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Au Revoir Atkins, Bonjour Dukan

The French know a great deal about food and how to prepare it; they've taken pride in their national cuisine for centuries. It was a Frenchman, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, who famously wrote in 1825: "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are." In Larousse Gastronomique, the monumental food encyclopedia edited by Frenchman Prosper Montagné, the entry on American cooking disparagingly mentions the countrywide distribution of factory-produced foods -- and this was in 1938! (Montagné goes on to observe, years before McDonald's served its first Happy Meal, that it is characteristic of Americans to eat as quickly as possible for as little money as possible). The great French chef Auguste Escoffier died before the Larousse was published, but not before he wrote the book's preface, which he begins with these words: "The history of the table of a nation is a reflection of the civilization of that nation."

This long cultural history of respecting food is likely a major reason why the French have had considerable immunity to the obesity epidemic. French women really don't get fat, or at least nine out of 10 don't -- according to the 2010 OECD Factbook a mere 10.5 percent of French adults are obese, in contrast to almost 35 percent of Americans. Nevertheless, for those who need help or just think they do, we imported Weight Watchers to France, and last year Jenny Craig opened shop. When queried as to why Jenny Craig (a company that sells low calorie prepared meals) made that decision, Eric Moreau, the company's chief executive in France, explained: "The French have a negative reaction to American food. But in terms of weight loss, the Americans have credibility here."

When it comes to losing weight, will the French have credibility with Americans? We'll find out next month, when France, land of the thin, will be exporting a diet plan to America, home of the weight-challenged. But the answer, judging by Amazon pre-sales, appears to be YES!

Editor's Note: France's National Agency for Food, Environmental and Work Health Safety has identified The Dukan Diet as one of 15 imbalanced and potentially risky diets.

Visiting Dukan's website, (and reading numerous articles about the plan) indicates that the first two stages (there are four) are gimmicks -- in other words, calories are severely cut with unnecessarily punishing and complicated dietary restrictions. This makes it easy to be dismissive -- the last thing we need is another weight-loss fad. However, only the first half of Dukan's plan is gimmick laden. If the dieter can make it to Phase III, the gimmicks are few, and Phase IV has only one, vilifies no foods, allows bread, cheese, wine, and dessert, and mandates daily exercise for the rest of your life. I would be pleased to never see another fad diet, and for everyone to simply begin to eat better (lots of vegetables, fruits, lean proteins, whole grains) and move more. But since that doesn't seem to be happening, the Dukan Diet may be better than many. Here's the plan:

Phase I (Attack) The diet begins with 1-10 days of severe penance -- only lean protein (meat trimmed of all fat, fish, shellfish, eggs, non-fat dairy products), a small amount of oat bran, and water are allowed. If the dieter needs to lose a great deal of weight, the full 10 days are recommended. Then Phase II begins.

Phase II (Cruise) During this period, which lasts until the desired weight goal is achieved, lean protein, oat bran, and water days (as above) alternate with lean protein, oat bran, water, plus vegetable days. There are 28 vegetables to choose from -- no peas, carrots, corn or potatoes. The dieter is supposed to drop about 2 pounds a week.

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If losing only a few pounds is the goal, the phase might be over before becoming intolerable. But if one had a target of losing, say, 30 more pounds, it would be a dreary four months, followed by:

Phase III (Consolidation) At this stage, which lasts five days for every pound lost, Dr. Dukan allows the return of “pleasurable foods.” This means one can now consume vegetables and a couple of servings of potatoes or pasta daily, along with fruit, bread, and cheese. There are “festive” meals twice a week, which means wine and dessert are allowed, but no second helpings. No additional pounds will be lost, but weight should remain stable as the dieter transitions to:

Phase IV (Stabilization) lasts forever and has three “non-negotiable” components. For six days a week, you eat whatever you like, and you have hopefully learned to eat better. Every Thursday, however, you return to Phase I and have only lean meat, oat bran, and water, which, of course, significantly cuts your caloric intake one day a week. You also commit to walking 20 minutes or so every day and never using an escalator or elevator, the latter being much easier to commit to in Paris than, say, New York City, but within reason a terrific idea.

If the dieter can stick with it to the end, ultimately the diet becomes very French -- eating well and moving more, with discipline. According to the New York Times, some “Dukannistes” are already skeptical that Americans will follow it successfully. For example, one woman interviewed said: “We French have a greater competency in cooking. Ah, no, this diet, it would never work for them.”

Perhaps not, but it seems destined to be our next big fad. We’ve had far worse.