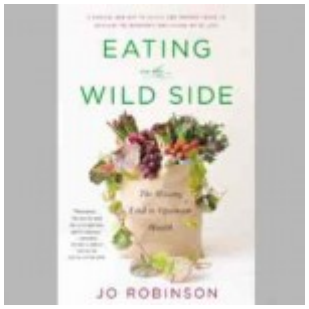
Book changes conventional thinking about fruits, veggies

By Kemp Minifie, Epicurious

With “Eating on the Wild Side: The Missing Link to Optimum Health”, Jo Robinson has written the next “Omnivore’s Dilemma” – a book of revelations that food lovers and home cooks everywhere will be reading, recommending, quoting, and living by. Robinson may not be a household name yet, but her groundbreaking work will turn much of what you thought you knew about food upside down and inside out. Chew on this amazing fact, for starters, one of hundreds in the book: Berries have four times more antioxidant activity than the majority of other fruits, 10 times more than most vegetables, and 40 times more than some cereals.



“Eating on the Wild Side” explains the fascinating changes that have taken place in our food in the 10,000 years since man’s adoption of agriculture, and the unintended consequences of those changes. Generations of farmers, following in the footsteps of our distant ancestors, selected what plants to grow based on flavor, ease of harvest, and the simple economics of what would sell, and not on the plants’ beneficial nutrients, something they had no way of knowing until very recently. The upshot: What we eat today is actually far less nutritious than what our hunter-gatherer forebears ate.

As alarming as all this may sound, there is lots of good news here, too. Robinson, an investigative journalist and author or coauthor of several best-selling books, pored over more than

6,000 scientific studies to uncover the most nutritionally powerful foods available to us—many of which can be found in your supermarket, farmers' market, or home garden. For instance, when it comes to apples, the Granny Smith is the most nutritious of the 12 most common varieties (surprise!).

If the mere mention of nutrients and scientific journals makes your head spin, rest assured that Robinson's book is an entertaining read full of unforgettable stories – the kind you're likely to repeat at cocktail parties. Each chapter ends with a clear, concise list of the take-away points, along with charts of the best varieties of each type of produce to choose at the supermarket, the farmers' market, and from seed catalogs. It's the new food bible for the 21st century.

We caught up with Robinson between food conferences to find out more about how to eat on the wild side. In addition, she shares two super-nutritious recipes from her book, Armenian Lentil Soup and Apple Crisp with Apple Skins.

Epicurious: In your last book, "Pasture Perfect", you showed how beneficial it is on so many levels to confine our consumption of livestock and dairy products to animals raised on grass. What was the impetus to investigate and write about fruits, vegetables, grains, and pulses in your latest book, "Eating on the Wild Side"?

Jo Robinson: Since 2000, I've been investigating the nutritional differences between our present-day diet and our original diet of wild game, plants, and seafood. I spent five of those years focusing on animal products and developing the EatWild.com website. Then, I began researching fruits and vegetables so I could cover more of the food on the plate.

Epi: The information you unearthed about so many of the fruits and vegetables we take for granted is truly amazing, even shocking at times. When you started your research for the book, what did you expect to find, and what was the discovery

that surprised you the most?

JR: My intuition was that wild plants were more nutritious than the plant food we eat today, but I wasn't prepared for the extent of those differences. Some wild tomatoes, for example, have 30 times more of a heart-protective compound called lycopene than our supermarket tomatoes. The wild dandelions in our lawns have eight times more antioxidants than spinach, which we regard as a superfood. Unwittingly, we have bred a wealth of nutrients out of the human diet. We didn't start 50 or 100 years ago, as many people assume, but 10,000 years ago when we first became farmers.

Epi: You write that the most beneficial bionutrients have a sour, astringent, or bitter taste, but that human beings are wired with a preference for sweet, starchy, and fatty foods, so that we selected plants for the qualities we like, and in the end created plants significantly deficient in the bionutrients contained in their wild ancestors. From an evolutionary biology point of view, is there a logical theory or explanation for this?

