

Your Best Year Ever

8

# HEALTHIEST CUISINES IN THE WORLD

*What makes these traditional ethnic foods stand out? Simple: their use of whole, seasonal and locally sourced ingredients that boast a high nutritional profile and strong disease-fighting properties.*







TEXT SASHA GONZALES PHOTO RADIOUS IMAGES/CORBIS

# VIE-TNAM-TESTE

With its broth-based noodle soups, steamed fish dishes, and veggie-filled rice-paper rolls and vermicelli salads, Vietnamese cuisine is fresh tasting and easy to digest.

Sheena Smith, a clinical nutritionist from the Integrated Medicine Institute in Hong Kong, says that because Vietnamese dishes are less likely to be fried and do not generally contain coconut milk, they are also low in calories, making them ideal for people watching their weight.

She adds: "Most Vietnamese meals also use plenty of fresh herbs and vegetables, like basil, coriander, mint, lettuce, water spinach, cabbage, cucumber, bamboo shoots and bitter melon. This means that their diet is high in vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, all of which are essential for a healthy immune system."

The abundance of fish in Vietnamese meals also translates to a diet that is high in omega-3 fatty acids. Sheena says this anti-inflammatory essential fatty acid has been shown to aid in the prevention and treatment of heart disease, autoimmune diseases and arthritis. Numerous studies

have also been done on the link between fish consumption and depression. A Chinese study, published in 2015 in the *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, found that participants who ate the most servings of fish developed a 17 per cent reduced risk of developing depression, compared to those who ate the least. One possible reason: The omega-3 fatty acids found in fish may have an effect on the secretion of serotonin and dopamine, neurotransmitters that are associated with depression.

Pho, the national dish of Vietnam, is made with a rich bone broth that is flavoured with spices like cinnamon, ginger, cloves and star anise. The spices help to reduce inflammation in the body, while the bone broth, which usually takes hours to prepare to extract the flavour of the beef or chicken bones, is chock-full of nutrients like calcium, phosphorus, magnesium and potassium, and amino acids like glycine and proline that are not found in significant amounts in muscle meat. These nutrients benefit the immune system, bones, joints, hair, teeth and nails, Sheena adds. ▶



# JAPANESE

One of healthiest aspects of the Japanese diet is that the food is served in small portions. As a result, the Japanese consume about 20 to 25 per cent less calories than people of most other cultures, according to Jane Freeman, a dietician and sports nutritionist at Food Equation.

Japanese cuisine is also characterised by oily fish like salmon, mackerel and tuna. These are packed with heart- and brain-healthy omega-3 fatty acids. In addition, the Japanese consume plenty of leafy and root vegetables, which contain immune-system-boosting antioxidants. The purple sweet potato in particular, also known as the Okinawan potato, is loaded with antioxidants called anthocyanins, which have anti-inflammatory properties, while seaweed contains iodine, a mineral that most of us do not get enough of. Iodine is essential for a healthy thyroid, a gland in your neck that helps produce and regulate hormones. And let's not forget that other Japanese favourite - tofu. Made from soya beans, it is rich in protein and calcium, which are important for muscle growth and repair, and bone health.

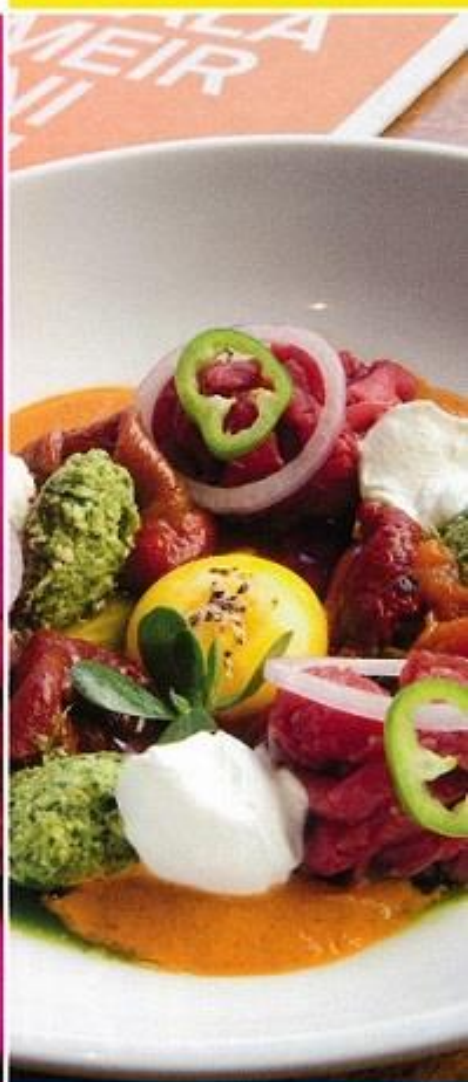
"Another outstanding feature of the Japanese diet is its abundance of fermented soya products, like miso and natto," says Jane. "Fermented foods are excellent for gut health as they are prebiotic, and so promote the growth of healthy probiotic bacteria in the gut."

