Bush listed pork rinds as his favorite snack, commentators agreed that it was an attempt to gain favor with white, working-class southern men, the so-called Bubba vote. For most Americans even aware of the existence of pork rinds, they elicit a certain amount of disgust; for those who practice religions prohibiting pork, pork rinds are not only unpalatable but inedible. Yet since 2000 pork rinds, along with beef jerky, have been the fastest growing products in the salty snack foods category, tapping into the market share traditionally held by potato and tortilla chips; in 2003 pork rind sales topped \$840 million.³⁶ Atkins dieters who miss the salty crunch of chips find solace in the sanctioned pork rinds. Middle-class Atkins enthusiasts buy cinnamon-flavored pork rinds by the case and use crushed pork rinds as a breading for fried chicken. One Yankee business executive told of always looking forward to his travels to the South where “every vending machine has a package of pork rinds.” A university administrator tells of coming home to find her Atkins-dieting husband “sitting in a chair, drinking a scotch, and dipping pork rinds into

sour cream for a snack. Before Atkins, he would have never done that.”³⁷ One journalist, commenting on the increase in pork-rind consumption, spotlights Sandy Clark, described as “female, white-collar, health-conscious, and Jewish—lousy demographics for peddling deep-fried pigskin.” While consuming two bags of pork rinds a week, Clark has lost seventeen pounds since starting Atkins.³⁸

The end result is a complicated notion of class and food that allows these “white trash” foods to edge their way into upper-middle-class respectability. Pierre Bourdieu has shown that in the realm of food “taste” in its broadest definition can be examined and identified in terms of class. A low-fat regimen, adequate and persistent exercise, and a lean body are representative of an upper-middle-class taste culture (“habitus,” as Bourdieu terms it), providing those who can attain it a kind of cultural capital.³⁹ In contrast, bodies and consumption habits that do not conform are regarded as somehow lacking in moral fortitude. In American culture people who are overweight are commonly regarded as being so because of their own inner, moral deficiencies. Similarly, whereas both low-fat and Atkins foodways can be called “white” (here in the sense of Caucasian) by virtue of its bourgeois class sensibility, a low-fat regimen embodies the ideal qualities of whiteness that Americans consider more deserving, somehow more virtuous. Barbara Ehrenreich, commenting on the challenge of Atkins to mainstream low-fat notions of health and diet, wholeheartedly agrees. “In the last couple of decades,” she argues, “the low-fat way of life has become an important indicator of social rank... impervious to critique [because of the] identification of low-fat with virtue and fat with the long-suspected underclass tendency to self-indulgence.”⁴⁰ Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, Ehrenreich gleefully revels in the more working-class Atkins approach that now challenges the prevailing (class-bound, as she sees it) low-fat gestalt. Thus, the recent popularity of Atkins among educated, economically successful Americans has begun to create a space for pork rinds and beef jerky in the landscape of mainstream American foodways.

An Atkins Discourse

Until the last couple of years, most Americans rarely questioned the perceived wisdom of “low-calorie, low-fat, high-fiber, lots of fruits and vegetables, limited amounts of animal foods.” To be sure, there have always been fad diets cycling in and out of popularity, but with Atkins and other high-fat/high-protein/low-carb diets a sea change seems to be occurring. Low-carb dieting found mainstream acceptance so rapidly this time around (as opposed to its 1970s

incarnation) in reaction to alarming reports of obesity reaching epidemic proportions, with life-threatening health consequences. Most alarmingly, children are getting fatter, the consequence of which, among others, is rising rates of “adult” Type 2 diabetes in children. Atkins’s masculine persona allowed a good portion of the population who had never felt comfortable with dieting to regard it more favorably. That the medical establishment seemed virtually unanimous in its opposition to Atkins seemed not to matter. After all, Americans have long been skeptical of nutritional information, some of which changes radically over the decades.

Take eggs, for example, which were largely out of favor in the low-fat discourse but which, according to Atkins, are now firmly rehabilitated. A couple of decades ago Americans were told that the high cholesterol in eggs made them too dangerous; consuming one or two per week was the limit. Eventually, this declaration was restricted to just the yolks. More recently the public has been told that whole eggs are fine, as long as consumption is kept to a half dozen or so per week.⁴¹ On Atkins, by contrast, eggs are a “good” diet food, apparently replacing bread, rice, and pasta as a staple. Atkins dieters consume them by the dozen, and at all meals.

