



# Decolonizing Nutrition: Reclaiming Food, Culture, and Health

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# What does colonized nutrition mean?

shaped by  
Eurocentric,  
industrialized  
models

Calorie counting

Protein obsession

"Superfoods"

Rigid dietary  
pyramids

# Traditional nutrition education... Mediterranean Diet is the best cuisine!



Ignores ancestral foodways, spiritual food relationships, cultural eating patterns

Leads to erasure of non-Western knowledge

Pathologizes foods from BIPOC communities

"Food is not just fuel—it is story, medicine, identity, and survival."

## Top Headlines in Heritage Nutrition

**"Mediterranean Diet Linked to Longer Lifespan, Lower Risk of Heart Disease"**

*(Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2018)*

**"Mediterranean Diet Reduces Stroke Risk by 35%"**

*(American Heart Association, 2018)*

**"Mediterranean Diet Cuts Risk of Dementia and Cognitive Decline"**

*(Neurology Journal, 2023)*

**"Following a Mediterranean Diet Can Lower Depression Risk"**

*(Molecular Psychiatry, 2019)*

**"Mediterranean Diet May Reduce Risk of Breast Cancer by Up to 68%"**

*(JAMA Internal Medicine, 2015)*

**"Mediterranean Diet Helps Manage Type 2 Diabetes Better Than Low-Fat Diets"**

*(Diabetes Care, 2014)*

**"Mediterranean Diet May Protect Against Inflammatory Diseases"**

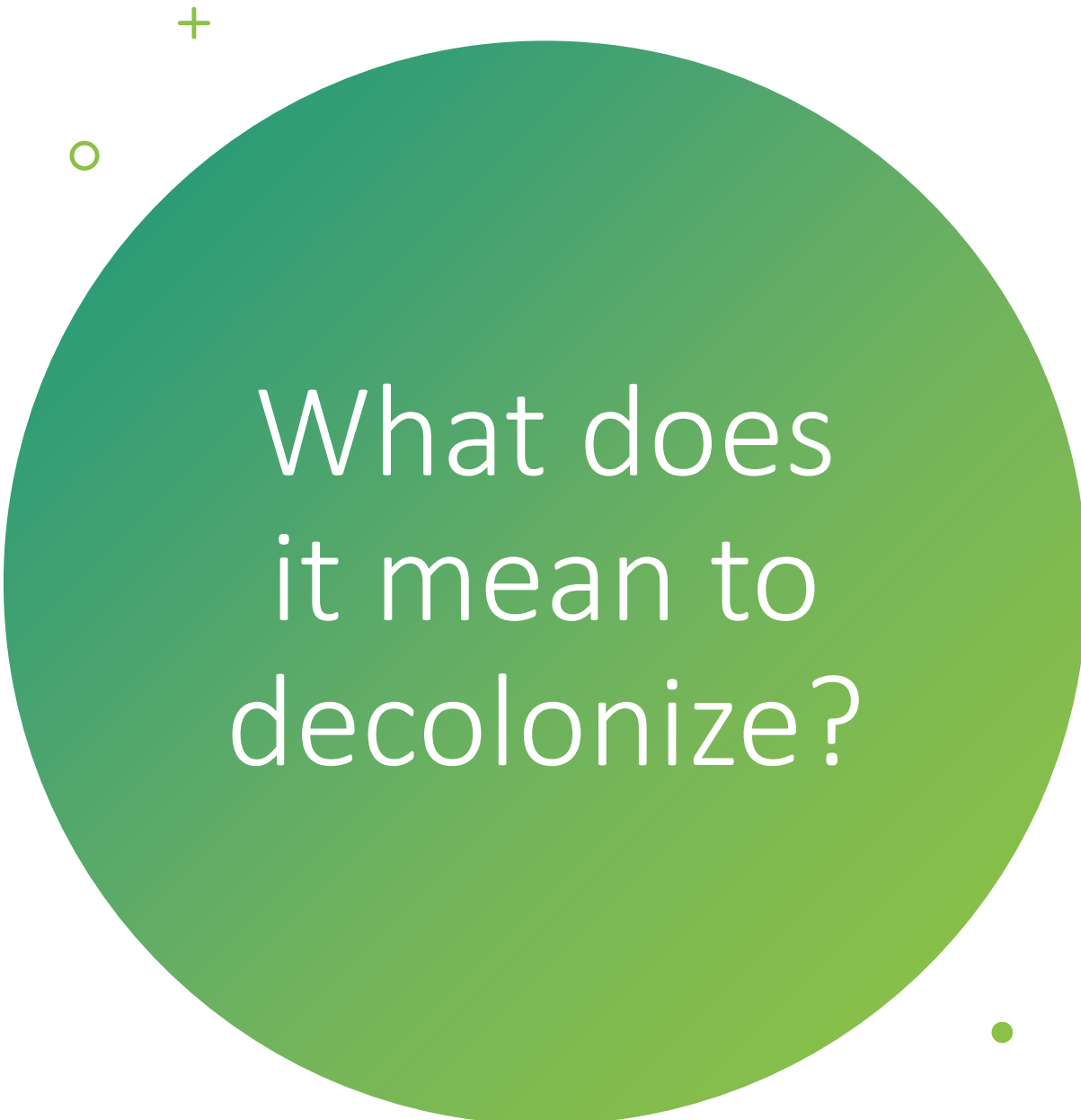
*(The Lancet, 2021)*

**"Mediterranean Diet Shown to Improve Gut Health"**

*(Gut, 2020)*

**"Mediterranean Diet + Physical Activity Increases Longevity and Quality of Life"**

*(BMJ, 2020)*




# What does it mean to decolonize?

- As people working to create equitable and sustainable food systems ....  
we must:
- recognize complicity in colonialism
- engage Indigenous perspectives and narratives
- work to support communities seeking food sovereignty and self-determination

Unsettling Settler Food Movements: Food Sovereignty and Decolonization in Canada  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1038478ar>

# Principles of Decolonized Nutrition

Center	Center heritage diets & cultural food practices
Honor	Honor food sovereignty & food access challenges
Reclaim	Reclaim intuitive eating & diverse body norms
Teach	Teach context, community, colonization in nutrition education



# How do we heal and grow?

- Community-driven action
- vital to sustaining this movement until our food system produces equitable, healthy outcomes for each person within it
