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**The Functional  
Food Fad**

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Penelope Karageorge  
Contributor  
250 E. 39th Str. Apt. 11-L  
New York NY 10016-2178

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# The Food feign

Eating used to be simple. Not any more. It's no longer enough for food to be nourishing and flavorful, it has to do something extra for your body. 'Functional foods' have entered supermarkets and, from their shelves, our homes, slowly changing the way we view nutrition. Penelope Karageorge spoke with two pioneers in the field, Dr Artemis Simopoulos and Steve Demos, who explain their commitment to foods that work for you.

**I**f you're health-conscious—and who isn't?—a trip to the supermarket can become a study in existential choices. What taboo ingredients does that frozen dinner contain? How about the Chilean grapes? We prowl through a maze of foods, struggling to do the best for our bodies and psyches, often seeking out enriched foods, and specific, "healthy" fruits and vegetables. Now these foods have been given a name: functional foods, also known as nutraceuticals (a blend of the word nutritional and pharmaceutical), or medicinal foods.

Like functional furniture, functional food works for you, beyond being merely tasty or hunger-satisfying. A food can be fortified with health-promoting additives, or it can simply be a fresh food with specific claims attached to it. It's the hottest new trend in the food world. In fact, it's a growing, international, billion-dollar enterprise.

Two outstanding functional food pioneers are Dr. Artemis Simopoulos, author of the international best-seller *The Omega Diet*, and Steve Demos, considered a food visionary. Demos created Silk soymilk, now found in almost every supermarket in America. Since selling Silk to Dean Foods for \$295 million, Demos has now moved on to start a new company, NextFoods, and introduce a new product, GoodBelly, aimed at digestive health. This organic fruit juice beverage contains the pro-biotic Lp299v, part of a time-tested Swedish drink.

## Fat chance

Simopoulos, a brilliant scientist, has devoted her life to the study of genetics and nutrition. She encourages eating natural foods, with emphasis on selecting the right foods, and based her original investigations on the Cretan diet. After extensive, in-depth research, she repudiated a couple of popular but wrong-headed ideas about nutrition.

One: we can be healthy by eliminating fat from our diets.

Two: just olive oil consumption will ensure a healthy life.

In a wide-ranging interview with

*Odyssey*, Dr. Simopoulos spoke with passion and intensity about the topics close to her heart—genetics and nutrition, and the history of how our ancestors ate. Does your mouth water when you catch the heady aroma of Greek soul food? Are you turned on by *horta*, lentil soup, dandelion greens, and fish, just like your mother cooked it? You could be addicted to Greek functional food, according to Simopoulos. *Horta*, as well as all of the above, supply omega-3 fatty acid to help you live a long, disease free, and even depression-free life.

According to Simopoulos, human beings evolved eating greens, fish, animal fats and later grains. "The body cannot make the essential fatty acids. Therefore you have to get them directly from your diet. One is omega-6, and the other is omega-3, and both of these were once in our food supply. But by changing cattle feed from grass to corn, we changed the composition of the muscle of the animal, as well as their milk. You end up with animals with a lot of omega-6, and no omega-3. We developed a food supply that was not consistent with our genetic programming and profile."

She's adamant about eating the proper balance of omega-6 and omega-3 foods, and particularly recommends seeking out omega-3. "Right now we have a food supply that's totally unbalanced. It's very high in omega-6, and studies show that very aggressive behavior is seen in people who have very high omega-6 fatty acids in their diet. If you eat a standard American diet, you are also going to manifest heart disease and depression. We know that omega-3 fatty acids elevate the mood, and are very important for alleviating depression."

For Simopoulos, canola oil is crucial, as well as fish and greens. and in her *Seven Dietary Guidelines of the Omega Diet*, her first rule is: "Eat foods rich in omega-3 acids, such as fatty fish (salmon, tuna, trout, herring mackerel), walnuts, canola oil, flaxseeds, and green, leafy vegetables."

