

Why Aren't the French Dropping Like Flies?

Last year, while browsing through the latest government report on diet and health, I came across a graph that left me flabbergasted.

In little black bars across the page it traced the incidence of deaths from coronary heart disease in twenty-seven industrialized countries. Japan did the best, which is no surprise because the Japanese eat lots of fish, rice, and little green things. But the identity of the runner-up astonished me. Right behind Japan, with the second-lowest rate on earth—lower than Italy with its olive oil cuisine, half of Scandinavia with its high-fish diet, and a mere fraction of the United States, the most finicky country in the world about what we put in our mouths—was, incredibly, *France!* Impossible, I gasped. Everybody knows that the French wallop in butter, cream, and egg yolks; gobbie pork, cheese, goose fat, and sausages; and guzzle wine like fish. If the French have the second-lowest rate of fatal coronary heart disease in the world—and the lowest in the Western world—then everything the U.S. surgeon general, her predecessor, and their battalions of government doctors want us to believe about saturated fats and cholesterol must be dead wrong. And if this is so, the surgeon general would have resigned in disgrace long ago, which she didn't.

I telephoned a doctor friend of mine, an expert in nutrition who never tires of frightening people about the devastating

effects of dietary fats, and asked him the obvious question: "If you're so smart, why aren't the French dropping like flies?"

Maybe the French actually eat more austere than we think, he suggested. Or maybe it's genetic. Perhaps the French government collects health statistics differently from the way we do. He feverishly proposed every excuse that came to mind, while avoiding what for him would be an awful truth: that we may not need to give up sumptuous food to stay healthy.

The genetic argument is hopelessly feeble because the French are not a homogeneous people like the Japanese. But do the French eat as richly as tourists imagine? After only twenty telephone calls to U.N. agencies here and in Europe, I found a statistician in Rome who was willing to send me the most recent Food Balance Sheets of the Food and Agriculture Organization.

Here are the facts: the French take in about as many calories as we do in the United States, but they consume more cholesterol and saturated fats because they eat four times as much butter as we and more than twice as much cheese and lard. I made a quick calculation that the French consume more saturated fat just from the forty pounds of cheese they eat each year than the surgeon general says we should take in from all sources combined.

If the French have heard of oat bran, it does not show up in the statistics—they eat only one-fifteenth the number of oats we do. They consume less sugar and beef and less whole milk, but the rest of their diet differs from ours in unremarkable ways: slightly less meat of all types and slightly less fresh fruit, a little more seafood, twice the garlic, half the onions, rather more potatoes and bread, and the same number of eggs.

I was about to launch an arduous search for detailed health statistics comparing France and the United States when my doctor friend sent me an excellent article by Edward Dolnick called "*Le paradoxe français*." It had appeared in the May/June issue of *Hippocrates* magazine, and it did all the work for me. Only 143 out of every 100,000 middle-aged French men die each year of coronary heart disease, compared with 315 among middle-aged