- **Always seek out the leadership in a community for direction**



CULINARY MEDICINE CLASS AT PRITZKER SCHOOL OF MEDICINE, U OF CHICAGO



# food is power

a field guide for students  
on nutrition, health, and food justice



# Food is Power in the schools

- food sovereignty, food systems, justice and nutrition
- decolonized curriculum exploring cultural foodways
- reimagining delicious healthy food using locally sourced
- cotaught by U of Chicago medical students

Each lesson has three sections.

**● the food rainbow: red**



**Nutrition lesson:**

- Vitamin A
- Lycopene

**Food is Power lesson:**

- Natural vs. Artificial foods
- Natural food color vs. added/synthetic food dyes (esp. red)
- Food roots and routes: cabbage

**Cooking lesson:**

- Recipe: Red Cabbage Salad
- Recipe: Easy Tomato Sauce
- Recipe: Mini English Muffin Pizza
- Skills: slicing and marinading

Where do foods get their bright red color? The answer is—micronutrients!

The vibrant red color of many fruits and veggies comes from a wonderful nutrient called **lycopene**. **Lycopene** makes many of the fruits and veggies we eat a beautiful red or pink color. It's also an antioxidant that helps fight against sunburns and promote skin health. Most (80%) of the lycopene in our diets comes from tomatoes.

In some red foods, we can also find **Vitamin A**. Vitamin A strengthens your vision and your immune system to help you fight off colds.

**antioxidant** - substances from food that neutralize damage and protect the body from harmful byproducts from cellular activities. The best sources of antioxidants are fruits and vegetables

## Nutrition



What are we bringing into the kitchen?

### spotlight on: lycopene

- Nutrient that makes plants red and pink
- An antioxidant

*Found in: red carrots, watermelons, grapefruits and papayas*

### spotlight on: vitamin A

- Supports vision and immune system
- Helps your organs work well

*Found in: green leafy veggies, green, yellow and orange fruits and veggies, including carrots, broccoli, cantaloupe, apricots and mangoes*



We can empower ourselves by growing food ourselves. This way we can also recognize the types of food that are already growing around us. Our ancestors were **foragers**, people who knew and survived off of the hundreds of edible plants growing on the land.

We can start to rebuild our knowledge about food through growing food ourselves. By growing food, we can also grow our own food supply!

