

# Chapter 1

## What Is a Plant-Based Diet?

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Getting familiar with the core of a plant-based diet
  - ▶ Understanding that this is more than a diet; it's a lifestyle
  - ▶ Using simple ideas to start your plant-based diet today
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**T**he goal of a plant-based diet is to eat more plants. Sounds simple enough — or maybe it doesn't. Eating nothing but plant-based foods is intimidating for a lot of people. Most of us are comfortable with our current way of eating and are unsure about what to do with plants: Which ones should you eat and when? Can you get full on plants alone? All kinds of questions and concerns come up, and I address some of the common questions in this chapter.

In this chapter, I also give you an overview of life on a plant-based diet. I outline what you will and won't eat. I explain how eating this way can benefit so many aspects of your life — mainly your health. At the end of the day, it's all about feeling better, looking better, and just being better, and this way of eating can do just that.

### *What Does Plant-Based Mean?*

Eating a plant-based diet simply means eating more plants. No matter where you are, or what you eat right now, you can eat more plants (everyone can). Of course, my goal and the goal of this book is to get you to eat predominantly (and, ideally, exclusively) plant-based all the time, but you'll likely have a transitional phase, and it starts with eating more of the stuff that the Earth has so deliciously and naturally provided us.

I get to the “meat” of eating plant-based later in this chapter and explain what this really looks like on your plate on a day-to-day basis, but first I want to compare this approach to some other popular veggie-minded trends.

A few terms that are floating around represent a similar style of eating, yet they're all distinct. That doesn't mean you have to label yourself and stick with only that way of eating; these terms describe different ways of eating and help you understand what kinds of food choices fall within a certain category. Also, this breakdown can help you understand how a plant-based diet fits into the bigger picture.

- ✔ **Plant-based:** This way of eating is based on fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds with few or no animal products. Ideally, the plant-based diet is a vegan diet with a bit of flexibility in the transitional phases, with the goal of becoming 100 percent plant-based over time.
- ✔ **Vegan:** This describes someone who doesn't eat anything that comes from an animal, be it fish, fowl, mammal, or insect. Vegans refrain not only from animal meats but also from any foods made by animals (such as dairy milk and honey). They often also abstain from purchasing, wearing, or using animal products of any kind (for example, leather).
- ✔ **Fruitarian:** This describes a vegan diet that consists mainly of fruit.
- ✔ **Raw vegan:** This is a vegan diet that is uncooked and often includes dehydrated foods.
- ✔ **Vegetarian:** This plant-based diet sometimes includes dairy and eggs.
- ✔ **Flexitarian:** This plant-based diet includes the occasional consumption of meat or fish. I like to refer to it as “a little bit of this and a little bit of that” — said with no judgment, of course!

## *Getting to the Root of a Plant-Based Diet*

A core of foods makes up a plant-based diet. Making sure that you really understand them is key for a strong foundational knowledge that you can continuously build upon. You'll find so many wonderful foods to explore and try, but for now I introduce you to the basics and tell you what foods to avoid.

### *What's included*

The big question is, “If I'm not eating anything from an animal, what is there to eat?” I begin by exploring the wonderful plants that I hope you get to know quite well on this journey. You'll find all sorts of diverse foods to enjoy (if you're new to this, prepare to be pleasantly surprised by what you find).

### *Valuable vegetables*

You'll discover a whole array of veggies that you'll likely get to know quite well while eating plant-based. If you're new to this, you'll probably stick to tried-and-true, familiar veggies in the beginning because they'll feel safe — and that is A-okay! But over time, I encourage you to expand into new areas and pick up that funny-looking squash over there or try that wild, leafy bunch of something over here. You can flip ahead to Chapter 7 for an extensive list and full explanation of the vibrant world of valuable vegetables, but for now, here's my starter kit:

- ✓ Beets
- ✓ Carrots
- ✓ Kale
- ✓ Parsley, basil, and other herbs
- ✓ Spinach
- ✓ Squash
- ✓ Sweet potatoes