She fiercely repudiates the idea of the Mediterranean diet as a nutritive cure-all,

pointing out that vast differences characterize the cuisines of countries notable for their olive oil consumption; healthy consumption goes beyond olive oil. "The Mediterranean diet is a geographic term. The right diet is identical to the traditional diet of Greece prior to 1960. And this type of diet is also found in the traditional diet of Korea, or Thailand, or Japan. So this is marketing when they talk about the Mediterranean diet. The Olive Oil Council is pushing that concept so that they can sell olive oil. Olive oil is not enough."

According to Simopoulos, good health begins with a shopping list. You need to fight off the bad fats—including butter, margarine, corn oil, safflower, and cottonseed oil. "Most of the work of the diet takes place at the grocery store. The most important change you'll be making is in eating a healthier balance of fat. A combination of olive oil and canola oil will become your primary oils," she writes in *The Omega Diet*. "Just as important, you will be supplementing your diet with foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids while you limit your intake of omega-6 fatty acids, saturated fat, and trans-fat acids. These changes are easier to make than you might expect. Simply using canola oil as your primary oil, for example, will satisfy most of these dietary requirements."

Simopoulos travels around the world lecturing, and when the interview with *Odyssey* took place she had just returned from a two-week lecture tour in Thailand where she was impressed by Thai culture. "They're very much interested in their health and the Thai massage is very famous. They are really so much more advanced in these respects than Europeans are. Here, we don't pay as much attention as we should, either in respect to physical activity or our health. Otherwise Americans wouldn't be as fat as they are."

## Weighed down

Obesity has struck American society—and increasingly Europe—like a plague, infecting youngsters as well as adults. As for the cause, Simopoulos weighs in to the debate.

Although Greece was once a shining example of health, according to recent studies Greek youngsters have been found to be among the most overweight in Europe. 'Greece has such a history and culture of a healthy mind and a healthy body. If a country like Greece allows their children to be fat, no-one else can be saved!' says Artemis Simopoulos.

"I think Americans are having a weight epidemic because they don't walk very much. Physical activity is not part of their education. Plus, they overeat. You can eat any combination of foods, but if you don't overeat, you're not going to gain weight. The portions here are very large. They don't have any concept of portions in restaurants. Butter and bread are free. In other countries, your pay for your bread."

Although Greece was once a shining example of health, according to recent studies, Greek youngsters have been found to be among the most overweight in Europe. What happened? "The Greek children are overweight because of cultural changes," she says. "The majority of Greek children are no longer breast-fed. They start life with a larger weight during the first year of life and it continues because they are over-fed. Mothers run around in Greece with a spoon and a dish to make sure their children eat well. This is a national characteristic."

Changes in Greek lifestyle, including the trend towards urbanization, have brought changes to society. "And [Greek children] no longer have open spaces for walking and exercise. If you're thinking in terms of Athens, for example, of the big towns, they have changed a lot. They're manifesting the changes of big cities everywhere in the world. And instead of walking to school, the children are picked up by a bus. I would say the fact that they don't walk and the use of automobiles and buses for school are very important factors."

She adds: "Plus children no longer eat fruit as a snack. For example, at the university, the predominant dried fruits and nuts that were so characteristic of the Greeks are being replaced by cookies and chips. And not only that, instead of adults having just one ouzo, they now have a lot of hard liquor. The changes in Greece are very characteristic of Western Europe and the United States. Eating more, drinking more, exercising less."

Simopoulos does not take the Greek weight issue lightly. "Greece has such a history and culture of a healthy mind and a healthy

body. If a country like Greece allows their children to be fat, no-one else can be saved!"

Born in the Mani, Greece, Simopoulos was the eldest of three girls. Her father was a physicist. Her mother, a university graduate who majored in literature, stayed home to raise a family and prepare delicious, nutritious food. When Simopoulos enrolled in Barnard at the precocious age of sixteen, she enjoyed the intellectual stimulation, but was dismayed by the American diet: inedible white bread and something orange masquerading as cheese. Graduating in three years, she entered Boston University School of Medicine, graduating at age twenty-three as a pediatrician, the youngest person ever to graduate from medical school in Massachusetts.

