



# PALEO WOMAN

If Wilma and Pebbles can do it... OLIVIA STREN takes up the protein-rich Paleo challenge.

meeting a friend for lunch at a butter-scented French patisserie, which, under the circumstances, feels like attending an AA meeting at a liquor store. I've been on the Paleo Diet—also known as the Caveman Diet, the Human Diet and the Power Diet—for what feels like a Stone Age (it's been six days), forbidden to consume any grains, dairy or legumes. The once-consoling gurgle of a hard-working milk-frother taunts me in the background, and rows of oven-bronzed almond croissants make eyes at me

from behind the pastry counter. But I'm busy, looked in a staring contest with the basket of flour-dusted baguettes sitting before me. As the baguettes and I share a moment—we were once so good together! Or was it all a charade?—Barbra Streisand's *The Way We Were* drifts to mind. Only instead of breaking up with a shoreside Robert Redford in creamy cable-knits, I'm parting with a different golden specimen: bread (and all of its cousins). I order sliced chicken breast and ratatouille, and mournfully swaddle

the baguette in its white napkin—a beautiful carb in its woven basket.

The Paleo Diet posits that as *Homo sapiens*, we are genetically identical to our hunter-gatherer ancestors from 100,000 to 200,000 years ago, wired to eat a nutrient-dense, protein-rich and seasonally varied diet. Our Flintstonian forebears (Fred and Barney notwithstanding) were lean, physically powerful and virtually free of cavities and degenerative diseases such as cancer and diabetes, spared the scourges of obesity and even acne. In his book, *The Paleo Solution*—the ostensible holy book on the subject—Robb Wolf says that human health began to suffer tremendously after the advent of agriculture about 10,000 years ago, which fashioned a modern diet based on grains, dairy and carb-heavy, starchy crops lacking in vitamins and minerals.

Wolf explains that it was his own ailing health that prompted him to turn caveman. A vegetarian for years, Wolf felt he and his homemade hummus were on the only morally—and physiologically—upstanding path. But along the way, he acquired irritable bowel syndrome, colitis, high blood pressure and bad cholesterol. “Honestly, I was in so much agony that I literally would have killed myself if I could have rallied the muster to do it,” Wolf tells me over the phone from his home in Santa Fe. In desperation, he tried something radical: One night for dinner, he ate a six-pack of ribs and a salad. “I felt better almost immediately,” he says. The way he describes it in the book, it's as if while gnawing on a bone, clouds parted to reveal twin rainbows, a staircase of divine light and the voice of James Earl Jones commanding him to forsake his rice cooker. “I ate. And ate, and ate. I was warmly satisfied, clear-headed and I felt better than I had in years.” Wolf began gaining muscle, losing fat and enjoying great energy and acuity of mind; he's since penned that *New York Times* best-seller and opened a successful gym.

I've never been fond of fashionable or faddish diets, largely because they tend to involve the removal of things I love (bread, lattes, joy). Also because one minute you're drinking soy milk and feeling great about yourself, and the next you read something proclaiming that what you just ate might kill you. But unlike such diets du jour as the Middleton-approved Dukan, which demands »

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1/3 (Vertical)

that you eat only high-protein foods for the first “Attack Phase,” Paleo is based on medical anthropology and evolutionary biology. A diet of charcuterie spreads doesn’t sound so trying, I tell myself, and resolve to take Wolf’s month-long challenge. “What’s necessary is a bold, 30-day intervention where we remove all these foods and potentially feel good for the first time in our lives,” Wolf tells me.

“Is quinoa allowed?” I ask him meekly. “It’s not technically a grain.”

“Yeah, but it walks like a grain and quacks like a grain,” he says mercilessly. Since I don’t have serious digestive problems and feel that my relationship with bread and pasta has been a relatively peaceful one, I ask Wolf if all humans are genetically intolerant to grains. (I may not be good at math, or sports, or mornings, but maybe I’ve finally discovered a compensatory talent: the ability to digest, say, a Danish?) “I think of it as a bell curve. But the vast majority of people have significant problems [with grains],” he says. “And because we know that grains, legumes and dairy are pro-inflammatory...from an anti-aging perspective, everybody does better without them.” I decide not to ask Wolf his thoughts on salt.

“Everybody in the entire world should be eating either exactly like this or very close to this,” declares Kyle Byron, a Toronto-based nutritionist and personal trainer, over a Paleo lunch of chicken kebabs and arugula salad. “By removing grains, you will experience fewer insulin spikes, which cause fat gain, and fewer inflammation spikes—chronic inflammation eats away at joints and at your organs, and is a factor in causing heart disease, the number one killer in Canada. Most diets, like the Dukan, are debilitating. This one is more like a shift in eating that will help you thrive.” But he doesn’t endorse the 30-day challenge. “Anytime there’s a restriction, there’s a binge. It’s not sustainable. I advise people to change one thing a week.”

After a week of foraging in the produce and protein aisles at Whole Foods, I find myself flipping longingly through Italian cookbooks. The way someone else might gaze at a spread of a bare-chested Ryan Gosling, I gently touch close-ups of linguine alle vongole. One afternoon, I open my cupboard, denuded of offending garbanzos, and reach for a handful of raw almonds, only to bump into a box of crackers. Suddenly, I’m in the midst of a

faceoff with a Finn Crisp.

Evidently, my private war with that Nordic cracker was not only a question of willpower. Carbs excite the same brain circuitry that is lit up by amphetamines, sex and gambling. “This is a no-joke deal,” Wolf says. He tells me about a client who was a former crack addict and a prostitute. “Her process of getting off of refined, gluten-containing carbohydrates was harder than getting off crack.”

Mercifully, the biggest challenge of this diet for me is breakfast—no toast, no granola. Wolf suggests greeting the flush of dawn with, say, leftover pork loin (though as I sit in front of the TV one morning, it occurs to me that welcoming the day by eating a piece of chicken and watching Reeg was likely not the typical caveman itinerary). The Paleolith was walking 15 to 20 miles a day. “And they weren’t hunting and foraging for bagels,” says Wolf, spitting out the word “bagel” as if it were a piece of gristle.

About a week later, I head to *FASHION* market editor Jordan Porter’s place for a Paleo breakfast. She and her boyfriend, Alexander Mimran, went Paleo about eight months ago, and they assure me they’ve never felt better, thinner or more energized. The two of them are quite possibly the healthiest-looking human beings I’ve ever beheld—youthful, fresh and radiant enough to make the Gerber baby look like Keith Richards. Over a spread of frittata, coconut-flour walnut-and-cranberry “muffins” and raw pumpkin-seed butter, I confess: “I’ve been cheating with yogourt.”

“That’s OK,” Porter reassures me in a this-is-a-safe-space way. “What kind? Regular or Greek?”

“Both,” I reply weakly, suddenly feeling like some kind of dairy hussy.

“At least you didn’t cheat with bread,” Mimran says. “That’s the worst.”

“No, no, no—I haven’t done that!” I say defensively, deciding it best not to admit to my dangerously close call with the Finn crispbread.

Almost a month has passed, and I do feel more energetic and lighter than usual. But the world—with its cereal aisles, fromageries and latte-slinging cafés—feels vaguely hostile. The next time I meet a slice of baguette, I think I’ll follow Oscar Wilde’s advice: “The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it.” Even cavewomen need to (forgive me) cave once in a while. □