

Just desserts

with Tony Greenway



According to Gillian McKeith, Channel 4's thin Scottish nutritionist, 'you are what you eat'. This is worrying, because if that's true then Ms McKeith is a plate of alfalfa sprouts, while I am - fundamentally - a jumbo bag of tortilla chips on legs. Plus a nice Shiraz.

So just recently, in the interests of a) losing a few pounds, and b) actually seeing in my next birthday, I ditched the tortillas (well, OK: I've restricted myself to three bags a day), cut down on the vino and started out on a healthy diet.

There's a problem with that, however, because just what *is* a healthy diet these days? I thought I knew: less meat pies and bargain buckets, and more fruit, veg and oily fish. Except the dietary information we receive in the media flip-flops with dizzying regularity.

Every day a man wearing a frown and a white coat pops up and tells us that he's run a few tests and discovered that eating a previously tried and trusted foodstuff - bananas, say, or carrots - is the equivalent of tucking in to a large tub of radioactive waste. The other month, for instance, the man in the white coat told us that if we've been eating oily fish for its health-promoting properties, we've all been royally wasting our time. And didn't we all feel stupid?! The next day, during breakfast news, he dropped the biggest bombshell of all: you know that 'eat five portions of fruit and veg a day' advice? Well, actually, fruit and vegetables might do us more harm than good if we don't wash them properly, because of all the horrid

pesticides and chemicals they come pre-coated in. I nearly choked on my segmented grapefruit when I heard that one.

So what food is safe to eat? Not farmed salmon (that gives you cancer, apparently) or swordfish (which gives you mercury poisoning). And better lay off the cholesterol-increasing butter, cream, full-fat milk and cheese, too. Ooh, and no fried food, obviously (it hardens the arteries). Or breakfast cereal (lots of salt in that). Or chocolate (except the dark kind - that's all right. But not too much). Or caffeine (although some decaf coffee and tea is full of chemicals, thinking about it.) Blimey. By my reckoning, that only leaves broccoli, baked beans, rhubarb, dark chocolate and pineapple chunks - which rather limits our recipe options somewhat (broccoli, bean, rhubarb and pineapple chunk surprise, anyone?).

Except today, I notice, oily fish is OK to eat again. In fact, it now officially prolongs a healthy and active life, and may prevent prostate cancer 'according to a study' (but presumably not the same study that said it didn't last week). So that's all jolly fine and dandy. And butter, cheese, full-fat milk and cream? Well, there's good news and bad news here. If you do eat these things, word is you still might have a stroke. But if you don't eat them, you'll get all bendy because omitting calcium-rich food from your diet can damage your bones.

What else? Well, you should be eating raspberries, I can almost definitely tell you that much (as long as you wash them well first, of course). But are blueberries good this

week? Or bad? And is a glass of red wine beneficial for the heart, or a nightmare for the blood pressure? And should we be eating more or less pomegranates? I don't know about you, but when it comes to food, I'm as confused as Jade Goody at a financial services seminar.

I think it used to be simpler and less scary when we didn't know anything about food. When I was a kid, eating used to work like this: my mum would serve up something like toad-in-the-hole (suspicious-looking sausages in batter), mashed potatoes and sprouts. She would say: 'Eat this', so we did, except for the sprouts. So she'd say: 'Eat your sprouts - they're good for you', forgetting that the mashed potato had enough cream and butter in it to kill a small horse. Then, for afters, she'd serve up a whippy dessert, like Angel Delight, and we'd eat that in about five seconds flat and look around for some more. These days, I'd be too busy scanning the packet for the words 'may contain nuts' or asking her if the sausages in the toad-in-the-hole had been ethically farmed. Knowledge really is a dangerous thing.

Anyway, it's back to the healthy diet for me. I wonder if you can get lo-fat, organic, reduced-salt tortilla chips? Although, if you could, where would be the fun in that? ♣