Simopoulos went on to investigate nutrition. She is founder and president of the Center for Genetics, Nutrition and Health in Washington, D.C. She chaired the Nutritional Coordinating Committee of the National Institutes of Health for years, and was a consultant to the Office of Consumer Affairs during the Carter Administration. She has written over 280 scientific papers. Currently President of the Society of Neutrigenics/Neutriganomics, which she helped establish two years ago, Simopoulos is editing two scientific books. *The Omega Diet* has been translated into ten languages and will be coming out in Thai, Spanish, Russian, and Ukrainian; in China, the book is going into its fourth edition.

Health-wise, Simopoulos walks the talk. Growing up, she studied Greek dancing as part of her education in Kalamata and in 1949 she danced for Queen Frederika. She continues to enjoy dancing today. She does the family food shopping. "I don't have to read any labels, because I never buy any processed foods! I go to different markets. I go to Whole Foods if I want to buy nice fruit, but I also go to Trader Joe's if I want to buy a good rack of lamb."

Married to a cardiologist, Dr. Alan Lee Pinkerson, Simopoulos cites her husband as being crucial to her work. "He taught me the importance of fighting for scientific truth and

scientific integrity," she told *Education Update*, the prestigious and widely-read journal that recently selected her as one of the "Women Shaping History". The mother of three daughters, including a psychiatrist, Simopoulos says: "In the end, it is always the family that matters."

## Soy good

Like Simopoulos, Steve Demos offers us mind-opening new approaches to nutrition. The 58-year-old took the "weirdness" out of soy, putting Silk soymilk on almost every supermarket shelf in America. A globally recognized functional foods pioneer, Demos founded a new company, NextFoods, in 2007. He has just released GoodBelly, a drink aimed at aging baby boomers with digestive problems. His NextFoods product was inspired by his own experience. "As a member of the Baby Boom generation we thought we were immortal and could eat, drink, and travel and do anything we like. Then mortality showed up in the form of body aches. It changed our consciousness in terms of diet and our perspective on nutrition."

Like his first product, Silk soymilk, GoodBelly has philosophical roots. "GoodBelly delivers a holistic approach to wellness by bringing together validated science and organics," explains Demos. "GoodBelly's patented probiotic, Lp299v, has been clinically tested and proven for fifteen years and has also been proven in the breakfast table. Lp299v has been the probiotic in the number one selling fruit drink in Sweden for thirteen years."

Demos, who knows how to turn a catchy phrase, claims that new GoodBelly—yummy for the tummy—will restore the balance of "gut flora" that's lost with aging. "Forty percent of Americans experience some kind of gastro-intestinal trouble; as people age, their gut flora deteriorates, which makes digesting food more problematic. The result for millions of people is gas, bloating, and irregularity, conditions that can also be severe and chronic. Gut flora can also be negatively impacted when people are taking antibiotics,

Steve Demos's big breakthrough came in October, 1999, when the FDA declared that consuming 25 grams of soy protein per day can lower cholesterol and reduce the risk of heart disease. The product began to have wide appeal and today Silk soymilk is found everywhere from Walmart to Starbucks. Almost as vital to Demos as his success was proving that an organic company could realize an enormous profit, while still being environmentally and socially responsible.

which have the ability to kill both good and bad bacteria in the digestive track."

He adds: "The good news is that GoodBelly contains an impressive twenty billion live and active probiotic cultures which are clinically proven to restore the balance of gut flora in the intestinal tract, and promote immunity."

Demos told *The Wall Street Journal* that he's launching his new product with "guerrilla marketing, handing out a lot of products, creating buzz, and just being present and bringing innovation and newness to the market. The market will always be looking for somebody who is willing to take the risk and put out something different."

The food innovator introduced GoodBelly first in his hometown of Boulder, Colorado, an American community renowned for its "greenness". But for Demos, greenness is not enough. He resists the hippy tag and reaches towards science for functional food validation. "Everybody is outgreening everyone else," Demos says. "So where is the future competitive advantage? It's going to be with science. NextFoods was the evolution out of the granola crunch world into the marriage of validated science and the natural order of food. NextFoods is the next evolution of where food's going. It's going to be functional foods that are deeply rooted in verified, validated science."