Thus, as Atkins and other low-carbohydrate diets challenge the primacy of traditional low-fat diets, what has emerged is a competing dieting discourse that challenges and parallels, without fully displacing, the standard low-fat discourse. In many respects the two discourses differ dramatically: One counts calories and fat grams; the other tracks carbohydrates, seeing calories as secondary. One demonizes high-fat foods while the other outlaws high-carb foods. One encourages lots of fruits and vegetables prepared with little or no fat; the other deems most produce off-limits and recommends that vegetables be prepared with fat or eaten in combination with animal foods. One throws out bacon and pork rinds; the other celebrates them. One preaches restraint and deprivation; the other gives the appearance of sanctioning abundance and excess.⁴² Overall, the rules of food consumption—what is celebrated, what is taboo, what is a diet staple, and the rules of eating—are strikingly different. One man formerly on Atkins remembered, “For a snack during the day I would go into a deli and buy a half-pound of pastrami and eat the whole package of meat, maybe with some mustard, right then and there.”⁴³

To stretch the comparison a bit further we might say that one approach personifies the feminine and the other embodies the masculine, although we all know men who gravitate to a low-fat diet and women who find low carb a more natural fit. Studies on gendered food and eating patterns point to the conclusion that, whereas women are more likely to be

characterized by what they don't eat (food restriction through dieting), men are more likely to be characterized by what they consume (heavier, more masculine foods).⁴⁴

Occasionally, the two approaches cross over, such as both opposing highly processed ice cream, cake, and other treats that are high in fat, sugar, and carbohydrates—items that contain the “bad” elements of each diet. Yet both have spawned profitable and booming industries of (low-fat or low-carb) highly-processed products, and just as low-fat dieters cannot eat a whole box of Snackwell's low-fat cookies and expect to lose weight, neither can low-carb dieters eat large quantities of Atkins Crunchers chips or Atkins Advantage candy bars and expect to lose weight. Indeed, some Atkins dieters who consume too many of these low-carb products are wondering why they aren't losing weight.⁴⁵ Of course, it is important to remember that few Americans' eating patterns conform exclusively to either diet. Most of us prefer our carbohydrates, fats, and proteins all at once, and in abundance, although recent statistics indicate that Americans might be eating healthier in some ways.⁴⁶

It remains to be seen whether people can really go “Atkins for life” and permanently avoid grains and sugars and dairy; nutrition professionals are highly skeptical. Even Atkins knows this. While Atkins's latest advertising distances itself from red meat by promoting the wide variety of (minimally processed) foods one can eat on the diet, including fresh produce and seafood, Atkins Nutritionals (and others) have developed a burgeoning line of “carb-controlled” products comprised largely of grain-based foods (the Morning Start and Quick-Cuisine lines): low-carb breads, cereals, muffin mixes, bagels, and juice substitutes. For Americans used to the now-ubiquitous carb-centric breakfast of cereal, toast, and juice, switching permanently to breakfasts of bacon and eggs is a sharp and difficult deviation. One Atkins follower found himself depressed on the diet, but once he defied conventional Atkins wisdom and began to have a bowl of oatmeal every morning for breakfast, his mood brightened considerably. Desserts, the second most prominent category of Atkins Nutritionals products—the line is named “Indulge”—is another tradition Americans will find hard to give up permanently. Aware of these difficulties, Atkins Nutritionals in its mail order catalog reminds readers: “Here's a sweet reward for all of your healthy eating, Atkins Indulge Chocolate Candy Bars.”⁴⁷

Although Atkins certainly has its share of dieters who have tried and failed, it has fervent advocates who are evangelical in their enthusiasm. Impassioned testimonials for other diets exist, but both men and women on Atkins are particularly ardent about their diet regimen. Dieters have

been described as exhibiting a religious fervor to their commitment. Furthermore, there exists a common parlance widely understood and used by Atkins followers and promoted by Atkins materials. People talk about “doing Atkins,” the “Atkins approach,” or the “Atkins Nutritional Lifestyle.”⁴⁸ Restrictive eating regimens require that people practice their adherence both in private (home) and in public (restaurants, social events, others' homes). Strict food rules function to increase people's commitment (or hasten their exit), in that they hinder where and with whom people can associate. Thus, although dieters may vary in their practice of Atkins, the “differentness” of high fat and protein and low carb plus the extremes required—think of Induction—necessitates that people declare their allegiance to Atkins. One cannot follow Atkins—eat lots of high-fat, high-protein foods—and lose weight while still eating regular amounts of carbohydrates. Indeed, one will almost certainly gain weight. Atkins followers, then, can't have it both ways; they have to choose low fat or low carb. As low-carb eating reaches more and more into the mainstream, this identity may become somewhat diluted, but for those on Atkins following the most restrictive low-carb lifestyle of all, there may remain a strong group identity bounded by restricted notions of eating—a group that is largely white, economically stable if not affluent, and highly male.

