





Platt VS. Fat

**CAN A
FOOD CRITIC
DIET
SUCCESSFULLY?**

By **ADAM PLATT**



LIKE THE MANY experts I've consulted over the decades during the course of countless protein diets, Mediterranean

diets, all-fruit diets, and assorted other doomed starvation regimes, Tanya Zuckerbrot exudes the kind of practiced optimism that skinny, Type-A, successful professionals often do. There's a small stone statue of the Buddha in her posh midtown offices, a soothing, white-toned space that feels less like a medical-consultation room than like something you'd see on the set of *The View*. There's also a juddering, yellowish piece of rubber made to look like a five-pound chunk of fat, which she likes to use as a motivational tool; a doctor's scale that is recalibrated every day; and, framed on the wall among her first-class dietitian degrees, a signed poster of the toothy, grinning televangelist Joel Osteen. Zuckerbrot, who charges corporate-lawyer fees (\$15,000 for ten visits) to reveal the secrets of her popular F-Factor Method, often quotes Osteen to her prominent high-roller clients and has seen him in person at least three times, which, as she puts it, "is a lot of times to see Joel Osteen for a nice Jewish girl like me."

During our first visit together, Zuckerbrot gives me cheerful tips on how to avoid the temptations of the several Peking-duck dinners it's my professional duty to devour that week ("Forget those pancakes, Adam, and just *taste* the skin!"), and how to behave at the cocktail function I'm about to attend ("Anything on a skewer is your best friend, Adam!"). She's studied my first-ever "F-Factor Journal," a slightly comical document that includes carefully recorded visits to Sparks Steak House to gorge on slabs of sirloin. She's weighed me (a hefty 273 pounds), measured my body fat (a totally obese 31.3 percent), and assured me that although I am technically diabetic and a few pounds short of morbidly obese, this isn't such a tragic state of affairs, because roughly two-thirds of the entire country is overweight or obese these days, Adam. But most important of all, I'm here today in her office, and if I follow the steps of her F-Factor diet, everything will work out.

Except that in the realm of mega-super-diets, as in the realm of ecstatic religious conversions, and indeed almost anything you can name in that great tragicomedy called life, both Zuckerbrot and I know better than anyone that things don't always work out in the end. Which is possibly why, when I show up for my second session the following week, with another slightly comical food diary, penned in my tiny, earnest, indecipherable big man's handwriting, Zuckerbrot—who is dressed, as usual, in designer clothes and a pair of red-soled Christian Louboutins—looks for the briefest second like she's just seen a giant, overfed ghost. "I've been thinking about you, Adam," she says, grinning a slightly pained grin. "I was worried that you'd never come back again!"

Who could blame her for being nervous? As anyone who's even remotely familiar with the grim statistics on long-term weight loss knows, diets are made to be broken, especially by mountain-size professional gourmands whose job it is to consume anywhere from 3,000 to 10,000 calories during a normal working day. As

Zuckerbrot will tell me, she also has a reputation to think of ("I'll be honest, Adam, I don't like failure, and given your profession, I've had my concerns"). Plus, unlike the assorted gilded uptown housewives, corpulent Wall Street CEOs, calorie-conscious anchors, and aspiring supermodels (among many other things, Zuckerbrot is the "Official Nutritionist to the Miss Universe Organization") who make up her devoted F-Factor flock, I won't be forking over real money for her special, fiber-rich diet plan, which includes 24/7 availability, the highlight of which is a number to text for counsel during moments of existential panic while loitering guiltily in the Shake Shack line, say, or scanning the menu before ordering your *omakase* dinner at Nobu. Because—also unlike the rest of her clients—it was my crackpot idea to attempt to lose weight while routinely visiting the city's finest restaurants.

