

Jeff Novick's Fast Food: Beyond The Basics

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1. The Fast Food 10 Healthiest Packaged Foods

The healthiest foods are the foods that come straight out of the garden and are consumed in their natural form or as simply prepared as possible. These foods are fresh fruits, vegetables, starchy vegetables, legumes, and intact whole grains and should be the focus of any healthy diet.

Packaged and processed foods are usually loaded with fats, free oils, salt, refined sugars/sweeteners and refined carbohydrates/grains. They are also almost always calorie dense. However, there are some packaged and processed foods that can be included as part of a healthy diet. And in fact, keeping some of them around and on hand can actually make following a healthy diet, easier. This way, no matter how much time you have, you can always put together a healthy meal very quickly. Also, all meals are prepared in a large pasta "style" stock pot, which will make plenty for dinner and enough for leftovers.

Here they are.

1) Frozen Vegetables

Vegetables are the most nutrient dense food there is and including more of them in your diet is a key to improving the nutritional quality of your diet. Unlike many canned vegetables, plain frozen individual vegetables usually have no other added ingredients. Frozen peas and beans may have some added salt, but they usually make my 1:1 sodium/calorie guideline. Frozen vegetables can easily be thawed and included as part of a healthy recipe and/or meal. These are one of the main ingredients in my Basic Recipes

Caution: Be careful of all the new fancy frozen vegetable mixes as many come with added sauces that can be high in salt, sugar and or fat. Look for the plain bags of single individual vegetables or vegetable blends.

2) Frozen Fruits

The same reasoning for frozen vegetables also applies to frozen fruits. Look for the ones that contain just frozen fruit and avoid the ones with added sugars/sweeteners. Frozen berries are one of my favorites to keep on hand. Fresh berries are very seasonal, and they also often mold and rot quickly and easily. Frozen berries do not and are available year round. In addition, you can often find wild berries, including blueberries and strawberries, which are often sweeter and more nutrient dense.

3) Quick Cooking Brown Rice

My favorite kind of rice, is basmati brown rice. I love the taste and the aroma, especially when it is cooking. It smells like popcorn popping. However, I do not always have the 40 minutes to prepare the basmati brown rice from scratch. Nor do I always have some cooked up ahead of time. The solution, is anyone of the varieties available of "quick cooking" brown rice. While I do not usually like to promote a specific brand, one brand that I do prefer is Success Quick Cooking Brown Rice. This brand and variety has to be the simplest and easiest version of quick cooking brown rice ever invented. Many other versions require the measurement of water and rice (which can be troublesome for some). :) However, with this version all you do is place a pre-measured bag in a pot of boiling water for 10 minutes and wah-lah!, perfect brown rice. For those of you who want to avoid using the plastic bag, just remove the rice from it and cook in boiling water. You can now also get frozen pre-cooked whole grain brown rice that is also quick and simple to prepare.

4) No Salt Added Shelf Stable Beans

Next to green leafy veggies and vegetables, beans may be one of the most nutrient rich foods there is. They are rich in nutrients and fiber, very filling and relatively low in calorie density. The problem with beans for many of us is that most beans can take hours to cook and most canned beans are extremely high in sodium. So, for those in a hurry, the solution is to buy no salt added shelf-stable beans. Again, while I do not like to promote a specific brand, Eden Foods canned beans are one of the best out there and they are also the only canned beans that are BPA free. There are about 12 varieties of beans available from them, including Kidney, Black, Garbanzo, Pinto, Adzuki, etc. Not only are they available online, and in health food stores, I also find most local grocery stores are now carrying them. Just open a can and add them to your favorite dish, recipe or meal. These are one of the main ingredients in my Basic Recipes. There are also now a few varieties of no-salt added, organic beans that are packed in an aseptic shelf-stable container that are sold by Fig Foods and by Whole Foods.

5) No Salt Added Shelf-Stable Tomato Products

Tomatoes make a great base for many dressings, sauces, soups and meals (i.e., stews, chili's, etc). However, good fresh tomatoes are not always available year round and some of the one that are available in the off-season are literally tasteless. In addition, while there are some canned varieties that are salt free, most canned tomato products are extremely high in sodium and contain BPA. However, one brand I prefer is POMI brand tomato products as they are both salt free, shelf stable and BPA free. While these tomato product could never substitute for a fresh "in season" tomato on a salad, they can help make excellent soups, sauces, and meals when fresh tomatoes are out of season or when you are in a pinch. These are one of the main ingredients in my Basic Recipes. If you can't find POMI Tomatoes, look for any brand of no salt added canned tomatoes.

