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The Atkins Diet and Philosophy

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Men on Atkins: Dieting, Meat, and Masculinity

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"You get to eat a ton of red meat." That's how most people respond when asked to describe the Atkins Diet. There's no question that Atkins is unusual, even compared to other popular low-carb diets, in that it prescribes, even encourages, the consumption of meat and other high-protein, high-fat animal-derived foods such as hard cheese, bacon, sour cream, pork rinds, and beef jerky. In fact, under Atkins what can be considered "diet food" has left many Americans scratching their heads: low-carb dieters consume large quantities of Atkins-sanctioned bacon and pork rinds now that pretzels, grapes, even the ubiquitous carrot stick—healthy snacks in the low-fat diet regimen—are considered off limits because they contain too many carbohydrates.

Meat, naked and unadorned, seems to be at the forefront of every low-carb meal, and it seems as if the entire food industry has shifted in part to cater to the "Atkins lifestyle." Fast-food joints, high-end restaurants, and everything in between have gone from removing the bread or pasta at an individual customer's request to creating menus featuring Atkins-like meal options. 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."

Because of its emphasis on red meat the Atkins Diet takes on a strongly male persona, which has allowed men to come out of the dieting closet. Many men feel much more comfortable

admitting to being on Atkins and other low-carb diets, unlike the more traditional low-fat diets that feature such "female" foods as fruits and vegetables, fish, grains, and low-fat dairy products. In fact, the whole widespread popularity of Atkins has had interesting implications for food in our culture, including the "masculinization" of dieting—or, at least, a tempering of its strongly traditional female connection.

Understanding Masculinity

"Masculinity" is one of those concepts that everyone understands but can't readily define. If you asked your teen-aged brother to describe what being masculine means, he might respond with something like, "It's not feminine." Or, "It's being a guy." Or, "It's liking trucks and guns and football, and not liking ballet and tear-jerker movies on the Lifetime channel." And in part he is right, since these crass generalizations begin to set up what is called the "hypermasculine" ideal construction of maleness: stereotyped ideas about being male and female that have little to do with biology but a lot to do with agreed-upon rules of what is "normal" in society.[1] Philosopher Patrick D. Hopkins has noted that when in high school, a football player would insult another by calling him a "girl." "Girl," explains Hopkins, "signifie[d] a failure of masculinity, a failure of living up to a gendered standard of behavior, and a gendered standard of identity."[2]

To explain a bit further, throughout most of history most societies, including our own Western culture, have been built on patriarchy. Men (at least those of the privileged class) have held more political power, have had more access to wealth, have been given more legal rights, and have had more opportunities for education. Men have been valued more highly than women; what is "male" has been regarded as "better" than what is "female."

[1] For a more detailed discussion, see John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to be a Man* (Portland: Breitenbush, 1989).
[2] Patrick D. Hopkins, "Gender Treachery: Homophobia, Masculinity, and Threatened Identities," in Larry May, Robert Strikwerda, and Patrick D. Hopkins, eds., *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), p. 96.

In fact, the idea of "masculine" has always been defined in opposition to and in dominance over what is regarded as female. One scholar of masculinity notes that the first rule of traditional American manhood has been "no sissy stuff: men can never do anything that even remotely suggests femininity. Manhood is a relentless repudiation of the feminine."[3] This is why homosexuality throws these stereotypical assumptions about masculinity into question, because it blurs, even destabilizes, the strict, prescriptive notions of masculine and feminine. Further, ideal notions of masculinity are under pressure for economic reasons. Given that a sense of masculinity has been linked to economic production, to being the family breadwinner, in the current economic climate of uncertainty it is impossible (and for many undesirable) for most men to "win the bread" solely by themselves.[4]

While these strict definitions and notions of female and male have largely diminished today, we can still see lingering remnants. Women wear pants in public; one rarely sees a man wearing a skirt. It seems more normal for a woman to like football, for instance, than it does for a man to like ballet or hopscotch. Similarly, a woman is usually regarded positively when pursuing the male-dominated field of engineering, while a man who willingly becomes a stay-at-home parent often faces questions over his masculinity. Because of the long-standing hierarchy of men over women, when women take on traditionally male-dominated professions they are elevating their status; conversely, when men assume traditionally female roles they are demeaning themselves by acting "womanish." Notions of gender-appropriate activities also include dieting, which has long been regarded as a female activity.