During her most optimistic moments, Zuckerbrot assures me that this is actually not such a crazy idea. As the ultimate F-Factor guinea pig, I could drink alcohol on her diet (although not too much, and no sugar mixed with your spirits, please), and I wouldn't be punishing myself with brutal cardio workouts, which stimulate the appetite. Proteins are great, but not the overly fatty kind. And because I would be taking my carbohydrates not in the normal pasta-and-bread-basket form but from an endless stream of distressingly tasteless Scandinavian bran crackers, I would feel full without tipping too far into a zombified state. I would, in the process, learn to taste my restaurant dinners instead of ingesting them, the way I was used to, like a great blue whale sucks up clouds of tiny shrimp in the deep-blue sea.

Like most portly food lovers, I'd attempted to control my appetite in a hundred different ways over the years. I'd experimented with trendy juice cleanses, buzzy taurine-spiked protein powders, and two-day-a-week fasting regimes. About a decade ago, I'd dutifully lost 50 pounds under the care of another nutritionist, before gaining all the weight back during the course of a delirious, year-long fatso binge. I'd even visited my share of what A.J. Liebling, the patron saint of all giant, blue-whale food writers, contemptuously referred to as *slimming prisons*, where I'd huffed up and down arid desert hillsides before returning to the life of leisurely, booze-filled luncheons and furtive midnight ice cream.

But Liebling famously ate himself into the grave at age 59, and as I entered those same choppy late-middle-age waters, with two small daughters and an increasingly skinny, perplexed wife, it was time to take one last, gasping lunge at the golden ring of good health. After my latest checkup, our long-suffering family doctor, whom I'll call Dr. P, had called with a note of alarm in his voice, sounding, it later occurred to me, like the engineer of some listing, recently stricken ocean liner, making a last, desperate call to the bridge. Dr. P and I had had our little emergencies before, of course. There was the kidney stone I'd misdiagnosed as a bad case of indigestion after a particularly fierce Sichuan dinner, and the time I returned from a Champagne-fueled junket to El Bulli with a flaming case of gout. But this was a different kind of emergency. My numbers were spiking. He was prescribing cholesterol-lowering statins for the first time, and horse-size pills to control my suddenly diabetic blood-sugar levels, and he suggested I consider making a change, after years of unchecked grazing, in what he diplomatically called my "professional eating habits."

ON THE FIRST DAY of my great diet adventure, I whirl up a breakfast smoothie made of swampy-colored hemp protein powder, frozen blueberries, and almond milk. It looks (and tastes) like frozen plasterboard. Lunch is two lox sandwiches made with a scrim of yogurt and four compressed, F-Factor-approved wheat-bran crackers from Norway, which taste like dried lawn-mower clippings and have the texture of flattened Brillo pads. After another cracker

snack, dinner is a visit to not one but two steakhouses in search of the city's finest cut of New York strip, which I taste in tiny little bites while primly pushing the boats of creamed spinach and ruinous potato dishes aside. I repeat my smoothie-and-cracker routine the next day, and the day after that, and after another modest Peking-duck dinner of mostly scallions, hoisin sauce, and delectably crispy skin, and a visit to a trendy vegetarian restaurant, I take the night off and sit in front of the television in a dazed, semi-starved state, watching reruns of *Naked and Afraid*.

Not that this is so unpleasant. Like the bewildered contestants on that greatest of all reality-TV diet shows, I can feel my stomach contracting, even after just a few days of roaming around on this new calorie-deprived savanna. "I'm beginning to notice a change in your eating habits," Mrs. Platt says suspiciously when she comes home to find me sitting at the kitchen table eating my salad and crackers, instead of standing over the sink devouring last night's congealed restaurant leftovers.

Nine days after my first visit, I return again to the F-Factor offices, where Zuckerbrot greets me nervously. We discuss the concept of thermogenesis, which is the process behind her fiber-rich philosophy (whereby the body burns calories in its attempt to digest fiber), and her distaste for the way most people use the word *diet* (it means "a pattern of eating," not a temporary weight-loss program). Like lots of neurotic pudgy people, I have an aversion to being weighed, so when I lumber onto her scale, I hum to myself and look up at the ceiling. She adjusts the weights, and as I keep humming to myself, she falls quiet for a time. "Would you believe it, Adam?" she finally says, in a shaky way, like someone having an ecstatic experience at a Joel Osteen event. "You've lost 14 pounds."