Just as the current high-fat, high-sugar American diet is changing global foodways and health, especially in developing countries, it will be interesting to see, as with other American exports, how and to what degree the “Atkins approach” travels worldwide. Even though it is impossible to imagine people doing away permanently with grains, dairy, and sugar, there is evidence that low-carb approaches to diet and health are beginning to take hold across the ocean. Low-carb diets are a new vogue in Britain. Pasta-loving Italians, who for the first time are experiencing rising rates of obesity, appear to be attracted to low-carb diets in increasing numbers; even the Pope has reportedly been following the Zone diet.⁴⁹ As the world continues to be more closely connected, a global economic elite is emerging who have much in common with each other, perhaps more than with their lower-class fellow citizens.⁵⁰ It will be interesting to observe whether Atkins will be exported among this elite class, be absorbed into local foodways (similar to the American exportation of Spam to Asia), and ultimately influence both haute and vernacular cuisines. “Eating,” observes anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, “calls for habituation, even in the most upscale environments where food has become largely dominated by ideas of beauty and comportment rather than by ideas of energy and sufficiency.”⁵¹

If Atkins continues to increase in popularity, what will it mean for us at home? The permanent rehabilitation of nuts, eggs, meat, beef jerky, and the mainstream emergence of pork rinds? The end of potato and tortilla chip hegemony? The furor over the December 2003 discovery of mad cow disease on United States soil has abated, but if more diseased cattle are found in the American food chain, will this translate into dampening enthusiasm for Atkins or a stronger shift toward other kinds of animal flesh? Or neither? Journalists reported that many low-carb enthusiasts appeared unfazed by the mad cow news and were determined to continue eating steaks and bunless burgers. “Just bring on the beef,” wrote one low-carber in an Atkins Internet chat room.⁵² If meat consumption continues to increase, what will be the environmental effects of the need for more feed, increased animal wastes, and possible further consolidation of the beef industry? Will there be an effect on rates of coronary and kidney diseases? Will Atkins ultimately alter the mainstream “A+2b” meal formula, or will it go by the wayside as other diets have?⁵³

It is doubtful that the low-carb/high-protein/high-fat diets will subsume our traditional ways of eating, just as a strict low-fat diet has not permanently altered our eating habits, yet it will be interesting to see the future effects of Atkins on culture, the environment, health, politics, and economics. Whatever these results, the current popularity of Atkins is due in part to its Americanness—built on large chunks of animal flesh, particularly red meat—the same high-status food that has traditionally stood for abundance, wealth, and power. It is not surprising that men have gravitated to Atkins. ●

NOTES

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16. Personal interviews, notes in author’s possession.

17. This is true for other, more universal, reasons as well. Eastern thought, for example, has long associated the masculine yang with meat and the feminine yin with fruits and vegetables.

18. Dessert is usually off-limits on the Atkins diet, a fact that also corresponds to traditional notions of masculinity. The absence of caffeine and alcohol no doubt increases the difficulty for those stringently adhering to Atkins.

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20. Personal interviews.
21. Abby Goodnough, "New Doctor, New Diet, but Still No Cookies," *New York Times*, 7 October 2003, F1.
22. My requests to speak with someone at Atkins Nutritionals were denied. The only information I could obtain was a brief statement from a public-relations spokesperson. I asked her if Atkins had any information about the ratio of men to women who followed Atkins and also whether Atkins paid particular attention to gender as it designed its marketing plans and promotional materials. Her reply was, "Atkins used to be considered a man's diet a few years ago, but now our customers are 50/50 [men and women]." Although I considered this an inadequate answer, even an equal ratio of men to women following the diet would be considered a high number of male adherents (phone conversation 20 November 2003).
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28. Personal interview.
29. Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," *Daedalus* 101 (Winter 1972): 61–81.
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39. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 197.
40. Barbara Ehrenreich, "Got Grease?" *Los Angeles Times*, 11 August 2002, M6.
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