*Kale growing at Urban Growers Collective's South Chicago Farm.  
Photo by Urban Growers Collective.*

## Food is Power



Empowering a relationship with food... beyond cooking and nutrition

*from Food is Power Field Guide*

# Roots and Routes

The stories and food ways  
behind foods

## Collard greens

Collards (*Brassica oleracea acephala*) are not African, they are temperate and Eurasian in origin, but their consumption, and with them—turnip, kale, rape, mustard and other greens are a healthy blend of tastes—West and Central African, Scottish, Portuguese, German and the like.

Many culinary historians agree that the green craze in the South is supported by tastes for spring greens among Celtic and Germanic Southerners but was really spearheaded by people of African descent. In tropical West Africa, greens were available year-round in gardens and markets and figured prominently in regular meals. Unlike Northern Europeans, West and Central Africans had a climate that supported a continuous variety of edible greens from both cultivated and wild plants. Amaranth, celosia, inine (African spinach), and the leaves of cowpeas, cassava, okra, sweet potatoes, and other vegetables helped make up the 30-60 edible leaves prepared during the age of the slave trade.

Long before America, there were varieties West African greens related to collards that were made into a “relish,” a sauce to be eaten with rice, fufu or millet and some groups associated them with sacred medicine and vitality.



Rows of growing collard greens at Henry's Farm in Illinois. (Photo by Dr. Geeta Maker-Clark)

*from Food is Power Field Guide*

## food is power lesson

Flavor

Have you ever eaten a sea salt and vinegar potato chip and then eaten a whole bag?

Food marketers and scientists have engineered certain foods to taste very good and have made food from using some of the least nutritious ingredients (sugar, salt and processed white flour). This means that some of the food we crave might satisfy our hunger and taste-buds, but might leave our bodies still needy for nutrients.



An example of this engineering is the “bliss point” (a term developed by food scientists) that refers to a perfect balance of flavors designed to keep a food consumer coming back for “just one more.” This is the taste that keeps us eating “just one more” chip--over and over again.

Over time, these processed foods can lead to health problems down the line (like diabetes, obesity, and high blood pressure). Many people today—even doctors!—don’t discuss **whole foods’** importance to health.

### exploring your taste buds activity

**Ask:** Can you name all the flavors? We can take control of what we eat by figuring out the foods that satisfy our taste buds and help fill our bodies.

#### **Reflection questions:**

- Which flavors are your favorite?
- What fruits and veggies taste the best to you?



*from Food is Power Field Guide*

## roasted broccoli and buffalo sauce

### ingredients

#### BROCCOLI

- 2 heads of broccoli
- 4 large eggs
- 1 cup bread crumbs (ideally whole wheat)
- ¼ tsp salt
- ground black pepper

#### BUFFALO SAUCE

- 1 tbsp unsalted butter
- ½ cup hot sauce
- ½ lemon juice
- ground black pepper

### equipment

- knife
- baking sheet
- parchment paper
- bowls (2 medium, 1 small)

**Which hot sauce do I use?** You can buy hot sauce in the store or make it yourself. Try a mild hot sauce like Cholula, which is made from pequin peppers. Pequin peppers are native to the Mexican state of Tabasco.

Caribbean hot sauce is made from scotch bonnet peppers, which are native to Jamaica. Scotch bonnet peppers are one of the **hottest** peppers in the world.

### prep

broccoli → wash and cut into florets

### step-by-step

#### broccoli:

1. Gather all ingredients and pre-heat oven to 425° F.
2. Chop the heads of broccoli into florets lower down on their stems (so they look like small trees). Chop the large florets into smaller bite-sized at the stems.
3. Break the eggs into one medium bowl and whisk.
4. In the other bowl, mix the bread crumbs, salt, and pepper.
5. Dip the broccoli floret into the egg mixture, letting excess egg to drip off. Then, dip and roll each broccoli floret into the bread crumb mixture. Put the floret immediately onto the baking sheet. Bake for 15-20 mins.



#### sauce:

1. Make the sauce – Place butter in small bowl. Heat in the microwave or the stovetop. until completely melted.
2. Mix the hot sauce, lemon juice, and pepper into the butter and stir to form a smooth sauce. If the mixture isn't smooth, heat it for another 10 seconds.
3. Enjoy 1 tbsp of sauce per 1/2 cup of broccoli

# Cooking

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# Rainbow Cooking

- *Orange - Beta Carotene*
- *Green- Glucosinolates*
- *Yellow/Green – Lutein*
- *Red - Lycopene*
- *Purple - Anthocyanins*
- *White/Green - Allyl Sulfides*





- Reimagining delicious healthy food
- Using locally sourced and grown food
- Making powerful decisions!

