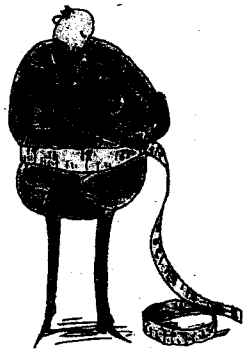
HOW IN THE WORLD TO STAY SLIM

BEST-BET STRATEGIES WITH AN INTERNATIONAL FLAIR



WE LIVE IN A BIG COUNTRY FULL OF big people. "In my experience, virtually every foreign visitor comments on the number of overweight people he sees here," says Mona Sutnick, Ed.D., R.D., nutritionist and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. "When visitors walk the streets of our cities, they find it very striking."

International data support the observation: "Americans are among the most obese people in the world," confirms Theodore VanItallie, M.D., emeritus professor of medicine at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City. (See "Who's the Biggest?" on page 82.) Only Eastern and Southern Europeans come close to our bulk.

Yes, as incredible as it seems, even the French—inventors of the croissant—are considerably thinner than we are. Steak and kidney pie notwithstanding, so are the British. And Northern Europeans, famous for their love of ham and cheese, are even thinner. In fact, they're the slimmest people in all of Europe.

But when it comes to slender, no one does it better than the Asians. The Japanese weigh less than people of any other industrialized nation in the world, even after taking into account smaller body frames. According to a recent study by Dr. VanItallie, the average 5'4" woman in Japan weighed 126 pounds in 1986. She's a shadow of the average 5'4" American woman, whose weight soars over 150 pounds.

Why are other countries doing better in the thin department? When we talked with international experts—doctors, epidemiologists, food writers, diplomats and multinational citi-

FRANK AUBERSON/PHOTO 20-20; ILLUSTRATIONS BY BLAIR THORNLEY

Source: *Obesity*, J.B. Lippincott Co., Philadelphia, 1992

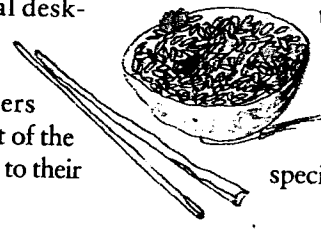
zens—they told us about healthy habits that are unique to certain countries. And they suspect that it's mostly these habits that are having an impact on weight control. But there were also common threads among these—slimming factors that popped up in country after country. These are lessons we need to take to heart, lessons that we could incorporate into our way of life, the experts say. (See "Lessons of the World" on page 88.)

So here's a rundown of some of the healthy habits that seem to be making a difference—a catalog of just exactly what the rest of the world seems to have going for it.

ASIA *China*

They bike everywhere. Rural Chinese tilling the fields obviously burn many more calories than a typical desk-bound American. But so do Chinese urbanites. "We compared Chinese office workers with Westerners. There, most of the office workers walk or bicycle to their jobs, so they get a lot more exercise," says Colin Campbell, Ph.D., nutritional biochemist who heads the Cornell–China–Oxford Project, a comprehensive study of the diet and health of 10,800 families across China. Cars are still a luxury, only for the wealthiest. (See "They Bike More" on page 83.)

They carbo-load, on principle. The principle is *fan ts'ai,* and it describes the ideal balance of a Chinese meal. The *fan* (grain) dominates the meal—rice, noodles, steamed wheat or millet, or bread, depending on the region. The *ts'ai* is the complementary food meant to flavor the grain; it's usually a green vegetable, sometimes stir-fried in a little plant oil. Meat is used in small amounts, if at all, as a condiment. "That's the way they typically eat, three times a day," says Cornell project nutritionist Banoo Parpia, Ph.D. Only for special occasions, like festivals, is the principle reversed, so there's more of the richer *ts'ai* and less of the grain. "What we get in Chinese restaurants in the United States is really festival food," says Dr. Parpia.



STEVE NIEDORF/IMAGE BANK

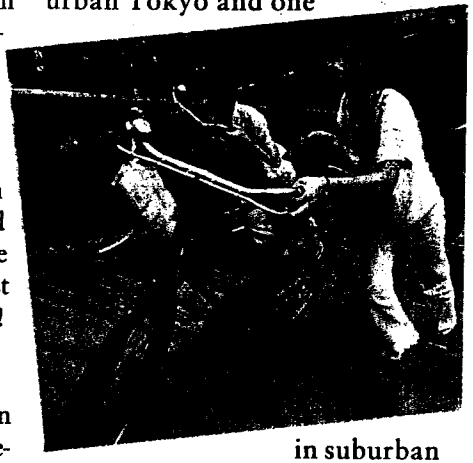
They eat more calories but less fat. With so much grain in their diets, the Chinese actually eat more total calories than Americans—about a third more. Yet their fat intake is much lower, averaging 14 percent of calories from fat in rural China, compared with an average of almost 35 percent of calories in America.

