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SKIN DEEP

Warmed-Over Atkins? Don't Tell the French

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

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PARIS

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Ed Alcock for The New York Times

Chloe Château, a Paris researcher on the Dukan diet.

PIERRE DUKAN has been called the French Dr. Atkins. Millions of Frenchmen are said to have tried his program, a method that promises — like dozens of diets before and since — no hunger, no calorie counting, instant weight loss and lifelong weight maintenance. The original Dukan [diet](#) book sold 3.5 million copies in French and has been translated into 14 languages. Three Dukan books were among the top five best sellers in France last year. Hundreds of online blogs and forums serve as the diet's virtual support system, not unlike Weight Watchers' weekly meetings.

Few Americans have even heard of the diet that made the 69-year-old Dr. Dukan famous, but that is about to change.

Next month, the diet will make its American debut when a division of Crown Publishing rolls out the North American edition of "The Dukan Diet," its cover featuring a plate with two Eiffel Towers and the words, "The Real Reason the French Stay Thin."

Dr. Dukan, who says he was paid a \$1.3 million advance for the North American rights, will attempt to woo American audiences with his well-rehearsed, rapid-fire pitch, which he seasons with medical jargon and wraps in charmingly imperfect English. The diet will be heavily promoted with a national print, television and radio campaign, and outreach via [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), all part of the publicity machine that propels diet books — one of the largest revenue generators in publishing — into general consciousness.

The doctor comes across as a missionary. "My dear friends, today I am reaching out to you with the certainty that I can help you put an end to the inevitability of weight problems in North America," he wrote in the preface of the new edition. "Now let this mutual journey begin!"

The diet has become so central to French culture that

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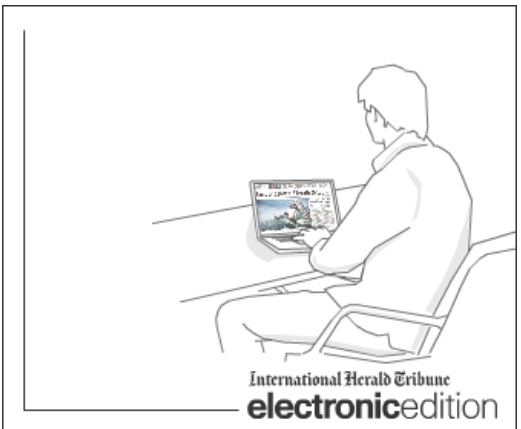
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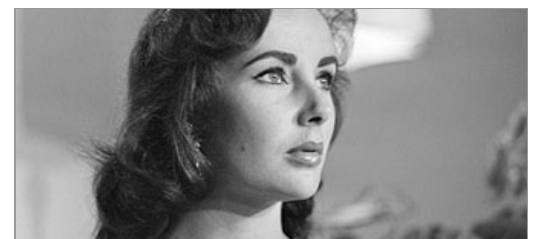
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Pool photo by Stefan Rousseau
Among the media-labeled Dukannistes:
Carole Middleton, Kate's mom.

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Eric Feferberg/Agence France-Presse —
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Politician François Hollande.

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Gold medalist David Douillet.

almost any public figure who has lost a lot of weight is labeled by the media as a Dukanniste: [Jean-Marie Le Pen](#), until recently the leader of the far-right National Front party; François Hollande, a longtime Socialist Party politician, former party leader and presidential hopeful; David Douillet, a judo gold medalist (who reported losing more than 75 pounds in six months). In Britain, the press has Carole Middleton, mother of future princess Kate, going on the diet in preparation for the royal wedding next month.

For years, critics have dismissed the Dukan diet as a warmed-over version of early Atkins: a simple protein-centric method that divides foods into good and bad categories and relies on the claims of a medical doctor who is long on enthusiasm and short on scientific research.

Asked about Atkins, Dr. Dukan acknowledged that it was a source of inspiration. "I am built on the shoulders of Weight Watchers and Atkins diets," he said. But he criticized Weight Watchers for its emphasis on quantity sizes and calorie counting, and Atkins for allowing unlimited consumption of fat. "I have a lot of respect for Atkins," Dr. Dukan said. "He was a legend in his time." But now, he added, "Atkins is dead."

His own diet's high-protein, low-fat approach is organized into four phases: attack, cruise, consolidation and stabilization. The first encourages dieters to eat as much as they want of nonfatty, protein rich foods, including oat bran (a key component) washed down with oceans of water. The second stage introduces vegetables, but no fruit; the third brings with it two slices of bread, a serving of cheese and fruit and two servings of [carbohydrates](#) a day, with two weekly "celebration" meals with wine and dessert (the diet is French, after all); and the final stage six days a week of "anything goes" and one day of reversion to strict protein-only stage one — for the rest of your life.

