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## Flexibility equals results

### Diet plans that bend rules leave room for 'good' and 'bad'

By Julie Deardorff

Tribune health and fitness reporter

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Dietitian Dawn Jackson Blatner was a long-time vegetarian who kept falling off the wagon.

Though she loved the health benefits of the plant-based diet, she also craved food with emotional ties: Grandma's pork roast, her father-in-law's beef chili and Sheboygan brats-on-a-stick.

So Chicago's Jackson Blatner changed the rules. She's now a "flexitarian" or a vegetarian who is "flexible enough to eat some meat, poultry or fish," she writes in her new book, "The Flexitarian Diet" (McGraw Hill, \$24.95). And Jackson Blatner says it's OK for you to be one too.

"Who wants to be told they can't eat meat if they like meat?" said Jackson Blatner, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. "My purpose is to excite and motivate people to eat more plants."

Welcome to the kinder, gentler era of nutrition. There are no forbidden fruits, no rigid guidelines and no drastic changes. Instead, experts such as Jackson Blatner acknowledge that humans are essentially weak-willed when faced with food they love.

So instead of telling people what they can't eat, Jackson Blatner tells them what they can eat, and how to do it. Gradually, the good foods will crowd out the bad ones and the changes become routine, said Jackson Blatner, who teaches flexitarian eating at The Chopping Block Cooking School.

"It's a win-win eating plan because you will enjoy the health benefits of vegetarianism without all the rules and restrictions," Jackson Blatner wrote in "Flexitarianism."

Not everyone agrees. Though every vegetarian meal is a step in the right direction, "it's a bit like telling a former smoker that it's OK to occasionally have a cigarette," said nutrition researcher T. Colin Campbell, author of "The China Study." "It really doesn't work for most people."

Still, "healthy eating doesn't have to be black and white. Gray works just fine too," dietitian Dave Grotto wrote in "101 Foods That Could Save Your Life."

When Grotto became known as "Let's-Make-a-Deal-Dave" to his clients and allowed them to occasionally indulge, he saw a pattern: They were decreasing—but not abandoning—the foods with little health benefit. But they were able to stabilize their weights, sustain blood pressures and meet other markers of good health.

And when faced with his own soaring cholesterol levels, Grotto took a little of his own medicine. Instead of a nutritional smack-down approach, he modified his diet by adding many of the foods in his book. After just a month, his cholesterol levels dropped 70 points and he lost 10 pounds.

"You can't write someone's favorite foods out of their life," said Grotto during a lunch with Jackson Blatner.

"It's so much more than fuel," added Jackson Blatner. "It's social identity."

Jackson Blatner's book is a lifestyle plan you can immediately implement. She tells you what to eat and how to do it. "I had patients who didn't really know how to make breakfast," she said. "If I said, 'add avocado,' they didn't know what to add it to."

What she didn't include—the science behind the healing powers of food, how food can be used as medicine and food lore—is found in Grotto's comprehensive nutritional encyclopedia. Though it wasn't planned, the books—like the authors—are helpful companions.

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