

You call **this** health food?



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Well, not exactly. But beer and chocolate are among the foods that can be surprisingly good for you, nutritionists say.

By Molly Kimball
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Andre Burvant was doing what he does every fall Saturday — getting ready to watch his beloved LSU Tigers play — when it happened again: Someone offered him a beer.

He wanted to say yes. After all, the 37-year-old New Orleans lawyer, husband and father of two is the guy in charge of keeping game-day gatherings supplied with food, drink and laughter.

But the answer was “no thanks.” Because, lately, he’s also the guy on a diet. For Burvant, beer and football no longer mix.

“Too much sugar,” he said. “I’m trying to be good, trying to keep my carbs in check.”

Burvant’s intentions are noble, but his sacrifice may be unnecessary. It turns out that when Benjamin Franklin famously said, “Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy,” he had science on his side. Research suggests that when consumed in moderation, a whole host of “guilty pleasures” — an ice cold beer, a hot cup of coffee, a bowl of guacamole, a thick, juicy filet, a chunk of chocolate — not only are not inherently bad for you, they can make you healthier.

Beer, for example, is linked to a drop in risk for heart disease and heart attacks. Any type of alcohol helps raise HDL cholesterol,

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Beer, chocolate can be good for you

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commonly known as the body's "good" cholesterol. Beer may also help prevent blood clots from forming, by making platelets (the blood-clotting cells) less sticky. And, unlike other types of alcohol, beer contains vitamins B-6, B-12 and folate, which prevent the rise of blood levels homocysteine, a marker for heart disease.

Beer is also a good source of antioxidants — and the darker the beer, the higher the potential antioxidant content.

"The majority of the antioxidants in beer come from the roasted barley," the main ingredient in traditionally brewed beer, said Dr. Samuel Godber, food science professor in the LSU Agricultural Center. "The longer the roasting process, the darker the barley, which can translate to an increased concentration of antioxidants."

What about the perception that beer is high in sugar? Not so, said David Blossman, the President of Abita Brewing Company.

During the brewing process, Blossman said, water and heat are used to convert roasted barley into simple sugars. Yeast is then added, which ferments those sugars into alcohol.

"The complex carbohydrates are left behind, providing the essence and flavor of the beer," Blossman said.

The end result? Beer with less than one gram of sugar per 12-ounce bottle.

What about the calories? A 12-ounce bottle of beer has about 150 calories, or 100 calories for the average light beer.

That compares favorably to a 6-ounce glass of wine, which packs about 120 calories. And many people find it easier to control calories beer-by-beer, versus the often free-flowing bottle of wine.

Moderation is essential. The recommended maximum daily alcohol intake is two drinks for men and one for women, for whom even occasional drinking can increase the risk of breast cancer.

America's other favorite brew, coffee, has been practically vilified for years. But like beer, coffee is packed with antioxidants, Godber said. These antioxidants, as well as the caffeine in coffee, are linked to a decreased risk of Parkinson's disease, gallstones and type 2 diabetes.

Drinking coffee has been proven to relieve headaches. It can improve athletic performance and endurance. And it can supply a mental boost throughout the day.

The downside of coffee? A typical cup contains 60 to 120 milligrams of caffeine, depending on the strength of the brew. More than 300 milligrams of caffeine daily can increase the risk of osteoporosis. Overconsumption also can cause nervousness and insomnia, and like any stimulant, coffee can raise heart rate and blood pressure.

Unfiltered coffee, such as espresso or French pressed, may increase cholesterol and triglycerides — although this isn't a great concern for the majority of Americans who tend to drink filtered coffee. Women who are pregnant or lactating, as well as people with particular health issues, may be cautioned to limit caffeine intake as well.

But, like beer, it's not all bad,

The same goes for guacamole, whose main ingredient is avocado, which is high in monounsaturated fat. This heart-healthy fat reduces cholesterol levels — particularly the undesirable LDL cholesterol — while possibly increasing the "good" HDL cholesterol.

Avocado is also an unexpectedly good source of fiber, folate and potassium. Another nutrient-rich ingredient in many guacamole recipes is tomato; the fat in the avocado helps the body absorb the tomato's nutrients more effectively.

A common misconception is that since guacamole is fatty, it's also fattening. But ¼ cup of guacamole contains just 100 calories, less than a cup of low-fat yogurt.

The real drawback with guacamole, said Dallas-based registered dietitian Yvette Quantz, is that its traditional companions of chips and margaritas can quickly crank up the total caloric content. So it's wise to use portion control, Quantz said, and to make trade-offs.

In other words, if you want the guacamole, skip the queso.

Whereas guacamole is a classic party food, a juicy filet is considered a luxurious dinner-time indulgence. In reality, the filet is a relatively lean cut of meat, an excellent source of protein, and high in iron, zinc, selenium, and vitamin B-12, Godber said.

A filet won't break the bank, calorically speaking: A 6-ounce cut has 360 calories, compared to 280 calories for a 6-ounce skinless chicken breast.

Other cuts of beef often have a higher fat content, so next

time you're in the mood for a steak, treat yourself to a petite filet. Just hold the butter and pair it with a side of veggies, and you can rightly call it "health food."

Ditto for that chocolate you crave for dessert — so long as it's the right kind of chocolate.

Recent research lauding the health-promoting properties of chocolate merely confirmed what chocoholics have been saying for years: Chocolate can improve your mood and ease stress.

The cocoa in chocolate actually activates certain receptors in the brain, resulting in a calming, soothing sensation. Cocoa also contains potent antioxidants that have been linked to cancer prevention, and lowers blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

Like beer, the "darker is better" rule holds true with chocolate, Godber said. Look for dark chocolate that contains at least 70 percent cocoa to reap the greatest benefit.

To be mindful of calories (and your waistline), Godber recommends keeping your daily chocolate fix to 1 ounce or less.

And Quantz recommends keeping an open mind about everything in the kitchen cupboard.

"Many people think that if they like something, it must be bad for them," Quantz said.

In reality, even many "guilty pleasures" can be beneficial when consumed in moderation, Quantz said. "You don't have to give up everything you enjoy to be healthy."

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