

Feel fantastic in five weeks

My macrobiotic makeover

Keen to sort out her digestive problems, Lorna V gave up her favourite Mediterranean dishes to try a five-week macrobiotic diet. Would she last the course?



Every foodie knows the addictive buzz of buying a new recipe book, watching the latest *MasterChef* series or finding a new favourite ingredient. As well as being a gourmet, I'm interested in the health benefits of the food we eat, but frankly a lot of 'health food' doesn't cut it when it comes to flavour.

When I first tried macrobiotic cooking in the early 1990s, I was drawn to its focus on seasonal, locally produced organic foods that nourish the body and help prevent disease. But I didn't stay the distance and eventually gave up the diet. I decided to come back to it after reading about a macrobiotic cooking course held at Penninghame House, a health centre in Dumfries & Galloway.

Named after the Greek for 'long life', the macrobiotic diet has its roots in Japan, but also draws on Traditional Chinese Medicine. Food is classified according to the Taoist principle of yin and yang (or

expanding and contracting energy). For instance, leafy greens, nuts and fruit are expansive (yin), while root vegetables, seeds and whole grains are contractive (yang). The idea is to get a balance of yin and yang foods for maximum nutrition with minimum digestive stress.

Within minutes of arriving at Penninghame, I was devouring chewy, succulent coconut and spelt cookies and had already discovered a new ingredient - rice syrup.

I spent the weekend at the centre's cookery school in the hands of macrobiotic consultant Marlene Watson-Tara, whose energy and glowing skin are a good advert for this diet. Under Marlene's guidance, we created healthy dishes including aduki bean soup and dairy- and sugar-free chocolate mousse.

I'd been having some digestive problems, and, like most women, I was well aware of my hormones playing havoc at times. So when Marlene offered to draw up a five-week food programme for me to try at home, I decided to give it a go.

THE BANNED LIST

As I barely drink, the no-alcohol rule was fine, as was not having any processed food. I only eat a small amount of red meat and chicken once a week, so swapping to white fish a couple of times a week was OK, too.

I was sad about leaving out my Mediterranean favourites

like aubergines, potatoes and tomatoes, which are said to create inflammation in the body. And the 'no animal products' rule meant I'd have to learn to live without cappuccino, Greek yogurt and feta cheese. The food plan stipulated no sugar and very little fruit (although I could have a little stewed apple every day), and that was tough. In fact, it was miserable.

EASY HABITS TO GET INTO

I was already tuned into buying sustainable, local and organic food, as well as eating whole grains and plenty of vegetables, and any ingredients I couldn't find in my local shops I sourced online from Clearspring (www.clearspring.co.uk).

I immediately resolved to adopt *gomashio* (a mix of salt and toasted sesame seeds ground together) as a topping for vegetables. I realised I'd forgotten about certain salad ingredients like radishes, which are tasty and nutritious. I also put many of Marlene's tips to good use, such as squeezing the



Warming miso soup is a macrobiotic staple

juice out of grated ginger and using this in a dish instead of adding the grated ginger itself, which gives you a mellower flavour. And I'd used dried shiitake mushrooms before - they're packed with nutrients that are great for the immune system - but I didn't know the stems need to be cut off after they've been soaked, as they have a bitter taste. The water from soaking them can then be used as stock for soup.

HURDLES TO OVERCOME

I loathed the taste of the medicinal teas and soups from day one, and all the grating and brewing reminded me of why I never went for macrobiotics in the first place.

My biggest block was sea vegetables (or seaweed). Sure, they may be packed with minerals, but by the end of the second

'My biggest block was sea vegetables. By the end of week two, I felt they belonged on the beach, not on my stove'

week, I felt they belonged on the beach and not on my stove. It didn't help that in week three I bought sheets of untoasted nori by mistake, and then either burnt it or didn't toast it enough, leading to a disastrous brown rice sushi. Having gone to the trouble of making it, I ate it - even though it tasted a bit burnt or chewy - as these sea veg don't come cheap.

But by the end of the five weeks I had embraced the idea of toasted nori as a

BANNED



ALLOWED



YIN FOODS



YANG FOODS



nutritious snack -it's a bit of a twist on crisps. Wakame, one of the last sea veg I tried, was the least offensive, so I could easily add that to any soup.

Miso is a macrobiotic staple, as this fermented bean paste is a powerhouse of enzymes, minerals and vitamins. However, making miso soup involves cooking up a vegetable broth and adding sea vegetables. Preparing and eating it every day for five weeks was too much for me. It was a novelty in week one; boring in week two.

Another problem I had was that many of the macrobiotic flavours seemed to merge into one salty mass, what with the tamari or soy sauce, the fermented plum vinegar, the pickles and so on. But when I told Marlene halfway through that I couldn't stand miso, her advice to switch to white miso helped. This milder, sweeter version is also fantastic for unusual salad dressings and dips, as it combines well with other ingredients like tahini.

Microwaves are banned, and at times I felt there was no point

realised macrobiotic eating had reduced my cravings - I didn't feel the need for cake or chocolate

washing up and putting away the pots and pans, as they would be out again in a couple of hours! Making puréed greens, miso soup and porridge for breakfast every day was overwhelming, particularly as I loathe eating in the mornings.