Less fat and lots of activity—it's no surprise that obesity rates are much, much lower in China than here. A bare 0.4 percent of men and 1.5 percent of Chinese women are overweight, compared with almost 35 percent in the United States today!

Japan

Public transportation keeps them moving. In Japan, public transportation is convenient and reasonably priced, compared with cars. "When you take subways and buses, you end up walking a lot to and from the station," says Masako Kinoshita, who grew up in Japan and returns frequently to visit her family. "And every train station has long, high stairs. You're always running up and down them to catch the trains."

Bike racks are packed. What's the difference between a subway station in suburban Tokyo and one

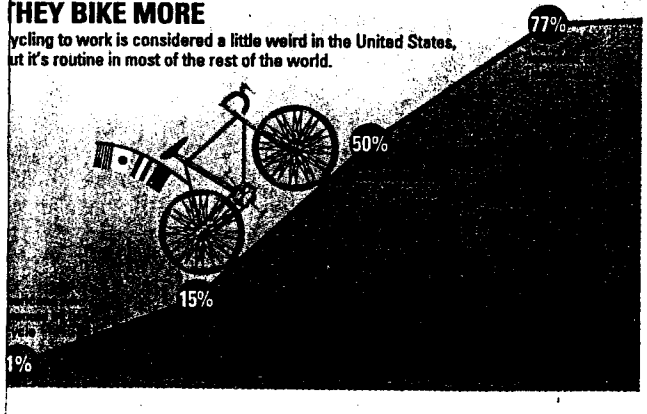


in suburban New York? In Tokyo, instead of cars, there are hundreds of bikes parked outside the station. In 1989, more than 3 million bicycles converged on suburban railway stations each day. (See "They Bike More.")

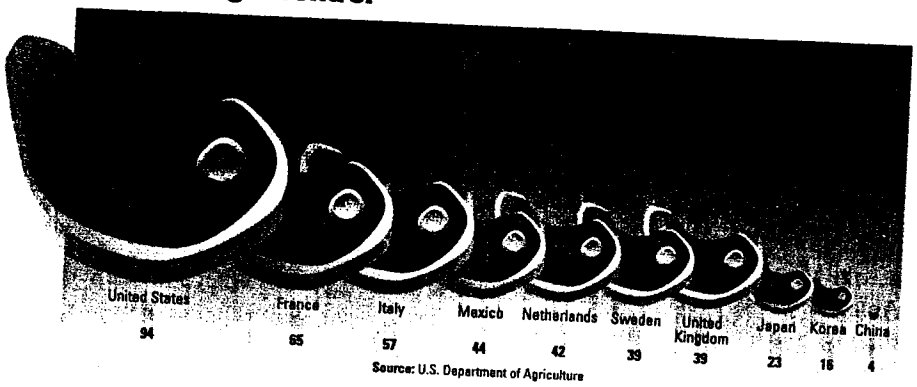
Rice and vegetables are the focus. Steamed or boiled rice (without added fat) dominates most meals. In

THEY BIKE MORE

Cycling to work is considered a little weird in the United States, but it's routine in most of the rest of the world.



CHARTS BY KENNETH BATTLEMAN



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

ALAN LEVENSON/TONY STONE IMAGES

1990, the average Japanese ate nearly a half-pound of rice a day. They also eat lots of preserved vegetables and moderate amounts of potatoes, fruit, beans (especially soy) and seafood.

Meat, dairy and oil are eaten sparingly. Dairy and meat products, though increasing in popularity, are not a traditional component of the Japanese diet. In fact, the average Japanese ate only about 23 pounds of beef and veal in 1993, compared with a hefty 94 pounds of cow consumed by the average American that year. (See "They Eat Less Meat.") It's a matter of economics as well as taste: Beef costs about three times as much in Japan as in the United States. The result is an ultra-low-fat diet. In all, only around 11 percent of calories in a traditional Japanese diet come from fat, compared with about 35 in the United States, says Dr. VanItallie, who lived in Japan for more than a year. "But their fat intake is on the rise, with the increasing popularity of American-style fast food," he notes.