Green tea, which is consumed in almost every household in the country, is also super-nutritious because it is loaded with powerful antioxidants called catechins. These have been shown to fight diseases, lower bad cholesterol, improve artery health and prevent oxidative damage to cells.

Their diet is thought to be the primary reason why Japanese women have the highest life expectancy compared to their counterparts in other countries. A 2013 study, conducted by researchers from the University of Washington and other institutions, and published in the medical journal *The Lancet*, found that these women are expected to live an average of 75.56 years. Singaporean, Irish, Icelandic and Cypriot women were ranked second, third, fourth and fifth respectively.



# ISRAELI



Sheena says the Israeli diet is similar to the Mediterranean one, except that it features more eggs and dairy. Eggs are powerhouses of high-quality protein, iron, vitamins and minerals, disease-fighting nutrients like lutein and zeaxanthin, choline for brain health and improved memory, and carotenoids, which may reduce the risk of age-related macular degeneration. Dairy products are high in calcium, protein, and fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K.

On top of eggs and dairy products, Sheena says Israeli dishes typically contain plenty of antioxidant-rich, seasonal fruits and vegetables, and heart-healthy olive oil and fish.

Findings from a recent study, published in 2015 in *The Lancet Global Health*, revealed the Israeli diet to be the healthiest in the West and the ninth healthiest in the world.

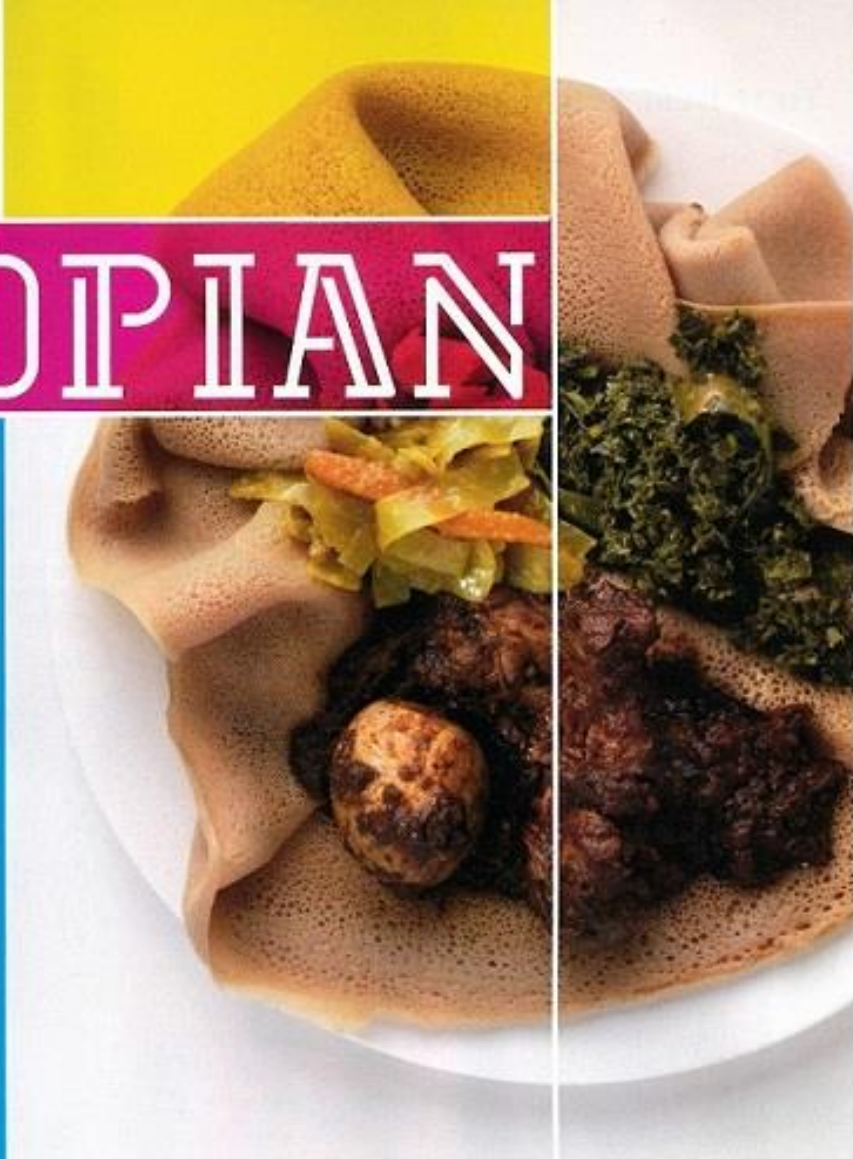
The study, led by Dr Fumiaki Imamura of the University of Cambridge, analysed the eating habits of 187 countries.



