

# THE WORLD ACCORDING TO

# MACROBIOTICS

By Heather MacCrimmon



**Macrobiotics.** When most people hear that word they roll their eyes and brush it aside as another fantastic health craze.

But as I watched Daniel MacNeil drawing spirals on a piece of paper I realized there was more to this than brown rice.

MacNeil, a diet counsellor and member of the Macrobiotics East Group, was explaining the principles of macrobiotics and those spirals represented the universal yin and yang. This may seem to have nothing to do with what you eat for breakfast but as he continued his explanation, the connection became apparent. Harmony, balance and common sense are macrobiotics basic principles, "The order of the universe works its way into everything," says MacNeil. "The worst sickness is arrogance—we think we are our own environment and not part of our environment." MacNeil thinks that when people aren't in harmony with their environment, they don't know that they are intricately connected with the world around them, especially through what they consume.

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Macrobiotics completely challenges the four basic food groups. In fact, dairy products are consumed rarely, if at all. The Macrobiotic diet is comprised of mostly whole grains, mainly brown rice (50-60%), vegetables (25-30%), beans and sea vegetables (5-10%), and miso (a fermented soybean paste). Processed foods, additives and excess sugar are avoided.

The yin and yang principles come into play when selecting food. Some foods are considered to be more yin (sweet) while others are more yang (salty) and a balance between the two is desired. Where the food comes from is also very important. It is desirable to eat foods native to where you are living (yikes, no bananas!) This is one of the more difficult aspects to adjust to, but it is also common sense. If your particular environment supports and produces certain foods, it is logical that those foods would fulfill your needs better than something imported from an area with completely different environmental and cli-

matic conditions. Following this, the seasons and time of year also govern what you eat, much as they govern what you wear.

The choice of foods is limited, as is the use of spices. Not only are they most foreign to Canada, but their addition to a food would make it more yin or yang, taking it away from the desired center. Because of this one would think this would be a very bland and uninteresting diet. On the contrary. I attended a macrobiotic pot luck supper, held by the Macrobiotics East Group. There was a large variety of dishes including brown rice (of course), millet and squash casserole, a noodle dish, mock meatballs made from tofu, miso-turnip dish, carrot and beet pickles, an organic sea vegetable dish and some very interesting desserts.

Although eating the food itself may be enjoyable, the reason most people chose to follow a macrobiotic life style is that they are more concerned with how they feel afterwards. The people I talked to at the pot luck represented a wide cross-section. Some were long time members, some had recently joined, some were "part-time followers of the diet", while others were strictly devoted,

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right down to their method of cooking (avoiding microwaves, electric heating and electric gadgets that would introduce another kind of energy). But what they all have in common is that they feel better since they have changed their eating habits. Most people said they don't feel heavy or tired after a meal, they have more energy and are much less frequently ill. In fact many people turned to macrobiotics when they were ill as a cure. There is growing evidence, according to the centre, that such a diet can play a major role in the prevention and cure of several degenerative diseases. Several people in the group had been diagnosed as having cancer and are convinced that a macrobiotic diet has greatly



helped them. Beulah Murphy is a prime example of this. A few years ago she was diagnosed as having cancer and she attributes her careful following of a macrobiotic diet to her recovery today. "The diet won't cure you by itself," she says, "your attitude has to change too." Mrs. Murphy lost 60 pounds as a result and presently runs a cafeteria style res-

Members of the group said they had noticed behavioural changes in people. They became less aggressive and more calm since they joined.

I wondered out loud why there weren't macrobiotic consultants in hospitals if it is so effective (just think of hospital food). But I was reminded of the politics of the health care system. That's another story. Instead, the Macrobiotics East Centre has opened to serve people interested in "taking responsibility for their own health." The drop in information centre and library will be open on Thursday evenings from 6:00 to 8:00 and on Saturdays and Sundays from 1:00 to 3:00 pm.

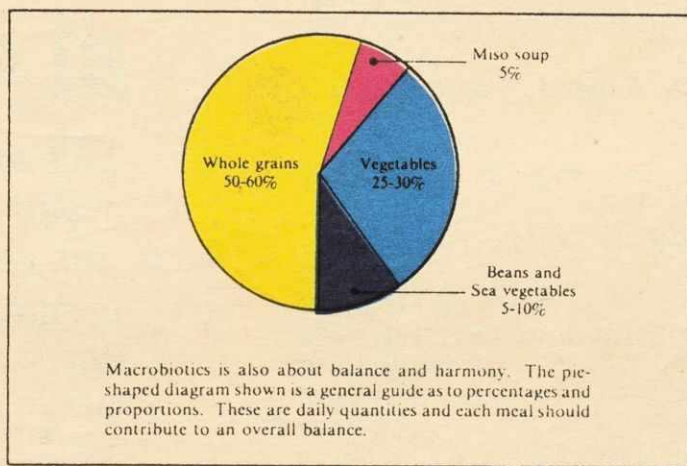
The Macrobiotics East Group has been in existence for two years and has about fifty members. Their purpose is to provide information, refer people to more intensive courses, make bulk food orders, run cooking classes and workshops, such as "Food Is Your Best Medicine", the one to be held February 21. They also plan group meetings, discussions and activities such as the monthly

After my brief encounter, there were still many things I found puzzling about macrobiotics. Indigenous foods are supposed to be important, yet potatoes (what could be more indigenous to this part of the country) are not recommended, while imported Japanese seaweed and rice are. The macrobiotic argument is, that though the rice is important it could be grown here. If environment plays such an important role in food, wouldn't domestic rice differ somehow from the imported rice?

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The Macrobiotic diet may be very difficult to adjust to for some people. "Well, I won't rush back," said one first time visitor as she put on her racoon fur coat after the pot luck. I had watched her push her food skeptically around her plate. "I'm a real meat eater and I won't give up cheesecake."

I have to admit, I don't like the idea of feeling guilty for drinking orange juice (another import). Nevertheless, even if you don't become a converted purist, macrobiotics can certainly change the way you look at what you eat, and talking to people who are so convinced of its benefits, it's worth at least an investigation.



taurant where she serves a complete macrobiotic lunch on weekdays.

Another man I talked to, Patrick Dornan, told me that before he started the diet he had poor eye sight, often got bad headaches twice a week and had difficulty running a mile. Since he "switched" he has noted an improvement in his eye sight, he no longer has headaches and at 58 years of age runs and competes in the half marathon.

pot luck. The dinner costs two dollars if you bring some food and five dollars if you don't. As a further service, Daniel McNeil provides diet consultations by appointment. He has studied extensively throughout Canada and the United States, including the Kushi Institute in Boston which is the major centre for macrobiotics founded by Michio Kushi the Japanese philosopher who introduced this philosophy to North America.

It seems odd that for all the technological advancements humans have made, we have to go back and re-learn what is probably natural and instinctive to most animals. The early pioneers were probably ideal macrobiotics; no chemicals or preservatives, eating what their environment provided according to the seasons. And now, modern macrobiotic philosophers are the pioneers of the food for the future.