According to a gadget called the Omron Body Fat Analyzer, I've shed ten pounds of fat in a little over a week, plus some additional water weight. Extreme weight loss isn't uncommon at the beginning of diets, and given my size, this isn't a huge amount in percentage terms. Still, this is exciting. The complex fiber has balanced my sugar levels while making me feel full, and deprived of the usual all-you-can-eat buffet of refined carbohydrates, my body has been burning fat. "There's a thin guy buried inside of you, Adam," she says, using the simple metaphors of the practiced evangelist. "We are pouring the cement down now. Once we build a good foundation, we will build a healthy house."

To celebrate, Zuckerbrot introduces a new cracker into my dining routine, one sweetened pleasantly with raisins and traces of honey. She explains that the F-Factor diet didn't begin as a slimming diet, in the usual sense of the word. She'd found her secret-weapon crackers, called "GG Bran Crispbreads," on the dusty bottom shelf of the health store across from her apartment while looking for ways to lower cholesterol and manage blood sugar levels for cardio-

vascular and type-2-diabetes patients she was working with after graduating with her master's in Nutrition and Food Studies from NYU. After three months of ingesting industrial amounts of fiber, her diabetes patients found that in addition to lowering their blood sugar, they'd also lost considerable weight. Soon, non-diabetics were clamoring for diet tips, and when celebrities began signing on (Megyn Kelly, Katie Couric), her career took off.

I enjoy my new honey-flavored crackers that evening, before visiting a poultry-themed French bistro called Le Coq Rico, where my dining party and I order two whole chickens, a fat slab of foie gras encased in pastry, and a whole roasted guinea fowl. "What's the matter, are you ill?" asks one of my guests as I take a bite of each of these delicacies and spend the rest of dinner moving their remains around my plate. On the contrary, I've never felt better, which is how new dieters, like new members of any sect, tend to feel during the first, heady days of conversion. I experience bizarre surges of energy, and instead of slouching off to the coffee bar for a post-lunch pick-me-up, I begin taking jaunty afternoon power walks.



Before and after.

FOOD WRITERS tend to fall into two broad categories: those who describe the *experience* of the meal (Liebling, Calvin Trillin) and those who obsessively chronicle the actual *tastes* that appear on the plate (Craig Claiborne, Richard Olney). I've always considered myself a bumbling, very junior member of the former group, but as I drop three pounds the next session and four more two weeks after that, I begin regaling my startled *fresser* colleagues with flowery descriptions of the sugary snap of fresh garden carrots.

"Now, *this* is what's called 'depth of flavor,'" I hear myself proclaim one evening at the fine new Village bistro Mimi. The subject of my enthusiasm, I dimly recall, is a helping of plump, hand-rolled gnocchi, which a couple of short weeks ago I would have hoovered up without comment. But after being relentlessly carpet-bombed

with Nordic bran, my taste buds react like they're experiencing the buttery softness of this Italian dumpling for the first time.

It doesn't take long, after years of public grumpiness, for this bizarrely optimistic new tone to creep into my work. Often I'll go long months without writing a three-star review, especially in this era of clamorous little bar-restaurants and overhyped comfort foods. But I've written three during the early stages of my dieting binge, extolling the virtues of everything from pork sandwiches to wood-fired pizza pies. Maybe it's true, as Zuckerbrot has prophesied, that my new eating habits will rekindle my love affair with food.

But as any nutritionist or serial dieter will tell you, if losing weight is relatively easy, your chances of keeping your appetite in check over time are roughly the same as your summiting the ten highest peaks on the planet without the benefit of oxygen. By an optimistic measure, four out of five people fail to maintain weight loss after a year. Besides, if, by some (Continued on page 98)



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miracle, you do manage to shed those extra 50 pounds, it takes years for the complex metabolic triggers that control the appetite to adjust to your new, lighter weight—and some experts think that this never happens.