### *Fantastic fruits*

Ahhh, the sweet juiciness of fresh fruit. We all love it! If you don't, you need to get on this train, because fruits are delicious; sweet; full of fiber, color, and wonderful vitamins; and so, so good for you. Throughout this book, I encourage you to try new ones, but here are some of my top picks to start with:

- ✓ Apples
- ✓ Avocado
- ✓ Bananas
- ✓ Blueberries
- ✓ Coconut
- ✓ Mango
- ✓ Pears
- ✓ Pineapple
- ✓ Raspberries
- ✓ Strawberries

### *Wonderful whole grains*

Consuming good-quality whole grains is a healthy part of a plant-based diet. Don't worry; you can still have your breads and pastas, but "whole" is the key word here. You don't want refined or processed — you want the real thing. When you buy these items, make sure the grain itself is the only ingredient. Although it's possible to buy proper whole grains off the shelf in packaging, make sure you double-check the label to confirm that it is, indeed, a whole grain (and only a whole grain). Here are some of my favorites (more in Chapter 3):

- ✓ Brown rice
- ✓ Brown-rice pasta
- ✓ Quinoa
- ✓ Rolled oats
- ✓ Sprouted-grain spelt bread

### *Lovable legumes*

Learning to love beans on a plant-based diet is key, as they're a great source of sustenance, protein, and fuel. It may take you and your body a little while to get used to them, but soon enough they'll be your friends — especially when you discover how great it is to eat them in soups, salads, burgers, and other creative mediums. Here are some of the best to start with:

- ✓ Black beans
- ✓ Chickpeas
- ✓ Kidney beans
- ✓ Lentils
- ✓ Split peas

### *Notable nuts and seeds*

Most people love a good handful of nuts! But the thing about eating them on a plant-based diet is making sure that they're unsalted, un-oiled, and raw. As long as you enjoy them in their natural state, you can feel free to eat them in moderation alongside your other wonderful plant-based foods. Here are the best ones to start with:

- ✓ Almonds
- ✓ Cashews
- ✓ Chia seeds

- ✓ Flaxseeds
- ✓ Hempseeds
- ✓ Pumpkin seeds
- ✓ Sunflower seeds
- ✓ Walnuts



Try munching on a few nuts or seeds straight up or adding them to salads or other recipes. And if you can't decide which one you have a taste for, toss them all in a trail mix!

### *The extras*

This is the category of foods that isn't really a category, per se, but these foods are still part of the plant-based diet. This includes such things as exotic superfoods, sea vegetables (see Chapter 4), condiments, and natural sweeteners (more on sweeteners in Chapter 13). Here are some specific examples:

- ✓ **Cacao:** The pure form of chocolate
- ✓ **Coconut oil:** Raw, virgin unprocessed oil (and the perfect butter substitute)
- ✓ **Honey:** The raw stuff, not the kind in bear-shaped plastic bottles
- ✓ **Maple syrup:** Again, the real stuff — no corn syrup here!
- ✓ **Nori:** A delicious and nutritious sea vegetable
- ✓ **Tamari:** A versatile fermented soy sauce

## *What's off limits*

As you can imagine, all things that aren't plants are off limits; however, as I mention earlier, you may need or want a transitional period during which you wean yourself off these foods one at a time (more on that in Chapter 5) until you can avoid all things from the animal world — including meat, poultry, fish, eggs, milk, and other dairy products. In addition, because this is a clean way of living, you may cut out most processed and fried foods that don't serve your body and your health on a nutritional level.



Of course, this is the ideal — you have to find your own place on the spectrum of plant-based eating and do what works for you. Often, making something off limits just makes you want it more, so you have to strike the balance between being tough on yourself and being practical.

## *It's Not a Diet, It's a Lifestyle*

The plant-based diet isn't the new fad or the latest thing that makes you lose a certain amount of weight in a certain amount of time. This is about changing your habits to the core. This is more than just a decision to change your food choices; it's a decision to change everything that comes with it.