# Shifting the Model

Colonized Model	Decolonized Model
Macronutrients	Ancestral wisdom
"Superfoods"	Seasonal/local/regional foods
Caloric math	Ritual, story, feeling
Diet culture	Food dignity



# Reclaiming heritage diets

Eating based on cultural, regional, ancestral traditions

- African Heritage Diet
- Latinx Indigenous foods
- South Asian Ayurvedic foodways
- Mediterranean seasonal patterns
- Native American food systems

## African Heritage Diet Pyramid

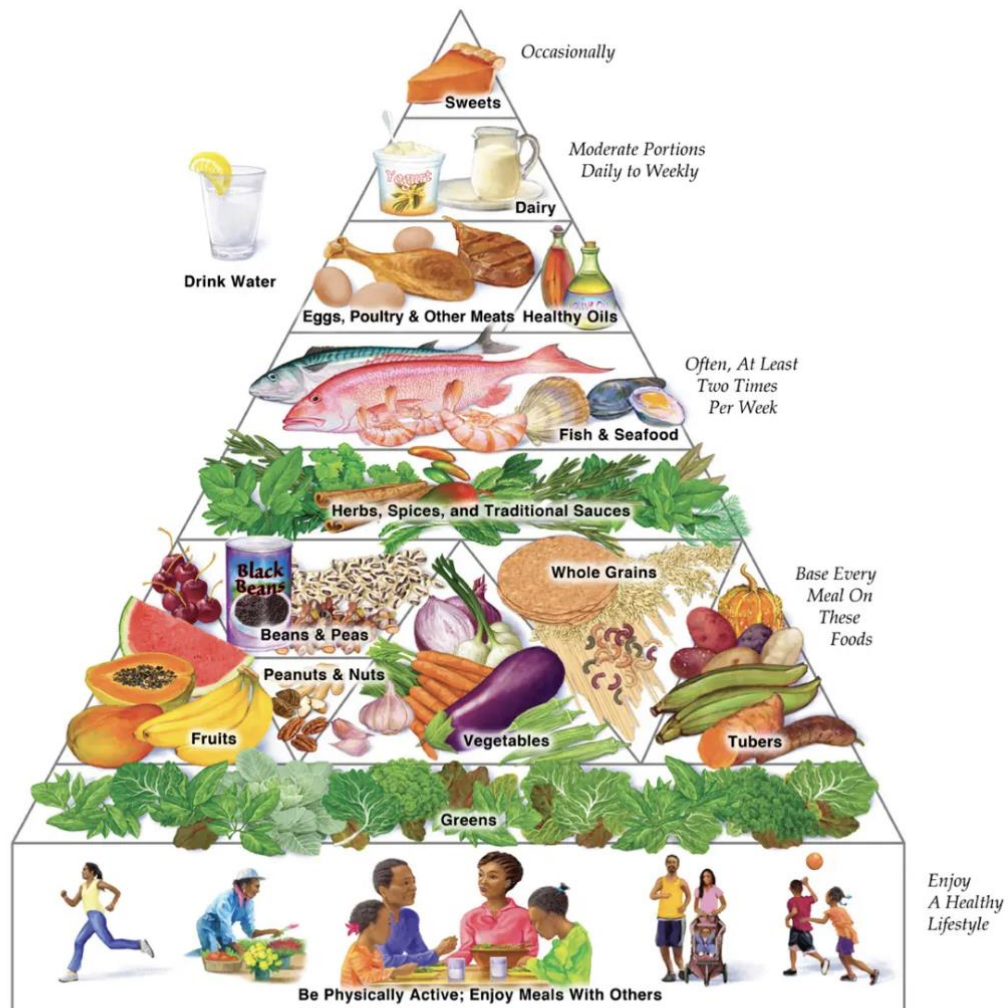


Illustration by George Middleton

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[www.oldwayspt.org](http://www.oldwayspt.org)

# Why Heritage Diets Matter

Restore spiritual, emotional, physical connection

Naturally anti-inflammatory, plant-forward, sustainable

Reduce shame, encourage cultural pride, promote healing

Heritage diets reconnect people to lineage, land, and community—they're not a trend.



# Food as Medicine, Food as Community Food as Nourishment

- Integrate cultural humility into medical nutrition education
- Include traditional food prep in clinics and classrooms (culinary medicine!)
- Respect patients' food stories
- Support local growers, foragers, Indigenous food movements

Decolonizing nutrition is embodied,  
relational, and ongoing

We can restore health by restoring  
belonging

