

RESET YOUR APPETITE

Our Former Restaurant Critic Changed His Eating Habits. You Can, Too.

Pete Wells tells how he recovered from an out-of-control diet. And each week in January, he and experts will suggest ways to reset your own appetite.



There are links below to a number of recipes, like sheet pan coconut curry, brussels sprouts salad, salmon and green beans in red pepper sauce and seared suite potatoes with chermoula, that can help with your reset. Rachel Vanni for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Spencer Richards.

By Pete Wells

A reporter for the Food section, Pete Wells was The Times's chief restaurant critic for 12 years.

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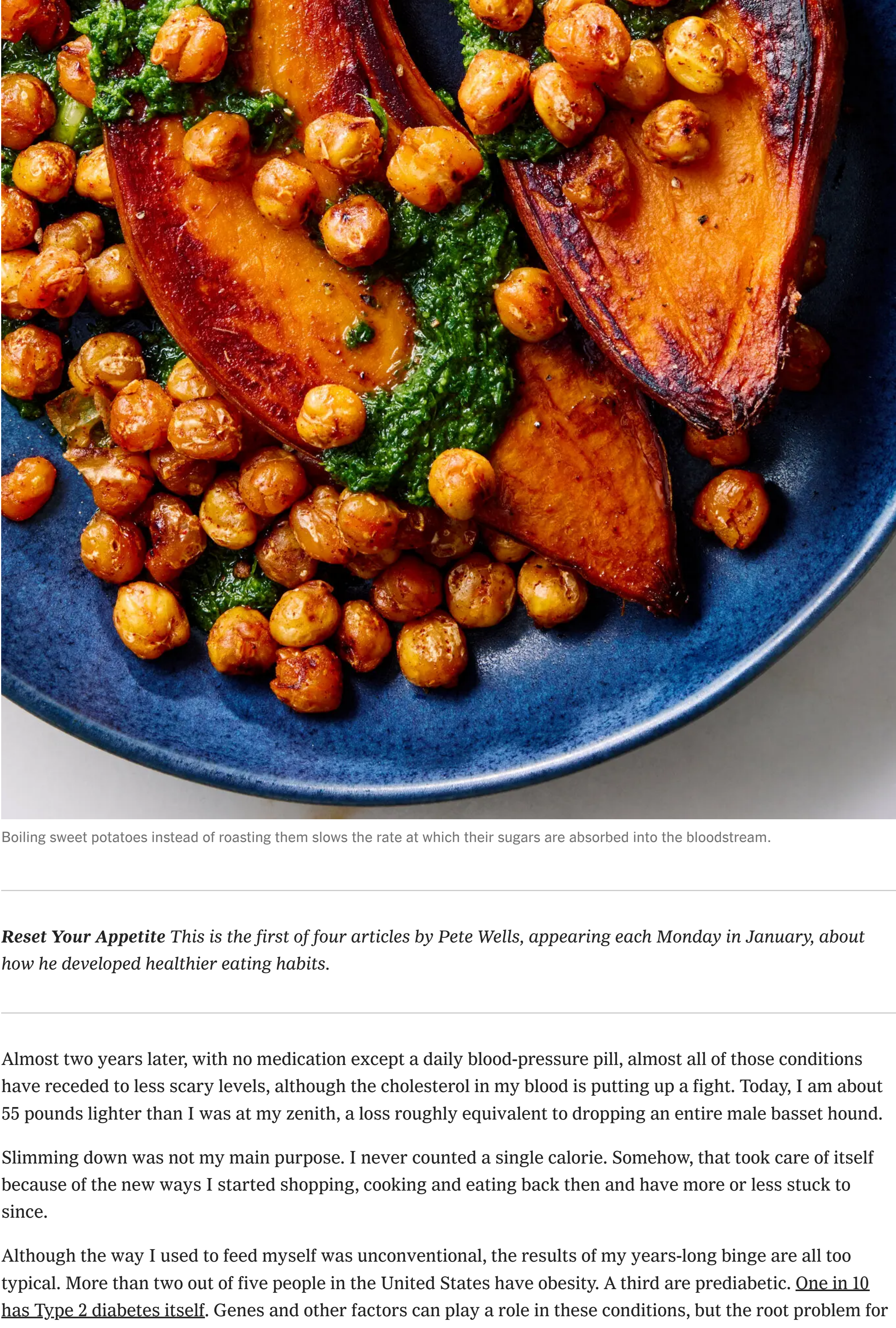
Amazon lists more than 70,000 diet books. Not a single one is called “Eat Like a Restaurant Critic.”