6) Intact Whole Grains (Buckwheat, Brown Rice, Oatmeal, etc)

Whole grains that are consumed in their "intact" form are low in calorie density, high in satiety, nutrient rich and shelf stable. They are easy to cook (just add water) and can be the base of many healthy meals and dishes. They also make great additions to soups and salads. Oatmeal, buckwheat, and barley all make a great breakfast and a great way to start the day. Brown rice, cracked wheat, quinoa, and/or millet mixed with vegetables make a great meal, side dish and or salad. My favorites are the ones that I can cook from start to end in 10 minutes. These include oats, buckwheat, quinoa and millet.

7) Whole Grain Pasta

The problem with many whole grain processed products (like bread, dry cereals, bagels, tortilla's and crackers) is that even though they are whole grain, they are still calorie dense. One of the only exceptions is whole grain pasta. The reason is, when you cook whole grain pasta, it absorbs some of the water it is cooked in, which is absorbed into the structure of the pasta, lowering its calorie density. Foods with high water content are lower in calorie density and generally higher in satiety.

So, unlike most processed whole grains, which have a calorie density of 1200-1500 calories per pound, the calorie density of most cooked whole grain pasta is the same as most intact whole grains and starchy vegetables, which is around 500-600 calories per pound. It is also very quick and easy to cook and can be ready in around 10 minutes. Mix in some fresh or frozen vegetables, some POMI no salt added tomatoes and some fresh spices and you have a healthy, nutritious and filling meal.

8) Dried Fruit

Dried fruit is nature's candy. Unlike fresh fruit, it is shelf stable and will not spoil easily. Adding small amounts of dried fruit to dishes can add both nutrition and sweetness. A few raisins or dates can really sweeten up a bowl of fruit and they also go great in a bowl of whole grain cereal like oatmeal or as part of a dessert like baked apples. In addition, they make great additions by adding a little sweetness to a large vegetable salad, or even some cooked dishes like stews and rice.

However, due to their high calorie density, go easy on them and think of them more as a condiment. Dried fruit is around 1200 calories per pound where most fresh fruit is under 300 calories per pound.

Grapes 300 cal/lbs

Raisins 1357 cal/lb

Plums 200 cal/lb

Prunes 1100 cal/lb

9) Unsalted Raw Nuts/Seeds and Nut/Seed Butter

Raw nuts and seeds, and the "butters" made from them, are rich in nutrients especially minerals. A few of them, like walnuts, flax & chia seeds are also excellent sources of the omega 3 essential fat. They are also shelf stable and will not spoil easily. They can add creaminess and texture to some homemade dressings and dips/spreads and/or soups. I sometimes make a salad dressing that is made from a little tahini (sesame seed butter) mixed with lemon and water. I also add a small amount of tahini to blended garbanzo beans to add some texture to my homemade hummus.

However, due to their extremely high calorie density, go very easy on them especially if weight is an issue for you. I recommend consuming no more than 1-2 oz a day at most. If you are struggling with your weight, I recommend either eliminating them or limiting them even more, to no more than 1 oz 2-5x a week. And, when you do use them, make sure you mix them with something low in calorie density, like vegetables or fruits.

10) Salt Free Spices/Seasonings/Herbs

As you decrease the amount of salt, sugar and oil in your diet, you will begin to appreciate the wonderful natural flavors of food. However, some people still like to add a little "spice" to their life. Fortunately, there are many salt-free spices, seasonings and blends available. Probably the most popular one is Mrs. Dash, which has many varieties available. In addition, for those of you who are not a chef and not familiar with the different flavor combinations of spices, you can now buy many salt free blends that can help. There are pre-mixed blends of salt-free Italian, Mexican, Indian, Southern and many other blends available.

There you go. My favorite 10 packaged staple foods that are not only good for you and can be included as part of a healthy diet. And in fact, keeping some of them around and on hand, can actually make following a healthy diet, easier.