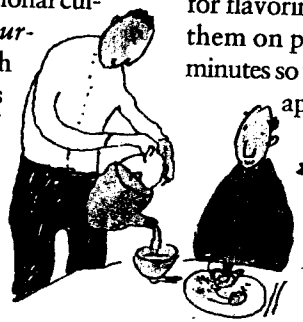
Small is beautiful. Small is not just a necessity; it's an aesthetic. The hallmark of a Japanese meal is minuscule amounts of different foods, each tidbit exquisitely arranged on its own dish. You don't get the American-style towering heaps of food—the Japanese consider that grotesque.

Public snacking is rude. Eating in public, while walking down the street or on a subway, is frowned upon. "Even chewing gum is very bad, though some younger people do it nowadays," says Kinoshita.

Dessert is rare. "We customarily don't eat dessert," says Kinoshita. "Or some people eat a small sweet bean cake after a meal. Even after 40 years in this country, I still have no need for dessert. Sometimes, when I eat at American friends' houses and they offer me a homemade dessert, I almost have to force myself to eat it—I think declining is not polite here."

Myanmar (Burma)

They sip soup. Forget soft drinks—the Burmese delight in sipping clear, lukewarm broth with meals, says Copeland Marks, renowned author of cookbooks on international cuisine, including *The Burmese Kitchen* (with Aung Thien; M. Evans & Co., Inc., 1987). "If you're in a restaurant in Burma and the waiter sees that your soup bowl is half empty, he comes around with a teapot full of soup and refills it," says Marks. Studies in the United States suggest that soup has a unique ability to satisfy the appetite.



They eat rice plain. Boiled white rice is at the center of most meals, says Marks.

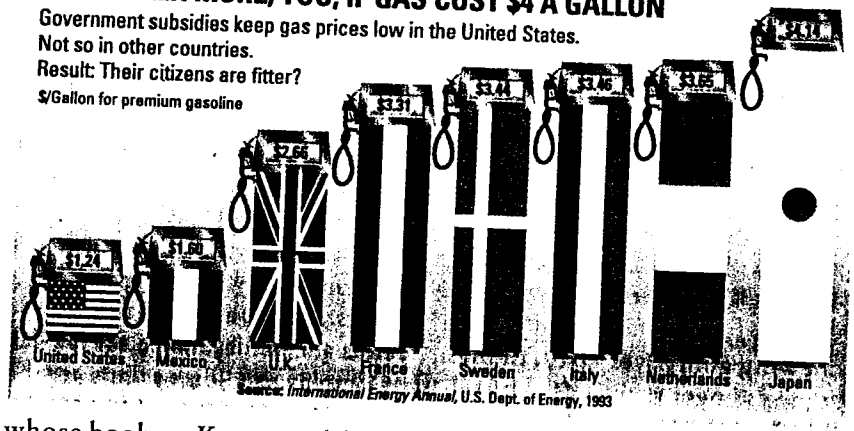
They can't afford meat. "Meat is money," says Marks. "If you're poor, you fall back on healthy foods—grains, vegetables, seafood and plain rice."

Salads are exciting, filling and low-fat. "Complex, one-dish salads are the hallmark of Burmese cooking," says Marks, who writes his books by moving to exotic countries and rustling up meals alongside the locals. "My favorite, which I think is the healthiest, is called 'Let-Thoat Son.' It includes three different kinds of noodles (egg noodles, rice noodles and cellophane noodles) along with rice, tofu, assorted vegetables and bean sprouts, and only a tiny amount of oil." (The recipe's in his book *The Burmese Kitchen.*)

Fried foods are garnish. The Burmese use bits of crispy fried garlic and onions for flavoring—"but you would drain them on paper towels for 15 to 20 minutes so you could see all the oil disappear," says Marks.

Korea

They boil. "Korean food is the healthiest cuisine in Asia," maintains Marks,



whose book on Korean cuisine is called *The Korean Kitchen: Classic Recipes from the Land of the Morning Calm* (Chronicle Books, 1993). Reason? "While other Asians tend to cook with oil, the Koreans cook with water," says Marks. Boiled white rice and noodles are staples, but Koreans also enjoy boiled vegetables and meats.