That line of work, which was mine from 2012 until 2024, gave me many rewards, but an easy glide path to health was not one of them. By my last year on the job, I was a mess. I creaked and groaned and belched like a tractor. Heaving myself out of the back seat of a car took so much effort that I dreamed about a portable winch. I waddled to the bathroom four or five times a night, between bouts of heartburn. I woke up with headaches, a mouth as dry as an emery board and a heavy coating of fatigue that I could never shake.

With each new complaint, I thought: So this is life after 60. I continued to believe this until a doctor sent me a series of numbers preceded by the words blood pressure, weight, body mass index, triglycerides, blood sugar. The numbers were large, he said. Taken together with my physical complaints, they pointed to prediabetes, fatty liver disease, metabolic syndrome, sleep apnea, acid reflux and obesity.

The prospect of diabetes scared me the most. Above all, it's what drove me to ask for another job at The Times and to teach myself how to eat again.

Recipe: Seared Sweet Potatoes With Chermoula



Boiling sweet potatoes instead of roasting them slows the rate at which their sugars are absorbed into the bloodstream.

Reset Your Appetite This is the first of four articles by Pete Wells, appearing each Monday in January, about how he developed healthier eating habits.

Almost two years later, with no medication except a daily blood-pressure pill, almost all of those conditions have receded to less scary levels, although the cholesterol in my blood is putting up a fight. Today, I am about 55 pounds lighter than I was at my zenith, a loss roughly equivalent to dropping an entire male basset hound.

Slimming down was not my main purpose. I never counted a single calorie. Somehow, that took care of itself because of the new ways I started shopping, cooking and eating back then and have more or less stuck to since.

Although the way I used to feed myself was unconventional, the results of my years-long binge are all too typical. More than two out of five people in the United States have obesity. A third are prediabetic. One in 10 has Type 2 diabetes itself. Genes and other factors can play a role in these conditions, but the root problem for millions of us is that we have stopped eating sensibly. We stuff our stomachs with far more food than we need. No wonder about 12 percent of American adults say they have tried one of the GLP-1 medications for weight loss.

I'm no expert on nutrition. On the subject of overeating, though, my credentials are hard to beat. In my long climb out of the deep pit I dug myself into, I've come to understand a few things about how I got there. As I've tried to build a healthier relationship with food, I've also learned a bit about the ways our bodies and minds work.

Each Monday for the next four weeks, I'll lay out some of the insights that helped me, and some recipes that reflect how I eat at home these days. By describing how I learned to eat a more balanced diet, I do not mean to suggest that you will have the same luck with my routine, or that you should even try. I needed to control sugar, cholesterol and overeating in general. I didn't worry, though, about sodium and potassium, which would be major concerns for somebody with kidney disease. Obviously, anyone with a specific health issue should get advice from a doctor.

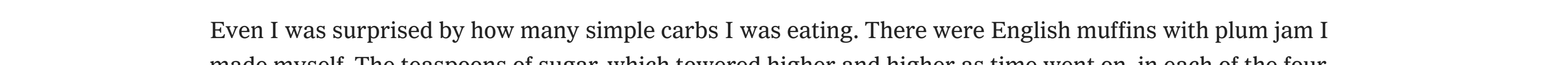
Recipes to Reset Your Appetite

Baked Steel-Cut Oats With Nut Butter | Scrambled Eggs With Zucchini | Simple Boiled Greens | Sheet-Pan Coconut Curry With Squash and Tofu | Brussels Sprout Salad With Pomegranate and Pistachios | Quinoa Salad | Millet With Corn, Mango and Shrimp | Salmon and Green Beans in Red Pepper Sauce | Roasted Broccoli and Chickpeas With Mole Verde | Ginger Chicken and Rice Soup With Zucchini | Coconut Fish and Tomato Bake

My assumption is that, like me, a lot of people simply want to eat less of the stuff we know we're supposed to avoid and more of the stuff that's better for us. These are not nutritional guidelines but general principles on how to behave more sensibly in the presence of food.

The behavioral approach has become a dominant school of thought in mainstream nutrition as it's become clear that the mind-set that reduces the challenges of dieting to mere math — otherwise known as “calories in, calories out” — gets most people nowhere. Eating is, after all, a behavior. We learn how to do it, and we can unlearn our habits if there turns out to be a better way.

Break Up With Sugar



Sugar in simple carbohydrates drives the appetite. MirageC/Gettyimages

The first thing I set out to do when I left the doctor's office was to hunt for simple carbohydrates to cut out of the meals I ate at home. At the time, all I cared about was reversing my slow slide into diabetic territory. What I didn't know was that the sugar in simple carbohydrates had been driving my need to keep eating, and that reducing my intake would help reset my appetite.