NOTE: Many of the above mentioned items can be found online at several websites. The first is VitaCost (www.vitacost.com) and offers shipping for \$4.99. They also often have coupons for free shipping. The second is Amazon (www.amazon.com). If you join Amazon Prime, which is

\$75/yr, you also get free basic shipping. In addition, you can often find many of these at Buy The Case (www.buythecase.net).

2) The 5 Basic Recipe Ingredients & Template

Most all my recipes consist of 5 basic ingredients and all meals can be cooked in around 5-15 minutes from start to end. All are prepared in a large pasta "style" pot.

The 5 Recipe Ingredients & Template

- 1) **Packaged Tomatoes No Salt Added** - 28 oz.
 - a. These can be tomatoes in cans or in the aseptic packaging (POMI).
 - b. Can be whole, chopped, diced or strained.
- 2) **Canned Beans, No Salt Added** - 14 oz
 - a. Any brand, any bean.
- 3) **Frozen Vegetables** – 1 lb bags
 - a. Individual vegetables and/or variety mixes without any of the sauce/spice packs
 - b. NOTE: to increase the nutrient density of each dish, add in an additional 4 oz of Frozen chopped greens to the above basic recipe
- 4) **A Cooked Whole Grain or Starchy Vegetables** (1.5- 2 cups cooked)
 - a. Cooked brown rice, potato, sweet potato, barley, etc
- 5) **Spice/Seasoning** (to taste)
 - a. Pre-mixed, salt free, spices make adding flavor simple.

By changing the type of bean, type of vegetables, the type of starch and the seasoning, you can come up with different dishes. I make everything salt free and no salt added. You are welcome to sprinkle some salt on top at the table before eating if desired.

Remember, you do not have to measure and weigh food as these meals are very low in calorie density and very high in nutrient density so you can eat all you want till you are comfortably full without having to worry about portions size or going hungry. And, all recipes are just guidelines so they can be easily adapted to meet your own personal taste preferences.

All dishes make up enough for at least 2 people to get at least 2 meals (or more) and can easily be refrigerated and/or frozen for later use.

3) BEYOND THE BASICS - The Recipes

1) Basic Vegetable Broth

4 Cups Chopped Potatoes
2 Cups Chopped Onions
2 Cups Chopped Carrots
2 Cups Chopped Celery
1 Cup Chopped Parsley
Water

Place the potatoes, onions, carrots, celery and parsley in a large stockpot. Fill pot with water. Bring to a boil. Turn down to low and let simmer 20 minutes. Strain.

Option 1 – Add ½ to 1 lb chopped mushrooms (any variety) to the chopped vegetables.

Option 2- Add garlic, ginger or any other favorite spice, seasoning to the broth.

BEYOND THE BASICS – SAUCES

1) Basic Tahini Sauce

The basic recipe consists of a 1/1/1 ratio of 3 ingredients.

1/3 Part Tahini
1/3 Part Lemon Juice
1/3 Water

For example, you can use ½ cup of each, or 1 cup of each. I usually use ½ cup.

Place all ingredients in a bowl and mix together thoroughly with a hand whip. This can be done in a blender or food processor also. The sauce will start to emulsify and thicken. If you like it thicker, add a little more tahini. If you like it thinner, add more lemon juice and water.

Variation 1 – Mustard Tahini Sauce

To the basic sauce add:

- 2-3 tsp Westbrae No Salt Added Mustard
- 1/8 tsp Garlic Powder (Optional)

Variation 2 – Dill Tahini Sauce

To the basic sauce add:

- 1-2 tsp dried dill
- 1/8 tsp garlic powder

2) Basic Marinara Sauce

2 - 28 oz packages no salt added tomatoes (I prefer Pomi brand)
1 cup Frozen Diced Onions or Onion/Pepper mix
3 tsp Mrs Dash Italian Seasoning (or any Italian Seasoning mix)
1 tsp Mrs Dash Table Blend
2 tsp dried basil
1/4 tsp garlic powder
1/8 tsp red pepper flakes (optional)
1/8 tsp oregano (optional)

Mix all ingredients together. You can either heat this up to use immediately, or just mix it together and store in the refrigerator for when needed.