Squid is a favorite. Many Americans think barbecued beef is classic Korean cuisine, but it's not. "Koreans never had any money to buy that beef until recent years, when they became affluent," says Marks. "Their country is a little thumb surrounded by water, so they're big seafood eaters. Perhaps their favorite protein dish is squid, which is low in fat."

TONY STONE IMAGES

Kimchi is their Baskin-Robbins. The Koreans savor more than 200 different varieties of pickled vegetables—called *kimchi*. No meal is complete without it, says Marks. It can be made from all kinds of vegetables, ranging from cabbage and cucumber to eggplant and turnips. The vegetable is fermented with garlic, red chiles and little or no oil. (Some experts in the United States believe that spicy foods may have a unique ability to quell appetite.)

NORTHERN EUROPE

Sweden

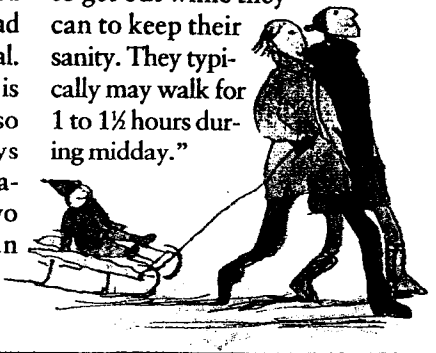
Society invests in fitness. Like the public libraries provided in the United States, most towns in Sweden offer a clean, inexpensive *simhall* (which translates as "swimhall" but offers much more). Along with a pool, there's typically table tennis, weight-lifting, volleyball and other athletic options. Also, some towns are crisscrossed by well-maintained pathways for walkers and cyclists, so it's possible for people to walk or ride to the store without ever encountering automobiles.

They follow *mat och potatis* Translation: Food and potatoes. It implies that there's a lot of potato on the plate. Potatoes are included at most lunches and dinners, often served just skinned and boiled. A little fish or meat, bread and a salad balance out a typical meal.

Swedish meatballs aren't so big. "Meat is much more expensive in Sweden, so portions are much smaller," says Swede Maria Rosenberg, a Massachusetts teacher and mother of two daughters, who is married to an American. Similarly, cheese is popular, but servings are scanty by American standards. "We cut slices with one of those cheese shavers, so each piece comes out ultrathin," says Rosenberg. "You might put just one or two slices on a piece of bread."

There's a time for treats. Ask any Swedish kid, and she'll tell you about *Lördags Godis*. Translation: Saturday Goodies. "Children know they can have candy only at a certain time on Saturday. They save it for that time, gulp it down, brush their teeth, and then they're done eating candy for the week," says Rosenberg.

They walk. "In the wintertime, there may be fewer than seven hours of sunlight daily," says Rodale Press health writer Margo Trott, whose husband is Swedish, and who has researched health habits in her in-laws' nation. "Seasonal affective disorder (a form of depression that appears to be related to a lack of sunlight) is not a joke there—people know they have to get out while they can to keep their sanity. They typically may walk for 1 to 1½ hours during midday."



The Netherlands

Few ranch homes. In the seventeenth century, for a short period of time, Dutch houses were taxed according to their width. So a few clever citizens built tall instead of wide—with plenty of stairs to climb. "In general, most people in Holland live in a house with at least two floors, so they have to walk up and down lots of stairs every day," says Jacques Van Berkel, economic officer at the Netherlands' consulate in New York City. And old houses, of course, aren't usually equipped with elevators.

LESSONS OF THE WORLD

Why are Americans so fat? Obesity is extremely complex, and scientists say many factors are involved. But if you're tempted to credit foreigners' genes for their slenderness, forget it. While genes often play some role, they generally do so through an interaction with an obesity-promoting environment, says Theodore VanItallie, M.D. "Studies of Japanese who moved to Hawaii or to the West Coast show that these people gained a lot of weight—maybe 15 to 20 pounds over their brothers and sisters back in Japan."

The fattiness of the cuisine alone doesn't account for all the international differences, either. Yes, the ultra-low-fat Japanese diet helps them keep their status as the thinnest affluent people in the world. But in other countries, the relationship between fat in the diet and fat on the people is sometimes contradictory.

In Europe, for example, epidemiologist Lawrence Kushi, Sc.D., says the Northern Europeans—who love meat and dairy products and have a higher fat intake—are actually thinner than Southern Europeans, who eat less meat, fewer dairy products and less total fat. "Basically, the main thing going on isn't the specific food they eat," says Dr. Kushi, associate professor of epidemiology at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health in Minneapolis, who has researched international obesity.