(Un)Manliness and Dieting

Body size and dieting nicely illustrate the concepts of masculinity and femininity. Since large size symbolizes power, throughout much of history the ideal body for men has depended in part on

[3] Michael Kimmel, "Clarence, William, Iron Mike, Magic—and Us," *Changing Men* (Winter–Spring 1993), pp. 9–10.
[4] Larry May and Robert A. Strikwerda, "Fatherhood and Nuturance," in *Rethinking Masculinity*, pp. 193–210.

being larger than women's, on having a greater physical presence. Though a muscular body is preferable to a rotund physique, men have traditionally been able to get away with a measure of portliness. By contrast, women are supposed to be smaller. Given the emphasis modern Western culture places on female slimness, along with the fact that the fundamental purpose of dieting is to deprive yourself in order to make yourself smaller, it is not surprising that since the early twentieth century in the United States dieting has always been thought of as a female activity.

Because of this, for a man to embrace dieting wholeheartedly potentially contained some element of threat to his masculinity; to declare publicly that he was dieting left a man open to possible ridicule about his virility. So while men in some number have always intentionally tried to lose weight, they traditionally have avoided publicly admitting to 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 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.

In the twenty-first century, 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.

Enter Atkins

Atkins has helped to masculinize dieting, allowing men a greater level of comfort in the world of dieting.[5] Men on Atkins regu-

[5] Judith Weinraub, "Suddenly It's a Guy Thing; In the Beginning, Before Low-Carb

larly 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.

I know of one all-male group of business-school professors at a prestigious university that has found a new camaraderie over low-carb dieting. While dining out together a year or so 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. 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.

Indeed, Atkins capitalizes on its male-friendly persona and does what it can to make its diet, its promotional materials and website, and its products accessible to men. For example, the Atkins website 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 to the "success stories" at the Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig websites. Of the over two hundred stories

Eating, It Wasn't Manly to Watch your Weight," *Washington Post* (29th September, 2004), p. F1.

posted on the Jenny Craig website, only sixteen are men's. (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, M.D., of the South Beach Diet began their careers as cardiologists, one of the most masculine of medical specialties.)

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 ten 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.*"[6] Similarly, Bob Keown explains, "[A]round the time of my thirty-sixth birthday, my wife had bumped into a guy she used to work with. He'd lost thirty pounds in three months doing Atkins. I bought *Doctor Atkins' New Diet Revolution* that afternoon."[7]

Food Has a Gender?

Atkins is popular with men in part because many of the foods the diet allows and even encourages its dieters to consume are stereotypically masculine. Meat, across cultures and throughout time, has been regarded as in the male domain. Some see this symbolic connection between meat and men in part the result of the legacy of hunter-gatherer days when men killed and brought home large game animals and then distributed them to the village. Women, by contrast, were traditionally responsible for trapping small game, fishing, gathering wild foods, and cultivating fruits and vegetables. While these food-gathering activi-

[6] Atkins Nutritionals, www.atkins.com, "A Successful Wager," http://atkins.com/Archive/2003/3/18-41314.html.

[7] Atkins Nutritionals, www.atkins.com, "Back in the Game," http://atkins.com/Archive/2001/12/21-882879.html.

ties no doubt accorded women their own measure of power, men controlled the high-status large, dangerous game meat, and accrued power because of it.

While meat has been squarely in the masculine category, traditional diet foods such as vegetables, fruit, fish, and low-fat salad dressings—and salads in general—have long been regarded as "female" foods. Nearly every culture symbolically associates gender with particular foods. In these cultural linkages, meat has most commonly been identified with men, and "nonmeats," especially grains, fruits, and sugars, with women. In Eastern thought, for example, the concepts of yin and yang associate meat with the masculine yang and fruits and vegetables with the feminine yin. As a child growing up in the United States I learned that little boys are made of such carnivorous delicacies as snails and puppy dog tails, while little girls are made of sugar and spice—everything "nice."[8]

These strong associations make it feel vaguely inappropriate to identify women with meat and even more strongly improper to associate men with, say, sugar or lettuce. If real men don't eat quiche, according to a popular 1970s phrase, they certainly should avoid "rabbit food." One male athlete friend of mine admitted, "Eating a steak sounds more masculine than eating carrots." Indeed, 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," a female friend related.