How are you eating, when are you eating, and what else are you doing that can enhance, help, and sustain this lifestyle? Who else is on board with you? Do you have support? I address all these points in this book because, when you make a commitment to eat well, that commitment has to extend into all areas of your life. Eating is one of the main daily concerns we have as human beings. We need to tend to our diet in order to survive. Without food, we don't live. But also, without food there is no pleasure, no taste, and no health. A plant-based diet ensures that you get all of those needs met.

I'm excited for you to empower yourself! Any decision you make can positively impact you for the rest of your life. And as passionate as I am about that, the truth isn't in my words; it's in the results you get when you sleep better, have more energy, notice better hair and skin, and improve your vitality. Heck, you may even lose (or gain) that weight along the way.

In the following sections, I explain some of the benefits and general principles that may become part of your new lifestyle, from eating more greens to coping with your body's reaction to the additional fiber you'll consume.

### *Appreciating the power of greens*

The earth isn't half green for no reason! We were meant to eat greens. In fact, half of your plate at mealtime and at least half of what you eat daily from the plant world should be green (see Chapter 6 for more on this).

Greens are the life force of the vegetable kingdom. Green leafy vegetables like kale, collards, Swiss chard, and spinach carry with them all the nutrients you need to thrive. They have everything from protein to trace minerals to calcium, and so much more — and guess what? They're low in calories! You can eat as many of them as you want, and they only help you get healthier. How is that for a deal? Did I forget to mention that there are ways to make them taste good, too? You don't have to chomp through them in their plain state like a horse — no! In Part III, I show you that you can get these guys into your body in myriad ways, from juices and smoothies to soups, sandwiches, salads, and more.

These powerful vegetables are the key to health. They help enliven and enrich your cells from the inside out. As long as they're kept in their prime and not overcooked (meaning, staying green and not grey or brown), they can give you all the goodness they have.

Here are the best greens to start with, from sweetest to most bitter:

- ✓ Lettuce
- ✓ Spinach
- ✓ Broccoli
- ✓ Kale
- ✓ Swiss chard
- ✓ Bok choy
- ✓ Collards
- ✓ Arugula
- ✓ Dandelion greens
- ✓ Mustard greens

And here are some ideas of where you can add greens:

- ✓ **Green juices:** Go to a store where they make fresh juices and test the waters. If you have a juicer at home, give it a go — soon, you'll be adding greens to every juice!
- ✓ **Smoothies:** Add a handful of spinach or kale to your next fruit smoothie. You won't taste them, but you still get all the beneficial nutrients.
- ✓ **Salads:** You don't have to use just lettuce. Try chopping kale and chard into bite-size pieces and adding them to your next salad. A salad allows you to get all the enzymes and nutrients greens have to offer in their raw state.
- ✓ **Sandwiches:** Dress a sandwich with any green you'd like to add a little crunch.
- ✓ **Soups and stews:** You can chop up greens and add them to your soup to give it a little texture. For those picky eaters, puree the leafy greens into a soup . . . they'll never know!
- ✓ **Stir-fries:** Slice greens really thin and sauté them with olive oil and garlic, and then drop them into different recipes or serve them alongside other dishes.
- ✓ **Pastas:** Add fresh greens at the end of the cook time for your pasta or sauce. Warm them up a bit to wilt them so they combine more easily with the pasta. (And the greens add a fun dose of color as well as nutrients.)



Try one new green a week. It's important to rotate your greens because our bodies can become too dependent on the nutrients in one and then not get others. Also, you may develop an allergy or intolerance if you eat the same one for too long.

## *Focusing on quality, not quantity*

It's not about how much you eat; it's about *what* you eat. In fact, the amount you eat is irrelevant. I realize that may shock you, given that most diets are so focused on portion size, calories, and grams of protein. It drives me mad! Why? Because restricting food and calories is *not* the key to health. It's about what's in the food, what it's made up of, and what's in that recipe or box that counts. I want to get you so connected to your food that you become obsessed with ingredients and what's in your meals, as opposed to how much your plate weighs. You may actually start to feel lighter just knowing you can let go of that concept here and now.