So what is the secret? Six recurring themes emerged during interviews with our experts:

1. It's the motion. "Physical activity is the key," says Dr. Kushi. "Other people move more than we do."

In the developing world, the reasons are obvious: They can't afford to be lazy. "Most people in poorer countries don't have the vacuum cleaners, food processors or any of the other timesaving, labor-saving devices that we have," says Norge Jerome, Ph.D., nutritional anthropologist at the University of Kansas, who previously traveled the world as director of the U.S.AID program's office of nutrition. "Women especially are involved in food production throughout the world—that means they work hard in the fields and the kitchen all day long." They also walk many miles each day just getting to and from the fields and the market, she adds.

Even in affluent countries, though, people get more exercise than Americans get. The big reason: Old World towns and cities are, well, old. They predate Henry Ford by centuries. Streets are narrow and thus encourage walking and biking. "Walking is built into the lifestyle to a greater extent," says Dr. Kushi. "You can see that when you visit Europe and Asia; not only is the public transportation built better, but there's more infrastructure support for people who bicycle or walk. The streets are so narrow that having a car is almost a hindrance." Adding to the incentive to hoof it is the sky-high cost of driving in other countries.

2. Snack time isn't all the time. "Americans simply snack more than most other people," says nutritionist Mona Sutnick, Ed.D., R.D. "We eat all day long." Foreigners tell us that in their countries, either they don't snack or they limit their noshing to certain appointed times, like the British midafternoon tea.

3. There's less focus on fatty foods. Europeans and Asians alike commented on how expensive food is in their countries, relative to the United States—especially fat-packed meats, restaurant meals and processed foods. So these types of foods aren't as big a part of the diet as they are in the United States.

4. Their portions are smaller. Only in America can a fast-food chain name a product "The Really Big Chicken Sandwich." Americans seem to be more attracted to the idea of quantity than quality. Our international sources told us that servings are smaller in their countries, especially meat portions. "A humongous steak served to one person in an American restaurant would feed a family of four in Sweden," Maria Rosenberg told us.

5. Grains star on their plates. While we tend to make meat or cheese the centerpiece of our meals, healthier cuisines mandate that the largest serving on the plate be a filling, low-fat grain or starch—for example, it's rice in Asia, potatoes in Sweden, bread in Europe or corn flour in Mexico.

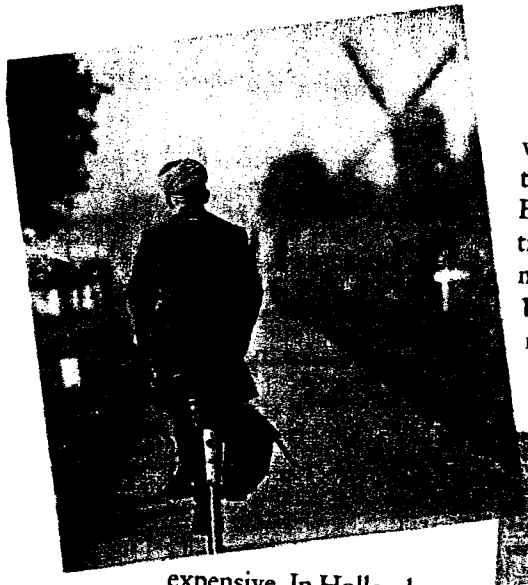
6. Dessert's not their religion. Elsewhere, people don't pout if a gigantic chocolate cake doesn't appear at the end of a meal. They're more likely to enjoy fruit for dessert—or skip dessert entirely. Even the famous rich pastries of Europe are usually reserved for special occasions.

While most of the world is slimmer than the United States, the trend may not last: World obesity is on the rise. "It's looming as a large problem," says K. Dun Gifford, president of the Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust, a Boston-based nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting traditional foods of many cultures. "As societies get richer, people become more sedentary. They eat more calories, more meat and more American-style fast food. American fast food combined with a sedentary lifestyle is making the citizens of the world fat."

They really do cycle past tulips and windmills. "It's normal for people to cycle to their offices, if it doesn't take more than 45 minutes," says Van Berkel. Hardly surprising, given the astronomical cost of driving in Holland. (See "We'd Walk More, Too, If Gas Cost $4 a Gallon" on page 86.)

They eat their veggies. "We don't have all the fast foods that are available in the United States," says Van Berkel. "And people consume a lot of vegetables—practically every vegetable grown anywhere is available in Holland."