The only must-do daily physical exercises are a 20-minute walk and total elevator avoidance, fine in a city like Paris where five-story buildings are common.

Even before its American introduction, the diet is under attack. "This is just another one of those diets invented by a charismatic individual who makes a lot of promises and has loads of testimonials but is not based on any scientific data whatsoever," said Frank Sacks, professor in the Department of Nutrition at [Harvard University's](#) School of Public Health and chairman of the [American Heart Association](#) Nutrition Committee.

France's governmental National Agency for Food, Environmental and Work Health Safety has identified it as one of 15 imbalanced and potentially risky diets. The British Dietetic Association, the country's organization of professional dietitians, branded it one of the five worst diets of 2011. "We call it the 'Do-can't' diet," said Sian Porter, a dietitian and spokeswoman for the British Dietetic Association. "Even if you can survive it for the first few

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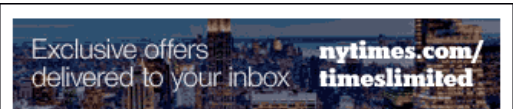
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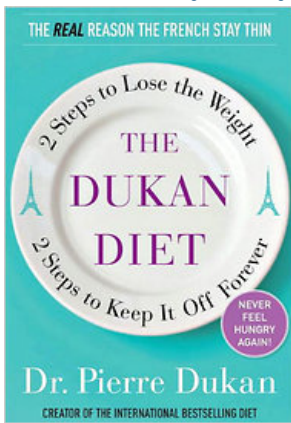
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days, it's hard to stick with it. It's hard on your kidneys. And it's expensive."

Michèle Fitoussi, a columnist for Elle magazine, commented simply that "of course you lose weight at the beginning."

"You are so bored eating nothing but sliced turkey and fake crab that you lose the desire to eat."

The diet was an accidental creation, and Dr. Dukan will tell you the story of its inspiration, whether you ask or not. It began in the 1970s with four words: "Let me eat meat." Dr. Dukan, then a Paris neurologist, was treating an asthmatic and seriously overweight longtime patient, a poetry editor. The patient had tried every sort of diet. They all had failed

him. He was determined to try again, but on one condition: he wanted meat.

Dr. Dukan told him to eat nothing but protein, to drink lots of water and to come back in five days. When the man returned, he had lost 11 pounds.

And so the Dukan diet was born. Dr. Dukan abandoned neurology and studied for a specialization in nutrition. He spent the next two decades trying out various diets on thousands of patients. His first book, which started with a small imprint and no marketing budget, spread rapidly via word of mouth and the Web.

Dukan's followers — Dukamaniacs, they are sometimes called — can be impassioned proselytizers. "I love meat, and it's a guy's kind of diet because of all the meat," said Romain Vergnol, a physical therapist who gained more than 20 pounds as he ate along with his wife during her [pregnancy](#), but lost it on Dukan.

Marie Dekker, a co-owner of a chic hair salon in Paris, said she "had become like a whale" and had tried the Scarsdale, the grapefruit and the fasting diets. "This is an easy diet to do if you work and have lunch on the fly. Oat bran becomes your best friend." Ms. Dekker said that she lost more than 17 pounds in 8 weeks. The most difficult period came in the later stages. "I suddenly craved other foods," she said. "I missed bread."

Chloe Château, a young researcher at a French Web site, decided to try Dukan after she came home heavier after spending more than a year in Britain. "When I got off the plane, the first thing my mother said was, 'Oh, you've put on weight,'" Ms. Château said. "She didn't even say 'Hi' or 'I missed you.'"

Ms. Château said that she took off 14 pounds in less than three weeks, put some of it back on, and plans to try the diet again, even though she has a kidney ailment and migraines. (Dr. Dukan advises all potential dieters to consult their doctors and undergo blood tests before starting.)

Dr. Dukan himself is not a die-hard believer in thinness. In 2003 he wrote the book "Men Prefer Curves," which advised women that "Your hips, your thighs, the roundness of your face and knees are natural sexual transmitters implanted in you since the origins of mankind." Women who are "curvy, even very curvy, fleshy or busty" should learn to use their bodies, he added, to facilitate "pleasure, seduction and the commitment of a man."

Some Dukannistes also doubt that the diet will have the same success in America as it has had in France.

"In France we are very spoiled: we have great fish and meat," said Clothilde Müller, 38, who works in a law firm and tried the diet along with her husband. "We have 20 different varieties of no-fat fromage blanc and yogurt in every supermarket. We French have a greater competency in cooking. And more Americans are [vegetarians](#). Ah, no, this diet, it would never work for them."

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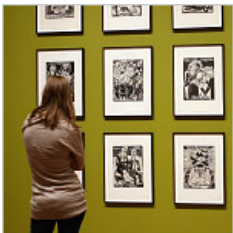
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