Of course, I touch upon numbers, in terms of recommended serving sizes and dietary percentages, a few times throughout the book to make sure you understand approximates and to give you a guideline, but in no way do I want you to become attached to this. Instead, become attached to being healthy and figuring out how plant-based eating enriches your “nutritional wardrobe” with all the colors, textures, and features brought forth by plants.



Try focusing on eating foods in their whole forms, not out of a package. Try to introduce at least one new food a week as you transition, while at the same time eliminating processed foods.

## *It's all in the genes: Understanding and working with your code for health*

People love to make the excuse that it's in their genes to eat a certain way, or to give in to being overweight because their parents are. Well, I say bananas!

Yes, your genes do play a significant role and help to make up who you are. But they're not the be all and end all; you can work with them and around them. You can use your genes as a template, but don't let them lock you in. Let them help you understand who you are and how you can overcome them.

You may be prone to thyroid disease, cancer, diabetes, or osteoporosis (we all are, to some extent). Instead of focusing on that, focus on how you can either prevent or reverse the disease. Flip to Chapter 20 for more on how a



plant-based diet helps with specific disease prevention and control. If you have a family history of an illness or malady, take control now with your diet. You don't have to be the next victim. You can do something about it!

## *Forging ahead with fiber*

You can never see enough commercials telling you to eat more fiber; we are a society that lacks fiber. It's from not only the processed food but also the meat and dairy that the average North American eats, all of which have no fiber. It's a pretty sad state of affairs, actually . . . so let's change that. Luckily, the plant-based diet is full of fiber; in fact, you can't get away from it! Here is why fiber is so fabulous:

- ✔ **Keeps you regular:** Fiber is the roughage from fruits and veggies. When it's in your body, your digestive system has no choice but to push the fiber and other things along and out, which makes for healthy daily deposits in your toilet bowl.

**Note:** It's ideal to have a bowel movement at least once a day, but some people may not be so lucky. The goal is consistency, quantity, and ease of elimination.



Of course, it can work against you, too. If you're prone to constipation, your body may take a little longer to get used to the fiber from whole foods, so take it slow when introducing them into your diet.

- ✔ **Keeps you fuller longer:** Fiber means bulk, which means more satisfying and filling. Fibrous foods send signals to your brain telling you that you're full much sooner than foods with no fiber. Therefore, you may find that you eat less than you're used to when you eat fiber-rich foods. Also, fibrous foods require more chewing because of the roughage, so it may take you longer to chew, swallow, and digest.



Eating high-fiber foods — which take longer to eat — can mean that you ultimately eat less because your brain has more time to process the “I'm full” signal.

- ✔ **Adds more texture to your foods:** The diversity of texture that fiber offers to your plate is exceptional. Each fruit, vegetable, and whole grain has its own complexity of fiber, which adds to the diversity in your meals.



In the beginning, fiber will not be your friend. When you first introduce all the roughage, skins, seeds, and other textures of plants, your gut may have a not-so-fun time getting used to it all. Stick it out. Just eat it for a bit. You may feel gassy, bloated, and just “full” all the time, but your gut needs to get used to

this and figure out how to pass these new foods along. When it starts working properly, you'll find that you depend on natural fiber from whole foods, not store-bought powders, to keep you going every day.



Because fiber draws water out of your body, drink lots of water when you eat fibrous foods to help it move along.

## *Common Questions and Answers about a Plant-Based Diet*

As with anything new, considering a plant-based diet can bring up all sorts of questions and concerns. This book is filled with great information that most likely addresses pretty much everything that has you worried. But to nip the fretting in the bud, here are five of the most common questions about taking up a plant-based diet.

### *Can I get full eating only plants?*

Absolutely! The wonderful thing about eating plants is that you're eating lots of fiber, and fiber makes you full! Also, the more wholesome the plants are (in other words, not processed), the more nutrients you're eating, which helps make you feel more satisfied. As the nutrients load your cells with vitamins and minerals, this helps make you feel pleasantly full, but not stuffed.

Also, the diversity of texture can help with this. Because so many plant foods require you to chew more, you actually spend more time getting through the meal. So a big bowl of salad with lots of stuff in it may not seem that heavy, but it can fill you up quite fast. I promise, after trying just a few recipes in this book, you'll be quite full!