JR: There is. In the wilderness, most plants are low in sugar, starch, and fat. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors needed lots of calories to fuel their active lifestyle. Nature, obligingly, gave them taste buds that were linked to reward centers in their brains, infusing them with feel-good chemicals whenever they consumed sugary, oily, and starchy food. Today, we have the same wiring, but we've turned our food supply upside down. We are now awash in fat, sugar, and starch. Unfortunately, we still get blasts of dopamine when we eat dessert after a full meal.

Epi: I was amazed to learn from you that berries increase their antioxidant profile with cooking, so that canned blueberries have more phytonutrients than fresh. Does that really mean that the wild blueberries I pick in northern New Hampshire and immediately pop in my mouth aren't as nutritious

as a can of cultivated blueberries from the supermarket?

JR: Those fresh wild blueberries are likely to be better for you than canned cultivated blueberries because the wild varieties are so much higher in antioxidants. But, canned wild blueberries have more antioxidants than fresh wild blueberries, provided you drink the canning liquid. Bizarre but true. However, you get plenty of phytonutrients from fresh berries – and they taste better! I, for one, eat them fresh.

Epi: Your storage recommendations for various produce were surprisingly varied. Some fruits and vegetables need to be eaten soon after purchase while others will last longer when stored in the crisper section of the refrigerator or in plastic bags perforated with a few pinpricks. Many people tend to shop for food only once a week. If they can't consume their produce at its optimum time, what's the best way to deal with it?

JR: You can still shop once a week, if you like. But eat the foods that lose their nutrients most rapidly in the first two days. "Eat Me First" foods include artichokes, asparagus, broccoli, kale, leeks, lettuce, and spinach. Interestingly, they are also among the most nutritious.

Epi: Are frozen fruits and vegetables a potentially better source of phytonutrients than fresh produce that's been picked and trucked across country?

JR: There's a better alternative to eating frozen food or food that's languished for days and weeks in a warehouse: Get more of your fruits and vegetables from the farmers' market or grow it in your backyard, which is the healthiest choice of all. Join the 35 million Americans who have home gardens. If you must buy frozen food, cook it before thawing it. The thawing process destroys more bionutrients than freezing.

Epi: In your research did you find there was a difference between the phytonutrient content of organic foods versus

conventionally grown ones?

JR: This is an area of research that needs much more attention. To date, some studies show that organic production enhances phytonutrient content, some show no effect, and some show that conventional production yields more bionutrients. Even though the verdict is mixed, I eat organic food and recommend that other people do as well. It reduces your intake of unwanted farm chemicals, keeps toxic chemicals out of the environment, and protects the health of farmworkers.

Epi: A surprising amount of your research seems to point toward a phytonutrient improvement for humans with cooked foods. The raw-foods enthusiasts maintain that cooking destroys beneficial enzymes. Do the benefits of cooking trump the beneficial action from the enzymes in raw food?

JR: Heat makes many bionutrients more available and potent. Cooked carrots, for example, give you twice as much beta-carotene as raw ones. But raw broccoli gives you more cancer-fighting compounds than cooked broccoli. This is not a one-size-fits-all situation. Heat does destroy enzymes, of course, but I have not researched the health effects of getting rid of them.

Epi: If people can only manage to adopt a few new practices from your book, what do you consider to be the three most important and effective ones for their general well-being?

JR: I believe that people should eat more berries – a half a cup a day is a reasonable goal – more leafy greens and reds [beet greens, red kale, red cabbage, red lettuces, and radicchio, particularly radicchio di Treviso], and eat the skins of fruits and vegetables, provided they’re organic.

Epi: Since researching and writing the book, how have you changed your diet and the way you shop and cook? Have you given up eating anything? Have you embraced certain produce, grains, or legumes that you ignored before? Are you trying to

grow or forage all your food?

JR: Everything about my diet has been transformed by my research. Many of the changes are not radical. I get a big boost in nutrition simply from knowing which varieties of fruits and vegetables to buy in the store, information that I share in my book. Knowing the most healthful ways to store and prepare food is just as important. I've included that as well. I have a wonderful garden where I grow the most nutritious varieties of fruits and vegetables I've discovered.