3) Basic Salsa

2 - 28 oz packages no salt added tomatoes (I prefer Pomi brand)
1 cup frozen diced onions
1 cup frozen diced pepper mix
4 tbsp lime juice
1 tbsp cilantro
1/4 tsp cayenne pepper

Mix all ingredients together and store in the refrigerator

BEYOND THE BASICS – SOUPS

1) Mushroom Barley Soup

1 cup pearled barley
1 lb frozen soup mix (or mixed veggie)
1/2 lb frozen lima beans
1 lb fresh or frozen sliced mushrooms
1-2 quarts water
1-2 quarts basic vegetable broth
1/4 tsp garlic powder

Place all ingredients in a large stockpot. Bring to a boil. Lower heat, simmer 10-15 minutes till barley is done.

2) Gypsy Soup

2 14 oz cans no salt added garbanzo beans
4 cups sweet potatoes (cooked or frozen) diced
1 lb mixed peppers
1 lb sliced onions
1-2 quarts water
1-2 quarts basic vegetable broth
1/8 tsp cinnamon
1/8 to 1/4 tsp chili pepper (or cayenne)
1/4 to 1/2 tsp garlic powder
1 tsp basil
2 tsp smoked paprika
1 28 oz Pomi Chopped Tomatoes (optional)

Place all ingredients in a large stockpot. Bring to a boil. Lower heat, simmer 10-15 minutes till done.

BEYOND THE BASICS - DISHES

1) Kasha Varnishkas

- 2 cups cooked toasted kasha (buckwheat groats)
- 2 cups cooked whole grain pasta (bow ties)
- 1 lb frozen onions (browned)
- 1 lb frozen peas & carrots
- ½ -1 cup water or veggie broth (for steam-sautéing)
- ½ tsp garlic powder

Cook pasta in a separate pot. While pasta is cooking, add all other ingredients to a large pot and heat. When pasta is done, drain and add to the pot. Enjoy

2) Quinoa, Lentils & Greens

- 4 cups cooked quinoa
- 1 14 oz cans no salt added canned lentils
- 1 14 oz cans no salt added canned black lentils
- 1 1/2 lbs frozen chopped kale
- 1/2 lb frozen chopped onions
- ½ -1 cup water or veggie broth (for steam-sautéing)
- ¼ to ½ cup tahini sauce
- 2 tbs sliced almonds
- 2 tbsp raisins
- ½ tsp garlic powder

Cook quinoa in a separate pot. While quinoa is cooking, add all other ingredients to a large pot and heat. When quinoa is done place in a bowl. Add the beans & veggies mix. Add the tahini, raisins, almonds and spices. Enjoy

3) Couscous, Fava Beans and Peas

- 4 cups cooked whole grain couscous
- 2 14 oz cans no salt added fava beans
- 1.5 lbs frozen peas & carrots
- .5 lb frozen chopped onions
- ½ -1 cup water or veggie broth (for steam-sautéing)
- ¼ to ½ cup tahini sauce
- 2 tbsp raisins
- ½ tsp cinnamon
- 1 tbsp chopped fresh parsley
- 1 tsp fresh or frozen lemon juice

Cook couscous in a separate pot. While couscous is cooking, add all other ingredients to a large pot and heat. When couscous is done place in a bowl. Add the beans & veggies mix. Add the tahini, raisins, and spices. Top off with some fresh chopped parsley and lemon juice. Enjoy

4) Mediterranean Millet

- 4 cups cooked millet
- 2 lbs frozen Mediterranean style mixed vegetables (or any mixed vegetables)
- 2 14 oz cans no salt added lentils
- ½ -1 cup water or veggie broth (for steam-sautéing)
- ¼ to ½ cup tahini sauce
- 1 tsp dried dill (or 1 tbsp fresh dill)
- 2 tbsp pine nuts

Cook millet in a separate pot. While millet is cooking, add mixed vegetables, lentils and broth to a large pot and heat. When millet is done place in a bowl. Add the lentils & veggies mix. Top off with the tahini, dill and pine nuts. Enjoy!

5) Tzimmes (Sweet Potato Stew)

- 4 cups cooked sweet potatoes (or mixed sweet and white potatoes)
- 2 lbs frozen sliced carrots
- 2 14 oz cans no salt added garbanzo beans
- ½ -1 cup water or veggie broth (for steam-sautéing)
- 2 tbsp raisins
- ½ tsp cinnamon
- ½ tsp coriander

Microwave, steam or boil the potatoes and when done, cut into 1-inch pieces. Add the potatoes, carrots, garbanzo beans, and water to a large pot and heat. Add the raisins and seasoning. Enjoy.