### *How will I get protein?*

This is always the big question. Well, I have a big answer: from so many different places! A plant-based diet has so much protein, you may not even believe it. Although it may not seem like the grams of protein add up to the amount of protein you find in meat, what you soon realize is that it's not about the quantity but rather the quality. The standard American diet provides too much protein, and this can cause many chronic illnesses. Plant-based protein sources like legumes, nuts, seeds, quinoa, tempeh, avocado, and green leafy

veggies all have their own breakdown of amino acids, which build up inside your body to make a complete protein. The best part is, they absorb into your body much better than animal-based protein. You won't feel that same heaviness eating plant-based protein.

## *What about calcium?*

What about calcium, you ask? Well, did you know that plant-based foods like sesame seeds, hempseeds, bok choy, carob, and figs are extremely rich in calcium? Almost more so than a glass of dairy milk. I know this may be hard to get your head around, but it is actually proven in most cultures that the less dairy is consumed, the more calcium is absorbed by the body.

So fret not — just because you have “grown-ups” thinking you need a glass of milk to get your daily dose of calcium, that doesn't mean the so-called experts are right. Turns out, you can eat almonds, seeds, and greens and get the same amount of calcium in your body. You won't feel bloated, either, as these sources of calcium are loaded with vitamins and minerals, making the nutrients much easier to absorb.

## *How do I get iron? Won't I become anemic?*

Iron is definitely an area of concern for anyone not eating meat, so you need to be a bit more cautious to make sure you're consuming enough of plant-based sources such as:

- ✓ Dark leafy greens
- ✓ Seaweeds
- ✓ Nuts
- ✓ Seeds
- ✓ Legumes
- ✓ Dried fruit

If you still feel like you aren't getting enough, you may want to consider taking a good-quality, plant-based iron supplement — even just for a short period of time to boost your stores (see Chapter 9 for more on supplements).

Many people — even athletes and the like — survive and even *thrive* without meat!



## *Does eating plant-based help people lose weight?*

I'm adamant that people should never choose to eat a specific way for weight loss. This never proves to have beneficial long-term results and always backfires on people if their weight-loss plans aren't aligned for true health reasons. Focusing solely on weight loss or calorie counting can be extremely detrimental and can take up a lot of brain power and energy.

The good news is that by following a plant-based and healthy lifestyle, you will start to feel great and lose weight naturally. When you focus on eating well-balanced and nutrient-dense meals, your body isn't deprived, and it starts to function efficiently. Deprivation is not an option.

## *A Quick Guide to Making Plant-Based Part of Your Everyday Life*

You can start with simple ways to make eating plant-based foods easy and noninvasive to your existing diet. Here are a few suggestions to help you get started today:

- ✓ **Replace one to three meals a week with plant-based ones.** Use some of the recipes in this book (flip to Part III) or search for others that appeal to your palate.
- ✓ **Include healthy meat alternatives,** such as beans, legumes, nuts, and fermented soy, in place of meat in your meals.
- ✓ **Choose healthy alternatives to dairy,** such as rice milk, almond milk, and hempseed milk, or try avocado and cashews in place of cheese.
- ✓ **Explore new vegetables.** Go beyond your usual suspects and experiment with new colors and different green leafy vegetables.
- ✓ **Have a smoothie for breakfast.** Swap out bacon and eggs for a nutritious blended fruit smoothie to get you going in the morning.
- ✓ **Swap out butter for coconut oil.** This can be spread on toast, used in baking, and substituted anywhere else butter or margarine is used.
- ✓ **Pack power snacks.** Don't lurk around the vending machines, which are filled with non-plant-based ingredients. Bring trail mix (nuts, seeds, and dried fruit) to work or keep a small container of it handy at all times.
- ✓ **Make a simple veggie dinner at least one night a week.** If you're just getting started, change up at least one of your meat-centered meals to something plant-based yet familiar, like a vegetable stir-fry, hearty soup, or pasta.