Restaurants are pricey. "The portions in restaurants are smaller and more



with walkers, cyclists and horse riders that a major environmental issue in England is how to preserve the countryside against damage inflicted by millions of eager feet.

They love dogs and gardens. These renowned British interests burn calories. "They're always walking their dogs and working in their gardens," says *Prevention's* photo editor, Susan Flagg Godbey, who has led tours of the United Kingdom.

expensive. In Holland, restaurant visits are usually reserved for special occasions," says Van Berkel.

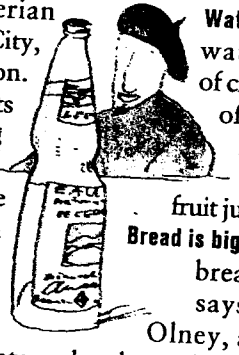
WESTERN EUROPE

England

The evening meal is light. Supper is traditionally light in England. "The evening meal was usually just salad, salad and soup, or toast and soup," says Wahida Karmally, R.D., director of nutrition, Irving Center for Clinical Research, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, who did an internship in London. (Research in this country suggests that a light dinner might help prevent fat accumulation.)

Walking paths are protected. The English countryside is laced with hundreds of miles of government-protected footpaths. Where they cross private land, owners are responsible for maintenance. These paths are so popular

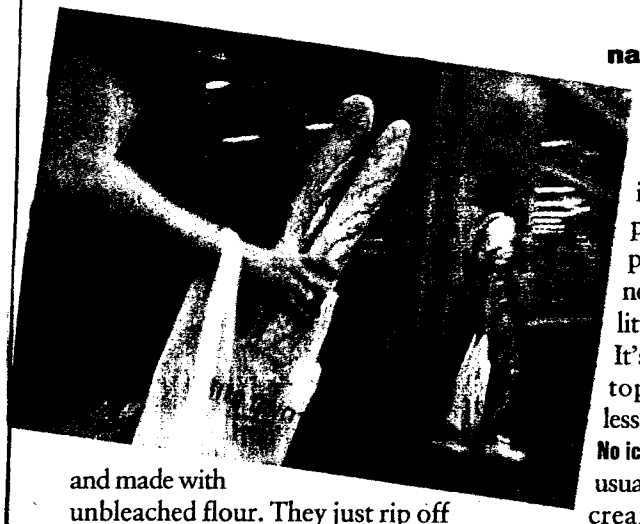
France



Water's the uncola. Bottled water is the beverage of choice during the course of a busy day in France. It's far more popular than calorie-packed fruit juices or even soda.

Bread is big. "People eat a lot of bread with every meal," says food writer Judith Olney, author of six cookbooks and a frequent traveler to France. "Bread is nearly fat-free, fresh and made with unbleached flour. They just rip off hunks and eat them."

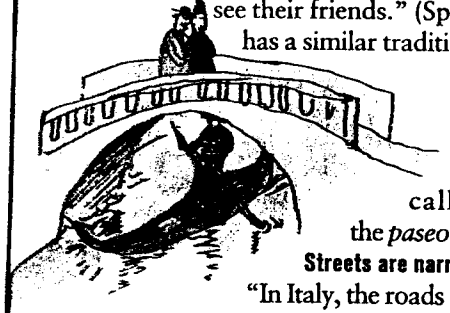
LEFT: CAROL LEE/TONY STONE IMAGES; RIGHT: L.L.T. RHODES/TONY STONE IMAGES



GEN NISHINO/PHOTONICA

Italy

They do the *passeggiata.* "In many areas of Italy, people spend the evening walking back and forth in the town center, visiting and chatting," says anthropologist Peter Brown, Ph.D., of Emory University in Atlanta. "It's a pleasant way to get exercise while they see their friends." (Spain has a similar tradition, called the *paseo.*)

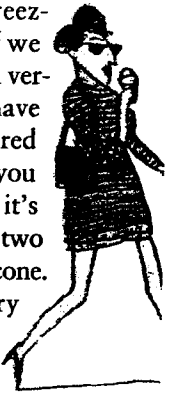


Streets are narrow. "In Italy, the roads are small, narrow and clogged," says Judith Olney. "So people walk a lot. They have strong legs. Even very elderly people haul wheeled baskets around town to shop."

natural weight control

Pizza is light! Fulvia Castelli, a Milanese philosophy student now living in Los Angeles, explains: "A real Italian pizza fits inside your dinner plate. It's dotted with a little tomato, basil and oil. It's not loaded with lots of toppings and usually has less cheese."