Even I was surprised by how many simple carbs I was eating. There were English muffins with plum jam I made myself. The teaspoons of sugar, which towered higher and higher as time went on, in each of the four cups of coffee after waking up. Brown sugar in oatmeal, wildflower honey on buttered toast, Vermont maple syrup on waffles. Orange, pineapple, grapefruit juice. Croissants, cardamom buns, blueberry muffins, cider doughnuts. Cumulus heaps of white rice at lunch, hunk after hunk of bread with dinner. Cookies to stave off the afternoon naps, which usually came anyway.

This is a partial list.

Five months into my sugar reset, I got an email from my doctor containing a lovely, lyrical phrase: “You are no longer prediabetic.”

By then I had lost more than 20 pounds, too, but resetting my simple carbohydrate base line had ripple effects throughout my life. The less sugar I ate, the easier it was to eat less of everything else. I was no longer strapped into what nutritionists call the glucose roller coaster, the cycle of sugar highs and deep lows that can lead to insulin resistance, wrecking the body's ability to regulate hunger.

In the United States, and increasingly around the world, supermarkets and chain restaurants are packed with roller-coaster foods that promise ever-more intense flavors and pleasures, but only leave us wanting more.

“We're supposed to feel satiated and full, and we don't,” said Ashley Gearhardt, a psychologist at the University of Michigan who studies compulsive eating. “We're being tricked.”

As I ate less added sugar and replaced refined sugars with whole ones, my appetite shrank, and my howling desires for sweet stuff became quieter, easier to ignore. I had more energy and seemed to think clearly again for the first time in years. I had unleashed forces that would make it easier to put in place all the other changes I'll cover in the next few weeks.

“Basically, you were eating less foods that encouraged you to overeat and more of foods that don't do that,” said Marion Nestle, an emerita professor of food, nutrition and public health at New York University. “Pretty much what any sensible nutritionist would advise.”

Shift Out of Overdrive



Whole grains help you feel full, and add nutrients and flavor to meals. Bobbi Lin for The New York Times

Nutritionists say that a great many people eat more added sugar than they should. A starting point is to figure out whether you're getting more than 10 percent of your total calories from added sugar, which should be the maximum intake, according to the federal government's Dietary Guidelines for Americans. (Unlike protein, fat and vitamins, added sugar isn't necessary to our bodies, so there is no recommended minimum amount, just a maximum.)

For the past five years, nutrition labels on packaged foods have been required to list the amount of added sugars. They can travel under many aliases, including some that sound harmless and maybe even wholesome: evaporated cane juice, agave nectar, fruit juice concentrate and brown rice syrup.

For me and for many people, there's little reason to worry about the sugars naturally found in fruits and vegetables, where they are packaged with other things that help you feel full sooner and slow down the absorption of glucose into the blood. Sweet potatoes are called sweet potatoes for a reason, but I don't think twice about eating one for dinner because they're fairly gentle on the blood sugar, especially when boiled and served in their skins.

I might as well admit that chief among the “other things” that help you feel full are what nutritionists insist on calling fiber, a word so off-putting that it makes me want to seek solace in the arms of the nearest cinnamon bun. Luckily, when it comes to simple carbs like rice and flour, we can use the less lumpish phrase “whole grains” to describe the same general idea. And this is what to look for if you find you eat too much white rice and white bread. Whole grains happen to have more flavor, too.

This is the heart of my first reset: eating carbohydrates in their original, sturdy, crunchy, complicated forms. I knew it would be better for me. And having raised two boys, I probably should have known that going through sugar overdrive many times a day was not producing the most rational behavior.

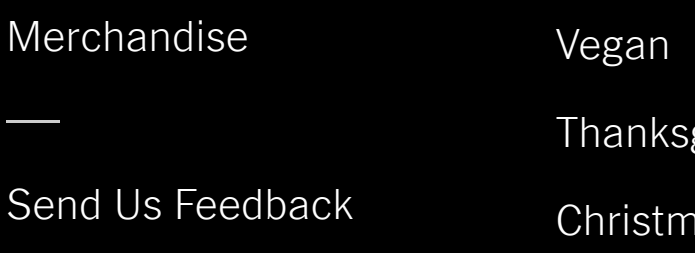
As my body adjusted, I stopped acting like a toddler at a birthday party. My whole diet, everything I ate, started to take a new shape.

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