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HEALTHY EATING NUTRIENTS

## Better Together

From green tea and lemons to red wine and fish, some foods deliver even more nutritional punch when paired. Here's how to take advantage of nature's most powerful food synergies.

By Matthew Kadey, MSC, RD / May 2010

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When patrons at Rouge Tomato — a tony restaurant in midtown Manhattan — select the Maine lobster salad or the almond crepes, they're getting much more than an ambrosial treat. Thanks to in-house dietitian Natalia Hancock, RD, who works closely with executive chef Jeremy Bearman, they're also getting a nutritional powerhouse. It turns out that many dishes at Rouge Tomato are created with a focus on "food synergy," a new type of nutritional science that emphasizes pairing nutritious ingredients to maximize their healthy benefits.

"The passion fruit vinaigrette we use on the lobster salad contains loads of antioxidants, which helps protect the structure of the omega-3 fats present in the walnuts and seafood," says Hancock. The net result? Improved omega-3 absorption.

Indulge in the crepes for dessert, Hancock says, and the almonds' vitamin E will safeguard the vitamin C found in the accompanying grapefruit and kumquats, extending its ability to wage protracted war on cell-damaging free radicals.

"It's clear that certain nutrients work together to create a bigger nutritional bang with every bite," Hancock says. "I want to make sure our customers are enjoying meals that take advantage of these powerful synergistic pairings."

Over the last few decades, there has been a mountain of research on the healing powers of individual compounds in foods, such as lycopene, vitamin D and essential fatty acids. Yet, scientists are now realizing that while an antioxidant like sulforaphane in broccoli can be a potent cancer fighter on its own, combining it with another compound such as selenium found in chicken, fish and Brazil nuts, will give you even more impressive disease-fighting results.

"Food synergy ties into the prevention of so many of our chronic illnesses, including heart disease, stroke, cancer and diabetes," says California-based dietitian Elaine Magee, MPH, RD, author of *Food Synergy: Unleash Hundreds of Powerful Healing Food Combinations to Fight Disease and Live Well* (Rodale, 2008).

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You don't have to eat in a fancy restaurant presided over by a professional nutritionist to enjoy the benefits of food synergy, either. While researchers haven't even begun to untangle all the science behind the synergy, these "power couples" can easily come together in your own kitchen — and prove that, when it comes to our diets, one plus one can easily equal three.

#### Tea With a Twist

Green tea is at the top of the functional-drink heap, promoting wellness through antioxidants called catechins, which can aid in reducing the risk of both heart disease and cancer. But if we want a bigger health boost from our tea, we should be adding a splash of citrus, says Mario Ferruzzi, PhD, associate professor of food science at Purdue University.

"In test tube and animal studies, we discovered that ascorbic acid, such as that in citrus including lemon, orange and lime juice, helps stabilize catechins in the gut and increase absorption into the bloodstream," he says. Looking for a warm-weather alternative? Brew up a batch of iced tea and add slices of lemon.

Other research suggests that pairing green tea with capsaicin (the compound that gives chili peppers their pow) can increase satiety and potentially aid in weight loss. The tag team of green tea and lycopene, present in watermelon, tomatoes and pink grapefruit, works synergistically to help men dodge prostate cancer.

#### Go Bananas for Yogurt

Yogurt and other fermented foods, such as kefir, tempeh and sauerkraut, are teeming with beneficial live bacteria called probiotics that keep our immune and digestive systems strong. But, like all living creatures, they need something to munch on to thrive. Enter inulin.

Found in bananas, asparagus, Jerusalem artichokes (sunchokes), onion, endive, garlic, leeks, wheat germ and artichokes, inulin is a nondigestible carbohydrate that acts as a food source for intestinal bacteria. "It behaves as a prebiotic to enhance probiotic growth," says Georgianna Donadio, PhD, program director for the National Institute of Whole Health in Massachusetts. In addition to boosting the friendly critter count in your gut, inulin increases the intestinal absorption of bone-strengthening calcium.

#### Bone Up on Vitamin D

If calcium could speak to vitamin D, it would say, "You complete me." That's because the sunshine vitamin increases the amount of calcium that gets absorbed in the intestines, says Magee. Ergo, you can down all the calcium-rich foods you want, such as tofu, yogurt, sesame seeds, broccoli and cheese, but without a steady supply of calcium's wingman, your bones won't reap the rewards.

European scientists recently reported that adequate daily consumption of both calcium and vitamin D was linked to a 20 percent drop in the rates of hip fracture in individuals 47 or older. Harvard scientists found that subjects with the highest calcium intake and blood vitamin-D levels had reduced insulin secretion, which may offer protection from type 2 diabetes. And another Harvard study determined that premenopausal women with the highest intakes of both vitamin D and calcium had a 30 percent lower risk of developing breast cancer.

Your best bet for getting enough vitamin D is to spend a minimum of 10 minutes a day in the sunshine (with a decent amount of skin exposed), but you can also benefit from good food sources, like cod liver oil, salmon and sardines. The latest recommendations from respected experts like Andrew Weil, MD — 2,000 IU of daily vitamin D — suggest that you may also need a daily vitamin-D supplement.

#### Better Your Burgers

Good news for grilled-meat lovers: Scientists at Kansas State University discovered that adding rosemary and other herbs to meat cooked at high temperatures reduces the formation of suspected carcinogenic compounds called heterocyclic amines (HCAs) by as much as 70 percent. Antioxidants in extra-virgin olive oil have also been found to help fend off cancer-promoting HCAs. Similarly, marinating meat such as steak and chicken in an antioxidant-rich spice or wine blend has been shown to be a very effective method of reducing HCAs.

#### Fatten Your Salads

Find naked salads unbearably boring? Then, by all means, top them with vinaigrette or a sprinkle of toasted pine nuts. Similar studies from Ohio State University and Iowa State University showed that adding healthy fats like nuts, extra-virgin olive oil or avocado to your salad bowl can increase the amount of beneficial antioxidants — such as lutein in leafy greens, lycopene in tomatoes and red peppers, and beta-carotene in carrots — your body absorbs.

"Fat slows down the digestion process, which gives the plant compounds in the same meal a better chance of being absorbed," says Magee. Fat also helps fat-soluble antioxidants, such as vitamin E, dissolve in the intestine so they can be passed into the bloodstream more efficiently. After absorption, says Magee, these antioxidants may help vanquish some of the free radicals in our bodies, which can damage DNA and trigger diseases and hasten aging.

In fact, a 2008 Journal of Nutrition study reported that those who ate more alpha- and beta-carotenes —

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