

## 5 Healthy Food Trends worth Watching

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If you want to know where American food traditions are headed, look back. Many of today's most healthful eating trends *used to be common practice*: offering nutritious, peak-of-season produce; slow-cooked dinners that foster leisurely family meals; an emphasis on meatless dishes and minimally processed foods.

- 1. Flexitarianism** - "Flexitarians" eat a primarily plant-based diet composed of grains, vegetables, and fruits, but occasionally obtain protein from lean meat, fish, poultry, or dairy. Dietitians and public health advocates have been recommending this type of eating for years (consuming meatless meals at least four days a week).
  - **Health benefits:** Studies show that flexitarians generally weigh less and have lower rates of hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, and prostate and colon cancer.
- 2. Locally grown foods** - In the past 10 years, the number of local farmers' markets has more than doubled – up from 1,755 to 3,706, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service.
  - **Health benefits:** Because of its freshness, locally grown food often tastes better than produce designed to be shipped. Non-local produce is picked about four to seven days before it arrives on supermarket shelves, and is shipped for an average of 1,500 miles before it's sold. USDA researchers have found that if produce from these "factory" farms isn't handled properly, it can lose up to half its nutrients in transit.
  - **Missoula's Farm to School Program:** In collaboration with Missoula County Public Schools (MCPS), this program works to incorporate fresh, local food products into school meals while supporting Montana-based agriculture. Last year the schools served 17,000 lbs of Montana-grown food! In addition to the school meal program, Farm to School offers educational classroom learning opportunities to teach students about what types of food are grown in Montana, how these can be a part of a healthy diet, and how food choices affect the broader community. For more information on this collaborative effort, check out these links: *Farm to School Program* <http://www.umt.edu/cfa/farmentoschool.htm>; *MCPS Food Service* <http://www.mcps.k12.mt.us/portal/Departments/BreakfastLunchPrograms/tabid/207/Default.aspx>.
- 3. Functional foods** - Functional foods are enriched with nutrients that may not be inherent to a given food. Familiar examples include orange juice fortified with calcium or milk fortified with vitamins A and D.
  - **Health Benefits:** These foods help many people fill nutritional gaps. However, functional foods are only *one helpful element* in maintaining a balanced diet, not a substitute for it. It's best to rely on whole foods that fulfill your dietary needs with naturally nutrient-rich sources.
- 4. Organic food** - These are foods produced following a government-regulated practice of growing and processing that minimizes exposure to pesticides, herbicides, and other chemicals used in traditional farming. Organic food sales have risen more than 20 percent per year since the 1990s, according to the USDA's Economic Research Service.
  - **Health Benefits:** A research review of 41 studies conducted by the University of California at Davis found that, on average, organic produce contained more vitamin C, iron, and magnesium compared with traditionally grown foods. However, other studies have found conventionally grown products to be nutritionally equal to organic foods. One thing for sure – choosing organic for produce commonly treated with high concentrations of pesticides such as peaches, apples, and strawberries, can minimize your exposure to these chemicals.
- 5. Slow food** – A term to describe a trend that supports the following principles: choosing locally grown and produced items, preparing them in traditional ways, and eating with friends and family.
  - **Health Benefits:** As with locally grown food, freshness is a key component of the slow food trend. Family togetherness is also an important aspect of the trend. "Slow food is all about cherishing the eating experience and getting back to what food used to be: a vehicle for drawing people together," explains Sara Firebaugh, assistant director of Slow Food USA. "*Healthful whole foods are a great start, but slow food goes a step beyond good nutrition -- and it's a difficult one to quantify. No scientific studies have conclusively proven that friends and family make better dinner companions than televisions, but the benefits are clear. A healthful diet isn't just about what you eat but how you eat it.*"