Until that time, the body's keen metabolic sensors are in protective starvation mode, sending pulsating siren calls throughout your svelte new form via the dimly understood parts of the brain that control that complex jumble of cues we call "appetite." Which is probably why, weeks into my diet—after conveniently forgetting to record anything in my food diary, consuming an entire 20-course tasting dinner at Blue Hill at Stone Barns ("That's not on the Daddy Diet," my horrified daughter says, watching Daddy cram chunks of delicious, fresh-baked chocolate-and-cherry bread down his giant maw), and enjoying a furtive late-night snack of leftover Bonchon fried-chicken wings—the Omron Body Fat Analyzer records that I've gained back two pounds of fat.

"If you don't want to become another statistic, you can't eat your restaurant dinners like a normal fat American," Zuckerbrot says, furrowing her carefully penciled brow in a gently disapproving way. "Mindful indulgence" is this week's mantra, and for good measure she relates motivational stories about fleshy business-mogul clients who fork over thousands of dollars for her nutritional secrets but in the end never lose a single pound. "Character flows through people like a river," she says, fixing me with one of her mesmerizing stares. "You know what they say, Adam: If you cheat on your taxes, you'll cheat in life."

I try not to cheat that week, or the week after, but lumbering slowly around town on my gastronomic rounds, furtively ingesting fiber-cracker snacks in the backs of taxicabs, the magic goal of 20 percent body fat seems like an increasingly distant, Sisyphian task. But as the visits tick by, the Omron Body Fat numbers begin slowly to creep downward, from 28.3 percent ("Anything more than three bites is not mindful indulgence for a man like you!") to 26.4 percent ("We're counting carbs, not calories, Adam. Remember, there's 40 grams of carbs in that

cup of quinoa, so when you order one of those bowls, it's like eating three slices of Wonder Bread!") to a promising but still very obese 26 percent.

The week before my last official visit to the F-Factor offices, I attend two weddings. I write another glowing, three-star review, this time of a new Chinese restaurant in the Village where, among other things, I enjoy two kinds of cold Sichuan-style chicken, several excellent varieties of regional noodle specialties, and an ethereal bowl of rice and tomato soup crowned with strands of fresh watercress. Zuckerbrot has recently gotten engaged, so strips of celebratory pink and white paper bunting are strung up around the white-toned office. When I clamber on the scale, I weigh in at 235 pounds, which is approximately 40 pounds less than when I'd begun my diet experiment. And despite those wedding indulgences, my body fat is also down again, although only by a meager tenth of one percent.

Despite the festive decorations, Zuckerbrot's not in much of a celebratory mood, although, for some reason, I am. When I tell her it's time to take the training wheels off and chart my own, wobbly dietary course, at least for a while, she regales me with more horror stories about clients who've lost over 100 pounds, failed to follow the F-Factor maintenance program (which carries a price tag of \$6,000), and returned a year later fatter than ever. She reminds me that I'm still technically obese ("You have 15 pounds to go, Adam; you can't enjoy yourself yet!") and that I'll need "wiggle room" to gain a few pounds, given my hazardous occupation. She cautions me against feeling pleased with myself, because when fat people feel self-satisfied, they tend to reward themselves with buckets of fried chicken. I assure her that those days are over. It's my plan to lose even more weight over the next couple of weeks, in preparation for my triumphant checkup with Dr. P.

I dutifully ingest my crackers that afternoon, and later that evening, at a new French restaurant downtown, I order a congratulatory martini, followed by the relatively slimming fillet of sole, which I enjoy along with a few chaste little tastes of crackly skinned duck breast and several fatty bites of a delicious \$43 lamb chop. There are also a few sips of Vouvray ('09 Le Clos de la Meslerie, for the record), followed by a grand flotilla of French desserts—crystal saucers filled with apricots and sorbet, a classic opera cake flecked with gold leaf on top. I take a bite of the little cake, then put down my spoon for a while, but when coffee comes, I take another bite, and then another, and before I know it, the dessert is gone. ■