

# Emerging Writers

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## The Food Nazi

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Natalie Dayvault

Second Place Winner

Creative Non-fiction Category

2018 Emerging Writers Contest

### **The Food Nazi**

When I was in kindergarten, food wasn't really something I thought about. Of course, if I was in danger of having to eat anything green, or anything with beef, or vegetables, or peanut butter, or anything healthy, I'd become a tad unruly. Generally though, it wasn't a concern for me. As I grew, I continued to eat an 80% bread, 10% Cheez-it, 10% chicken nugget diet until I was about 7, at which point I decided that grilled chicken wasn't the *worst* thing in the world. So long, of course, as I had plenty of fries to mask that 'char' taste I detested so much.

When I was 8, things began to change after I started getting headaches on a daily basis. Having always been a pretty peppy kid, my sudden 'wilty' state was unusual enough for my mom to make a doctor's appointment for me. The verdict? Sugar sensitivity. That is, sugar sensitivity in conjunction with a protein deficiency.

So, considering the possibilities my mom was expecting after a night spent scouring WebMD, this was amazing news. Pump the kid up with some steak, limit her blueberry muffin intake, and we're good to go! Or so she thought.

After that visit, we came to realize that 90% of the food I ate was loaded with added sugar, and low in protein. For a kid as picky as I was, the transition was going to be tough. But after many a trial and error, we were able to slowly incorporate some better

choices into my diet. No more honey nut cheerios, for example, on a day when I wasn't eating much protein.

Fast-forward 2 years, and I was a fifth grader! Things were going great, and sugar headaches were a thing of the past. That's when I decided that I wanted to become an ice skater. Having never done any sport before in my life, I was totally clueless when it came to the whole 'eat to perform' thing. But heck, I felt okay all the time, so it probably just didn't apply to ice skaters, right?

To a point, I was right. Constant protein intake isn't a necessity when you're learning to skate in a straight line. And so, my diet remained unchanged.

Another 2 years passed, and I was 12. I was constantly sore from my new schedule of practicing every day of the week, and the headaches were starting up again. What had changed? Why was I suddenly always feeling hungry 2 hours before lunch? Why did I always need so much water? Why did eating Chinese food on a night before morning practice make me feel so sluggish? And so I took to Google.

I think to some extent, I knew what a "good diet" consisted of, (salad was healthy, burgers were not, etc.) but I don't think I ever really accepted the fact that mine was one of the bad ones. I didn't eat a lot of burgers or cookies, so that meant my diet was healthy, right?  
Wrong.

Luckily, at the age of 12 I could tell which websites from Google had actual information and which ones were click bait with information catered to sponsors. So the things I read that night were exactly what I needed to see: the ugly truth. I was feeling hungry before lunch because my 3-year long ritual of cheerios before morning practice

didn't contain enough protein and/or good carbs for the amount of energy I was exerting. I always needed so much water because I not only had to replenish the water I was losing during practice, but also counteract the effects of salty food on my muscles. Chinese food made me sluggish because my idea of Chinese food was a bunch of salty rice with no vegetables. No explanation needed on that one.

As you can see, I had a long way to go.

I began by focusing on grains. Any foods I ate that were composed mainly of enriched white flour (bread, pasta, crackers) I switched to whole wheat. I'm honestly still proud of myself for being able to accomplish that when I was still so picky. I started introducing new things into my diet slowly but surely. Less bacon, more egg. A before-practice snack of almonds instead of crackers. Baked chips only, except on Saturdays. I was extremely strict with myself, and I allowed wiggle room only in the case of snacking on my beloved Cheez-its.

As time went on, I became more and more comfortable with vegetables and, well, real food. I phased out most processed snacks replacing them with homemade trail mixes and yogurt. I started eating bell peppers on everything, and salad was no longer scary and disgusting. And after a couple years, through ridiculous levels of willpower, I was even able to let go of Cheez-its as my long-standing cupboard staple. I don't even really miss them.

So how has all of this shaped me as a person? For one thing, I am much less fun to eat with because people say I "make them feel fat," which I'm sorry, is not even my fault a little bit. On the other hand, I do find myself judging people on their eating habits much more than I used to. Maybe that's why my relatives have started calling me a 'Food

Nazi'. When I see someone I know down an entire Frappuccino in one sitting, I find myself thinking, "...if they'd have left off the caramel sauce the sugar content would have gone down by 12 grams—and you can't even taste it!" Or similarly, when I'm the only one at the table dabbing away the unnecessary oil on my pizza, I feel the need to explain myself. "This isn't *adding* anything to the flavor, okay?? I don't *need* this fat. This isn't weird!!!"

So now for the big question: Is there ever going to be a point when my former blissful ignorance takes over and I can actually enjoy unhealthy food without thinking about it? When I'm no longer competing as a figure skater, is all of this going to matter less to me because it won't be affecting my stamina anymore? Is there going to be a point when I can eat something sugary and not convince myself that I'll get a headache, to the point where I get one simply because I told myself I would?

I think that in the end it all comes down to this: Is it really so bad to not get excited about a trip to McDonald's? After a couple years of healthy eating, I'm not too eager to go back to my old ways. Of course if I did I would most likely eat more than just bread and chicken nuggets, but why get a cheap fast food burger when I can have a much healthier and much better tasting one from the cute little independent restaurant down the road from my house? Learning to work with the food around me has really helped me establish a good basis for decision making with the food I eat, and it has helped me realize the difference between what society labels as comfort food, and what is comfort food for me. So okay, maybe I don't get a lot of joy out of eating a "meat" patty slammed haphazardly onto a bun that has been sweating in its foil wrapping for 5 minutes, but give

me a fork and some of my own homemade lasagna, and you'll suddenly see me as a much more normal person.