A vegetarian, Demos grew up in Philadelphia as part of a meat-eating family. Demos's first role model was his Greek American father, an entrepreneur who managed to combine money-making with humanitarian principles. After graduating from Bowling Green University in 1970, Demos and a friend flew to Europe and then hitch-hiked to New Delhi, India, where he stayed for four years and became a practicing Buddhist, committed to the tenet of "right living".

He returned to take-up residence in Boulder, living in a hand-crafted wood cabin 8,500 feet up in the Colorado Rockies, wearing his sandy hair long, complemented by a longish mustache, and practicing yoga daily. He wanted what sounded on the surface like

the impossible dream—to unite Buddhist teachings with a desire to make money. He pondered the problem, experimenting with a wide variety of possibilities before hitting the functional food jackpot. Eureka! Tofu! Ignoring the fact that a Los Angeles Times poll had named tofu the second-most-hated food in the nation, right behind liver, Demos committed himself to soy.

### Passage from India

Starting with a five-hundred-dollar loan from an upstairs neighbor, Demos set about to mix up a batch of nutritious, delicious soymilk, adding components including sugar, vanilla, and sea salt to change the "beany" flavor. "The proof is in the taste. If it doesn't taste delicious, then we've missed our market." His first sales were to members of his tai chi class. Demos created package appeal with a gable-topped milk carton. Before that, soymilk had been sold in dull, antiseptic packages, which made soymilk look like what Demos called "Armageddon food".

Because Silk costs about fifty percent more than dairy milk many people were reluctant to even try it. Demos overcame that obstacle by giving away more than three-million half-pints of Silk in five thousand stores, offering future buyers the chance to take it home and sample it at their leisure.

His big breakthrough came in October 1999, when the FDA declared that consuming 25 grams of soy protein per day can lower cholesterol and reduce the risk of heart disease. The American Heart Association then recommended consuming fifty grams per day; one eight-ounce glass of Silk contained 6.25 grams. The product began to have wide appeal, including to a high percentage of Afro-Americans and Hispanics who are lactose intolerant. Silk sales went on to double every year. Today, Silk soymilk is found everywhere from Walmart to Starbucks. Almost as vital to Demos as his success was proving that an organic company could realize an enormous profit while still being environmentally and socially responsible—and based on Buddhist tenets.

In 2002, he sold his WhiteWave Company to Dean Foods for \$295 million, giving away fifteen million dollars to WhiteWave employees, whether they were managers or truck drivers. For several years, Demos stayed on to manage WhiteWave, but left in 2005. He returned to India with his wife and children because India had proved his inspirational source and he yearned to realize a dream. "One of my goals I never fulfilled when I was younger was to go to the headwaters of the Ganges, a place called Gangotri. Here, I realized that business and right livelihood are still deeply ingrained in my being."

He had a type of food epiphany. He discovered his body was changing. "My body was starting a conversation with me, and I really didn't like what it was saying. We're probably going to be the oldest or longest-living generation in history to date. Our bodies are going to change as we age, and the only way that we're going to maintain the quality of life as we age is by supplementing," Demos told *Organic Processing*. "I wanted to do this through natural sources as much as I could. I also wanted to learn more about the specific systems and prioritize the most important area to work on. When I discussed it with the doctors and lifestyle professionals I had around me, they were all very adamant that if you really want to help people, start with the digestive system. That's where all the nutrition is absorbed into the body, and that's where the immune system is established. And the fact is, after age forty, your body stops making certain digestive bacteria. I saw an opportunity to address those needs."

Will Demos once again capture lightning in a bottle with his GoodBelly, the "only dairy-free, soy-free, and wheat-free product of its kind"? Will GoodBelly attract a vast body of consumers? Demos aims for "the creation of wealth, without the creation of guilt." Regardless, he'll stick by his principles, informed by a profound and intriguing self-knowledge, and involved in "right livelihood—good for me, good for you, good for everybody who touches it." 