A Spoonful of Sugar

The Shangri-La Diet: The No Hunger, Eat Anything Weight Loss Plan
by Seth Roberts
*Putnam Adult:*2006. 208pp. $19.95

BOOK REVIEW

Paradise might be a simple, quiet tropical island. Perhaps it's a land where the people are peaceful, and there is no pain or taxes. Paradise might be right where you are—if only you could eat whatever you want. If this last description works for you, then UC Berkeley psychology professor Seth Roberts may hold the key to your Shangri-La. The Shangri-La diet, according to Roberts's book, is "almost as easy as taking a pill, and a hundred times safer and less expensive." Even better, it lets you eat whatever you want.

In *The Shangri-La Diet*, Roberts asserts that all you have to do to lose weight is drink a few hundred calories' worth of sugar water or extra light olive oil a day. He says that consuming flavorless, calorie-containing foods lower an individual's body weight set point (the weight the body naturally "wants to be"), thereby decreasing appetite, food consumption, and ultimately weight. On the Shangri-La diet you are allowed to eat whatever delicious dish is presented at Chez Panisse or whatever pizza is offered at The Cheese Board, but you simply won't have the appetite for it.

The diet is scientific in the sense that it is based on the theory of body weight set point, a concept that has been around for a while, but still stimulates debate among metabolism researchers. The idea is that the body actively maintains a relatively constant weight (the set point). Hormones like leptin and neuropeptide Y act to maintain the set point by affecting appetite, basal metabolism, and body temperature.

A newer idea is that the body weight set point system is malleable. If the set point could be lowered, then the body would force itself to lose weight to achieve its new set point. For example, if a man weighing 220 lbs were able to lower his set point to 170 lbs, his appetite would naturally decrease, his basal metabolism would naturally increase, and he would lose weight until he reached his new set point of 170 lbs, with little effort.

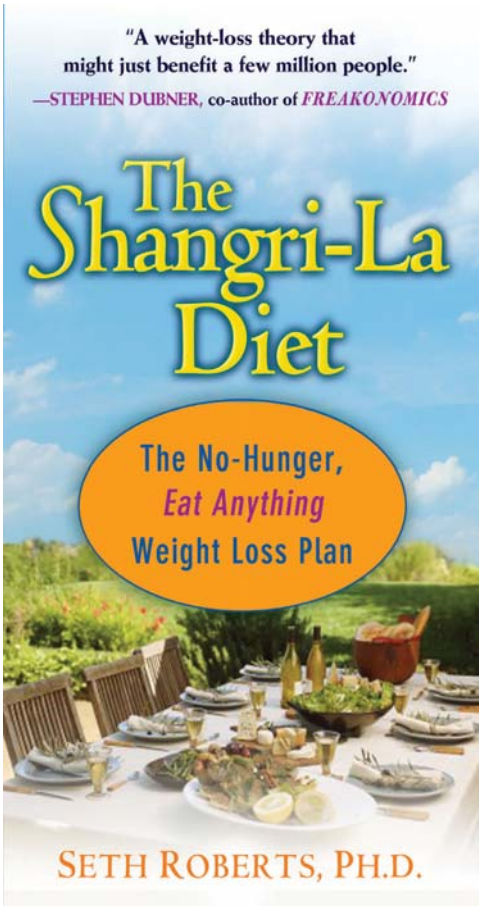
The trick, then, is to learn how to reset the set point. In *The Shangri-La Diet*, Roberts postulates that the flavor of food, through associative learning, affects the set point and therefore weight. Roberts says that familiar, strongly flavored foods that are digested quickly, like soda and doughnuts, increase the body weight set point when the body "learns" to associate the flavor of these foods with calories. The more frequently the food is consumed, the stronger the flavor, and the faster the food is turned to calories, the stronger the flavor-calorie association.

Roberts asserts that all you have to do to lose weight is drink a few hundred calories worth of sugar water or extra light olive oil a day.

Unfamiliar, bland, or more slowly digested foods, on the other hand, don't form such flavor-calorie association in your body. According to Roberts, these foods—like extra light olive oil and sugar water—actually lower body weight set point. So, to lose weight, all anyone needs to do is drink a few tablespoons of olive oil per day, and let the body

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE HARDESTY, SPECIAL TO BSR

Olive oil—the next diet supplement? Psychology professor Seth Roberts suggests a tablespoon of extra light olive oil a day will keep the pounds away.



weight set point do the rest.

While the bulk of experimental evidence for the diet comes from self-experimentation by Roberts and several others, Roberts says his theory explains results of previous studies that "cannot be explained by current theories of metabolism." For example, one experiment by Israel Ramirez showed that young rats given wet food gained more weight than rats given dry food. The Shangri-La theory says that wetting the food "both increased its flavor and speeded up its digestion, thereby leading to stronger flavor-calorie associations." But it's not necessarily true that this result can't be explained without the Shangri-La theory—if wetting food makes it taste better, perhaps the rats just wanted to eat more of it.

Ultimately, the book does not present as much rigorous evidence for the diet as you might expect from a UC Berkeley professor who has developed a diet "based on science." Roberts has not conducted any controlled experiments to show that the diet works, nor any to support the physiological theory behind the diet, and he has no plans to do so. Roberts is already convinced that the diet is effective.

The diet seems to have worked for him, and for at least some of the dieters that have weighed in at his website (`sethroberts.net`). But nutrition experts remain, for the most part, unconvinced. Nutritional biochemistry professor and MD Marc Hellerstein said the theory behind the diet makes "no sense," and there is no reason to think that flavorless, calorie-containing foods could affect the regulators of set point. Professor Greg Aponte, an expert on satiety signal neuropeptide Y, is equally skeptical. But, Roberts reminds us, novel ways of thinking are often disregarded at first.

It comes down to this: Seth Roberts believes the diet works, and invites you to try it. Certainly, as he points out in the book, you have little to lose; neither sugar water nor extra light olive oil pose particular health risks. But until the diet—or the theory behind it—has been tested more rigorously, it's unlikely that it will gain much support from biochemists or nutritionists.

Alisa Gray is a graduate of the department of nutritional science and toxicology.

"This is like putting a man on the moon when Southwest Airlines is already flying there every hour, handing out peanuts."

—Nathan Lewis, Professor of Chemistry at Caltech, at the Molecular Foundry User's Workshop, comparing the challenge of converting solar energy to fuels in a way that's economically competitive with cheap fossil fuels.

"Serendipity is like looking for a needle in a haystack, and instead finding the farmer's daughter."

—Walter Gehring, while discussing his famous discovery of a gene that controls eye development in fruit flies