These strong symbolic associations are also due in part to the "you are what you eat" principle: the belief that people absorb characteristics of the foods they ingest, particularly animal flesh. In some cultures, for example, people believe eating the eyes of animals improves one's eyesight, or eating tortoise flesh produces

[8] For a thorough discussion of the symbolic meanings of meat see Nick Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (London: Routledge, 1991).

lethargy, or, in Western culture (as elsewhere), eating beef makes one "strong as an ox," a strongly masculine identification. This explains why many Americans regard a woman with a large piece of meat on her plate as less feminine than one eating a salad.

Yet strictly gendered notions of some foods may have softened, now that Atkins has deemed a big red steak diet food. 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. While 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. 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 mostly deemed off-limits to women. While Atkins may be softening the stigma of women consuming meat in public, the relaxation of the even stronger taboo associating men with such "female" activity as dieting makes it the more prominent effect of the two.

Some men have mentioned that part of their attraction to Atkins had to do with the masculine foods Atkins emphasized. James Guilbeaux reveals that "I'm not a big vegetable guy, and that makes it hard to go on most diets."[9] 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?"[10] 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."[11] By contrast, one woman who tried Atkins remarked of

[9] Atkins Nutritionals, www.atkins.com, "Surf and Turf," http://atkins.com/Archive/2002/8/14-510853.html.

[10] Atkins Nutritionals, www.atkins.com, "A Toast to Good Health," http://atkins.com/Archive/2002/11/19-211272.html.

[11] Quoted in Lisa Blank Fasig, "Retailers Happily Find that Atkins Dieters Worth Their Weight in Gold," *Cincinnati Business Courier* (29th September, 2003), www.cincinnati.bizjournals.com.

the experience, "I know it sounds stereotypical, but when I was on Atkins all I wanted was a big fruit salad."

Atkins, Masculinity, and Class

Atkins's central focus on meat has interesting implications concerning class as well as gender. A dieter following a strict Atkins regimen must give up (at least for the most part) a large number of foods, including many that are cheap, industrially processed, and mass-produced—think pretzels, cookies, chips, bread, and pasta. This restriction means that people of a more comfortable income level are more likely to go on Atkins. The added expense of the diet creates a barrier for those with lower incomes, including many ethnic minorities. Of the forty-three Atkins success stories on the Atkins website, for example, all except three—two African-Americans and one Latino couple—are Caucasian Americans. Yet at the same time Atkins grants a sort of special status to certain foods—pork rinds, bacon, beef jerky—that are best known as part of so-called white trash foods and foodways, a version of Southern Appalachian cooking that is stereotypically heavy on grease and pork products. 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 only among southerners and Latinos. When during the 1988 presidential election the elder George Bush went on record as listing 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 (an older cousin of the Nascar Dad). 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.[12] Atkins dieters

[12] Marla Dickerson, "Slim Down with . . . Pork Rinds?" *Denver Post* (8th August,

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 told me 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." 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.[13]

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. French theorist 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.[14] 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.

Low Fat versus Low Carb

As Atkins and other low-carbohydrate diets challenge the primacy of traditional low-fat diets, what has emerged is a competing set of rules about dieting that challenge and parallel, without fully displacing, the traditional low-fat diet. In many respects the two sets of rules differ dramatically: One counts calories and fat grams; the other tracks carbohydrates, seeing

2000), p. A-2; www.porkrind.com.

[13] Dickerson, "Slim Down with . . . Pork Rinds?"

[14] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 197.

calories as at best 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. 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."[15]

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 while 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).[16]

Clearly Atkins and other diets low in carbs and high in protein and fat have not replaced our traditional ways of eating, just as low-fat diets have not permanently altered Americans' eating habits. While Atkins has declined in popularity, it still maintains a substantial number of adherents, and it will be interesting to see the future effects of Atkins on culture, the environment, health, politics, and economics. Whatever these results, the popularity of Atkins is due in part to its masculine-friendly nature—built on large chunks of animal flesh, particularly red meat—the same high-status food that has traditionally stood for abundance, wealth, and power.

[15] Personal interviews.

[16] For more on gender, food, and the body, see Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).