

Macrobiotic Diary

A day in the life of a woman who finds her bliss in rice

by Jessica Branch



Jolanta Sonkin

The lowdown from: Jolanta Sonkin

Age: 31

Occupation: I work at MacroTreats.com, a company that I started with my mother. We produce macrobiotic desserts and snacks including bars, cookies and pies.

Home: San Diego, California

After her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, Jolanta not only started eating a macrobiotic diet, but she and her mom also devoted themselves to providing macrobiotic eaters with sweet treats. Now, she gives iVillagers a taste of what it's like to follow a macrobiotic lifestyle.

What's eating a macrobiotic diet all about?

As a follower of this diet, which is said to cure diseases like diabetes and cancer, I consume no dairy, meat, caffeine or processed foods like pasta. I eat primarily grains, vegetables, beans and fish. I have very little fruit on account of the high sugar content, and the fruit I do eat is always seasonal and grown locally. For sweetener, I use brown rice syrup.

Before I started eating macrobiotically, I used to focus on the nutritional content (calories, fats, etc.) more than the ingredients. I thought I was really healthy, but I didn't eat nearly enough grains and vegetables. I also ate dairy and white meat. I would watch my fat and calories, but I didn't care that "no fat" and "low calorie" were achieved with artificial sweeteners and fat substitutes.

How did you decide to start eating a macrobiotic diet?

I adopted this lifestyle when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in January 2003. Five years prior to that, my aunt had been diagnosed with terminal lymphoma, and rather than accept the fatal diagnosis given to her by doctors, she researched alternative medicine and discovered the macrobiotic diet. She cured herself of cancer on a macrobiotic diet alone.

My mother decided to have a lumpectomy, but opted not to take any drugs. Instead she adopted the macrobiotic diet as well. My mother's cancer diagnosis was a wake-up call for me about how important it is to take care of my body and how the foods I eat can contribute to diseases like cancer. There was definitely a difficult adjustment period, but doing it with my mother made it much easier. Also, seeing firsthand how it cured my aunt gave me inspiration. I converted over time, though, making changes slowly.

Has anyone criticized your diet?

The response from my friends and family has been great and supportive. I have quite a few

family members who are also macrobiotic. But I have experienced some criticism. First of all, many people assume that I can't possibly enjoy eating. But I enjoy eating now more than I ever did; my meals are delicious and more satisfying than they were before. The other common criticism is that without dairy, I must not take in enough calcium, and without meat I must not get enough protein. What many people don't realize is that there are plenty of other sources for calcium and protein.

Has the diet changed the way your body feels?

I feel completely different. I am full of energy all day. I used to experience moments of fatigue throughout the day, and now I never do. I barely snack, because my meals are so much more satisfying. My skin looks great, I've lost weight and my stomach has flattened out. And I lost the weight naturally without even watching my calorie and fat intake.

What can't you eat? Do you ever feel deprived?

I don't eat meat, dairy, refined sugars or flours or anything processed. At the beginning I didn't think I could do it. I thought I would miss some foods too much, especially sweets and dairy. But with time I found myself craving these foods less, and then my mother came up with her idea for macrobiotic desserts. This is what inspired us to start our company, MacroTreats. We knew that if we felt deprived on a macrobiotic diet, then other people probably did as well. We wanted to make it as easy as possible for people to follow a macrobiotic diet.

How do you manage eating with other people in your life who aren't macrobiotic eaters?

My husband is also macrobiotic to a certain extent, because he eats what I cook. Surprisingly, he does not miss meat at all, and even opted for a vegan Thanksgiving.

What about eating in restaurants or at parties?

Sometimes eating in a restaurant or at a gathering with friends can be difficult. I am sure some people label me a picky eater, but I don't consider myself picky at all. I can usually have fish and vegetables at most restaurants. However, finding a whole grain can be challenging. Restaurants usually have white rice, white bread, etc. But explaining it to people is not difficult at all. Everyone is very curious and receptive.

Have your shopping habits changed?

My shopping and cooking habits have definitely changed. At first, finding and preparing food was difficult. I had to learn a lot more about vegetables and grains in order to have variety in my diet. The preparation was also much more time-consuming than I was accustomed to. Now I shop mostly in health food stores and spend the majority of time in the vegetable and bulk food aisles. I also spend more time in the kitchen preparing food, but you get used to it and eventually don't even realize it anymore.

Do you plan to follow this diet for the rest of your life?

Yes. I don't even like to call it a "diet," because it sounds so restricting, and I don't feel limited at all. It is a lifestyle.

What's the number one reason you stick with it?

I feel better physically and mentally.

What's your advice to women thinking of trying a macrobiotic diet?

If you try to change your entire diet at once, you will feel overwhelmed and probably deprived. As a result, you might give up. Make changes slowly and be patient.

For example, switch from white rice to brown rice or eat a MacroTreat instead of a regular cookie or candy bar, which tends to have refined sugars or flour, dairy, eggs and hydrogenated oil, as well as lots of additives and preservatives. You should always look closely at the ingredients of the products you purchase if you plan on trying this diet.

Try going to a great macrobiotic restaurant and ordering some of the most popular dishes.

Finally, macrobiotics is not just about what you eat. It is also a mental state. Meditation and stress management are just as important to the lifestyle as what you eat.

A day on the diet

Breakfast: I have a whole grain cereal, usually hot, and kale or a MacroTreat bar if I am in a hurry.

Lunch: I might have a soup or a veggie sandwich on whole grain bread.

Dinner: My meal usually consists of brown rice, vegetables and a protein source such as fish, seitan, tempeh or tofu.

I try to have grains and vegetables at every meal. I do have some sweets in my diet (all of which are macrobiotic friendly and produced by MacroTreats). They are all made with macrobiotic ingredients and sweetened with brown rice syrup. They taste incredible, so I never really feel deprived! 🍬

Jessica Branch is a writer and editor living in New York City. She has written for a wide variety of publications and Websites, including *Glamour*, *Time Out New York* and *Publishers Weekly*.