# ETHIOPIAN

Every day, millions of Ethiopians eat injera, a slightly sour crepe-like pancake. Injera is made with teff, an ancient super-grain that is gluten-free, high in iron – about 50 per cent more than whole wheat – and high in protein. This pancake is typically eaten three or more times a day with meat- or lentil-based curries and stews. Injera is especially healthy because it is fermented and therefore rich in prebiotics, which is good for gut health. It is also packed with fibre. "Ethiopians consume a lot of fibre – as much as 30g to 40g a day," says Jane. "The recommended daily amount of fibre for adults is 25g to 30g. Most of us, on the other hand, consume an average of just 10g to 15g a day."

Teff's high iron content is thought to be the secret behind Ethiopian runners' endurance and performance – Ethiopians are second only to the Kenyans when it comes to endurance running. A study, carried out by researchers at Manchester Metropolitan University in England and published in 2014 in the *Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition*, found that teff could improve the iron status of female endurance athletes.



India is famous for its spice-packed curries – and spices are thought to have positive effects on one's health, says Jaclyn Reutens, a clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants. One common spice, turmeric, contains an active ingredient called curcumin, which has been shown to reduce inflammation, protect against Alzheimer's disease and retard tumour growths. Fenugreek, another common curry spice, appears to help improve digestion, reduce nausea and relieve stomach acidity. Ginger, too, aids with nausea, but may also minimise pain related to osteoarthritis.

Another very healthy aspect of the Indian diet is that it is typically vegetarian or vegetable-based; Indians are not generally big meat eaters. "The use of beans, lentils and pulses gives many dishes a high-soluble fibre, high protein and low-fat content," says Jaclyn. "Soluble fibre, in particular, has been proven to reduce cholesterol levels, thereby reducing one's risk of heart disease."

The consumption of chapati and roti, too, makes Indian cuisine one of the healthiest, as these breads are usually made with whole-wheat flour and very little oil or ghee. They are, therefore, high in fibre and good-quality carbohydrates, and relatively low in fat. ▶

# INDIAN



# PERUVIAN

The traditional Peruvian diet features a variety of root vegetables, such as potatoes and sweet potatoes, and grains like quinoa and rice. Corn is also commonly consumed. Jaclyn points out that the good carbohydrates in root vegetables provide energy, while the high fibre content keeps one full for longer.

"As Peru is not landlocked, it is fortunate to have access to seafood, such as fish, squid, crayfish and other shellfish," says Jaclyn. "Seafood is naturally low in fat, and a good source of iron and protein. Iron helps transport more oxygen to the brain, thus improving concentration and alertness, and reducing fatigue. As Peruvians normally eat their seafood raw – such as in a popular dish called ceviche – or just lightly cooked, the nutritional value is preserved."

Peruvians also consume stews and salads made from lentils and beans, both wonderful sources of protein and soluble fibre.



One of the most commonly eaten foods in Sweden is rye bread. Made from rye grain flour, this dark, slightly sour traditional bread has a high amount of fibre per slice – around 2g. Plus, it is a good source of prebiotics, which keeps the gut healthy and reduces the risk of cardiovascular diseases. And it has a low-glycaemic index, which is important for controlling blood sugar levels, says Jaclyn.

The Swedes also consume plenty of oily fish such as herring, salmon and mackerel. These are high in omega-3 fatty acids, which protect against heart disease, help brain development, and reduce inflammation in the joints and arteries.

Berries of all kinds are also abundant in the traditional Swedish diet. Think lingonberries, bilberries, strawberries, blueberries and raspberries. These are all high in antioxidants, which Jaclyn says reduce the risk of cancer, strengthen the arteries against inflammation, and improve skin and eye health. In 2012, researchers from the Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University in the US found that berries also have an anti-inflammatory effect on the brain, thus keeping the organ healthy, and even helping to improve one's motor control and cognition.

# SWEDISH





# MEDITERRANEAN

The health benefits of the Mediterranean diet are well known. Characterised by olive oil, fish, tomatoes, green leafy vegetables, yogurt, feta cheese, nuts and fruit, Mediterranean cuisine is famous for preventing cardiovascular disease, thanks to its abundance of monounsaturated fats and low prevalence of red meat. And because it is low in sugar, it is thought to also guard against diabetes.

People of the Mediterranean, which mostly include southern Europeans, also drink red wine on an almost daily basis. This wine has long been known to have heart-protective properties. The alcohol and resveratrol – a potent antioxidant – in red wine are thought to prevent blood clots, reduce blood pressure and lower cholesterol. In fact, a study led by researchers from Israel's Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and published in October 2015 in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, revealed that small amounts of red wine helped modestly boost good cholesterol levels in people with type-2 diabetes.

If you want to reap the benefits of red wine, Jane advises that you to choose a good-quality drop. "If it's good quality, you won't need to drink a lot of it. One 100ml glass a day is acceptable. If you don't drink alcohol, you may wish to snack on red grapes, whose skin contains resveratrol." 