'No wonder celebrities like Madonna have macrobiotic cooks,' I thought. It's a full-time job!

HIGHS AND LOWS

My lowest point came in week three, when I went off my food and had no appetite. 'What's the point of a diet where you can eat as much quinoa as you like if you don't like it and don't want it?' I asked myself. Yet I had noticed benefits in just a week. All my digestive problems disappeared, and I began to suspect the culprit for my nausea was none other than my daily cappuccino. I was sleeping better, and within three weeks I'd forgotten all about my hormonal issues.

I realised that macrobiotic eating had reduced my cravings - I didn't feel the need for cake or chocolate,

and I didn't even want a cappuccino. When I did have one, thinking it was a big reward, my body literally rejected it!

What kept me on track was discovering new recipes, ingredients and tips. How could I not be spellbound while making a dish called Enchanted Broccoli Forest? Millet as an alternative to oat porridge, and toasted sunflower seeds as a topping for porridge or soup, have been great discoveries.

I admit I strayed at times - once a week I caved in and had some extra fruit or a piece of cheese, and I succumbed to the occasional

slice of cake at a friend's birthday or glass of champagne at a party. But I didn't have any blowouts. Since finishing the five-week plan, I've adapted my Mediterranean eating to incorporate macrobiotic principles - I still eat potatoes and tomatoes but not as often, and that daily cappuccino has gone. With this in mind, here are some of my favourite dishes for *Spirit & Destiny* readers to try.

WANT TO FIND OUT MORE? For products, information and advice on macrobiotics, visit www.macrobioticshop.co.uk

Noodles with miso and tahini sauce

Udon and lo mein noodles work especially well here. You could also try adding some steamed vegetables instead of the spring onion garnish if you prefer.

SERVES 4
PREPARATION TIME: 10 MINS
COOKING TIME: 10 MINS

INGREDIENTS

- 250g/9oz uncooked noodles
- 4 level tbsp white miso
- 3-4tbsp tahini
- 3cm fresh ginger, grated
- 2tbsp brown rice vinegar
- 1tbsp mirin (rice wine)
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- A pinch of dried tarragon, basil or thyme
- 2 spring onions, finely chopped

1 Boil the noodles according to the cooking instructions on the packet.

2 Mix the miso and tahini in a small saucepan. Add 100ml/3½ oz cold water, a little at a time, mixing well to make a smooth sauce.

3 Squeeze the juice from the grated ginger into the pan, then add the rice vinegar, mirin, garlic and herbs. Bring the mixture to a simmer. If it looks too thick, add more water. If it's too thin, simmer for longer to thicken the sauce.

4 Put the noodles in individual bowls, spoon the sauce over the top and sprinkle with the chopped spring onions to serve.



Apple and berry cooler

Agar-agar, also known as *kanten*, is a jelly made from seaweed, which seals in the natural flavour and sweetness of fruits to make delicious desserts. For a softer consistency, just use fewer agar-agar flakes. If you use firmer fruits such as apples or pears for this, peel and chop them, then cook them in the juice mixture to soften them.

SERVES 4
PREPARATION TIME: 5 MINS
COOKING TIME: 5 MINS, PLUS SETTING TIME

INGREDIENTS

- 1 litre/1¾pt organic apple juice, or other juice of your choice
- A pinch of sea salt



Serve the jelly with a simple apple sauce

- 4tbsp agar-agar flakes
- 250g/9oz fresh berries, like raspberries or strawberries, large ones sliced

1 Pour the juice into a small saucepan, add a pinch of sea salt then sprinkle the agar-agar flakes on top. Heat without

stirring, then simmer for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally until the flakes dissolve.

2 Put the berries into either a jelly mould, a bowl or individual glasses. Pour the liquid over the top, and when it's cooled down a bit, place in the fridge. The jelly will be firm in about 1 hour.

Keep it local when it comes to fruit



LORNA'S MACROBIOTIC DIET TIPS

1 Aim for a range of five tastes in every meal - bitter, salty, sweet, sour and pungent - as different flavours correspond to the body's needs.

2 About 60 per cent of your meal should be 'sweet' foods, such as whole grains, vegetables and beans. Other tastes can come from side dishes, such as pickles and condiments.

3 Eat like our ancestors. The cavemen of the Stone Age consumed only about 25 per cent fish or meat, with a diet mostly based on plants.

4 Chew food slowly to help the digestive process.

5 Eat fruit from our climate zone. Tropical fruits are high in sugar - so that banana isn't such an innocent snack.

6 Choose rice from Europe, such as Italian short grain or French red Camargue, because it's locally produced and seasonal.

7 Fermented foods like miso aid digestion. Just adding miso to vegetable soup is beneficial.

8 Aduki beans are good for women's hormonal health. Try making aduki bean burgers.

9 Deep-fried food like vegetable tempura can be a good thing, so long as it's fried in good-quality vegetable oil. **SPIRIT & DESTINY**

WANT TO FIND OUT MORE?

• Read *Macrobiotics For All Seasons* by Marlene Watson-Tara (£14.99, Lotus) or visit www.marlenewatson-tara.com for more about her work. For further information about Penninghame House, visit www.penninghame.org