No ice cream's home. "We don't usually keep a big pack of ice cream in the freezer," says Castelli. "If we want gelato (the Italian version of ice cream), we have to go out for it. Compared with the United States, you get a tiny serving. And it's very expensive—maybe two dollars for a very small cone. It makes me crazy every time I go back!" A more typical Italian dessert is fruit.



SOUTH OF THE BORDER

Mexico

Corn is the foundation. "Corn is at the base of the Mexican food pyramid," says *San Francisco Chronicle* food columnist Jacqueline Higuera McMahan, author of *Healthy Mexican Cookbook* (Olive Press, California, 1994) and six other cookbooks on Southwestern cuisine. "They eat a lot of it, in the form of tortillas. These are usually prepared with cornmeal and water—with no

added oil. Those hard-fried taco shells that they sell here in America—we don't have that in Mexico. A typical meal might be a soft, warm corn tortilla, heated on the griddle, filled with beans, salsa and a little shredded meat."

Nonfat sauces add zing. Sauces, marinades and salsas put the zing in Mexican dishes, says McMahan, who lived in Mexico for five years. "Mexican sauces and salsas are usually based on several kinds of dried chilies, with water, garlic and onion and other seasonings. Some contain oil, but usually it's just a little. This is a very healthy cuisine."

There's no cheese blanket. "Most of what you see in Mexican restaurants in the United States is not authentic," says McMahan. "In the United States, someone got the idea to top Mexican dishes with a half-pint of sour cream and massive amounts of cheese. But when they eat an enchilada or tamale in Mexico, they use just a little bit of cheese. It might be a tablespoon of soft goat cheese or crumbly *queso ranchero*, both of which are lower in fat than many other kinds. Some regions of Mexico, like the Yucatan, use no cheese at all."

Fruits and vegetables are their fast food. "When Mexicans do snack, they go for fruits and vegetables," says McMahan. "Street vendors sell jicama slices or roasted corn, sprinkled with chile and lime juice. Or they might carve beautiful little sections of watermelon, mango or other fruit—you see children walking down the street eating these flower-shaped slices. What could be better?" —by Cathy Perlmutter with Michele Stanten and Rosemary Iconis

SOURCES: Janet Bacon, *information officer, British Information Services Library, New York City;* Peter Brown, Ph.D., *anthropologist, Emory University, Atlanta;* Colin Campbell, Ph.D., *nutritional biochemist and head of the Cornell–China–Oxford Project;* K. Dun Gifford, *president, Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust, Boston;* Susan Gil, *assistant for information and cultural affairs, Consulate General of Japan in Boston;* Norge Jerome, Ph.D., *nutritional anthropologist, University of Kansas;* Wahida Karmally, R.D., *director of nutrition, Irving Center for Clinical Research, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, New York City;* Lawrence Kushi, Sc.D., *associate professor of epidemiology, University of Minnesota School of Public Health, Minneapolis;* Jacqueline Higuera McMahan, San Francisco Chronicle *food columnist and author of* Healthy Mexican Cookbook; Copeland Marks, *co-author of* The Burmese Kitchen *and* The Korean Kitchen: Classic Recipes from the Land of the Morning Calm; David Mozer, *International Bicycle Fund, Seattle;* Judith Olney, *author of* The Farm-Market Cookbook; Banoo Parpia, Ph.D., *nutritionist, Cornell–China–Oxford Project;* Mona Sutnick, Ed.D., R.D., *nutritionist and spokesperson, American Dietetic Association;* Jacques Van Berkel, *economic officer at the Netherlands' consulate in New York City;* Theodore VanItallie, M.D., *emeritus professor of medicine, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York City.*

Kid-Tested Snacks

PARENTS CAN LOV

We've discovered supersnacks yc kids will gobl —just do tell 'em hc HEALTH *they c*

ATTENTION, MOMS A dads. Searching for healthy snacks your fussy tle angels won't fly away from? We've got sor *Prevention* enlisted the toughest food critics the world—real kids—to test a whole snac athon of nutritious nibbles. Here's our repc ▲We assembled our 12 taster tots shortly af school—when small, empty tummies need re eling. There were 11 "big" kids, between 6 a 10, plus one little sister, age 3, who melted c hearts and joined the group at the last minute

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BURK UZZLE