

THE LOW-CARB FRENZY

THE FORCE THAT IS RESHAPING THE FOOD INDUSTRY—AND OUR BODIES

By DANIEL KADLEC

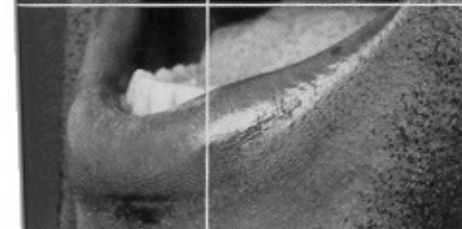
LET GO FROM HIS JOB AS A HOTEL MANAGER LAST SUMMER, BRAD SALTZMAN had begun to panic by fall. Sure, his bank account was evaporating. But equally upsetting, he says, was that he was seeking too much comfort in the kitchen and was busting out of his belt. Physically and fiscally, Saltzman, 36, was a mess. Then he hit upon a cure-all: low carbs. Saltzman went on the Atkins diet at about the same time he helped launch Pure Foods, a specialty retailer based in Beverly Hills, Calif., that sells only products with comparatively few carbohydrates. Today Saltzman is 25 lbs. lighter, and his wallet is weighty. He has 24 employees, up from just four when he started, and will have 40 full-timers by June. "It was a eureka moment for me," Saltzman says of his carb-counting catharsis in October. "I needed to lose weight, and I needed a job in the next 30 days or—all kidding aside—I'd have had to move in with my grandmother." Instead, he's college-trim and planning a chain of stores and low-carb cafés and vending machines that he believes will ring up \$100 million in sales annually within five years.

Critics of the carb counters' revolution may scoff at Saltz-

5 Carbs You
ould Be Eating

Essential Fa

Learn the Difference B



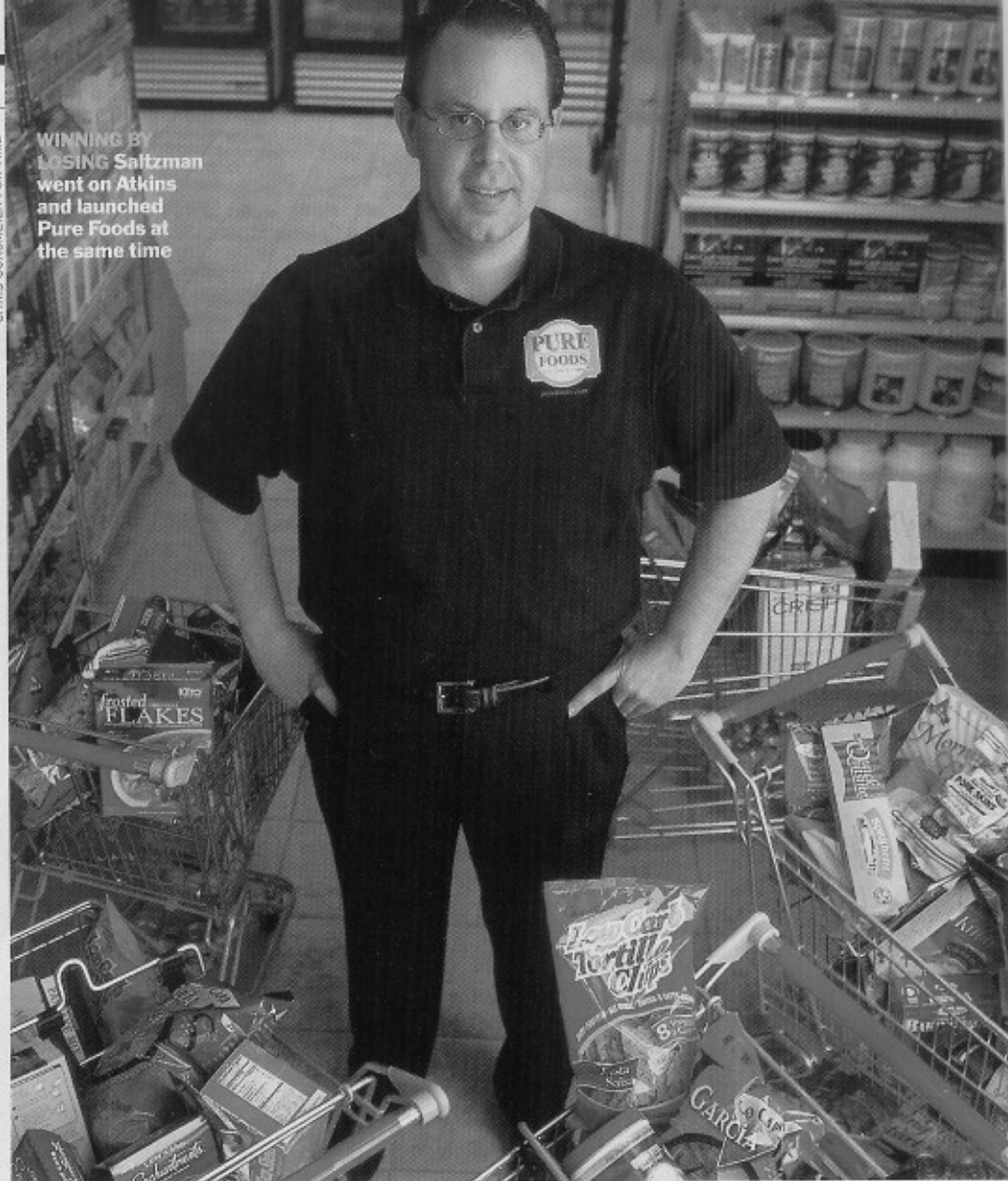
man's enthusiasm, believing that Atkins, South Beach, Zone and other protein-packed eating regimens are part of a fad that will soon run its course, like low-fat diets in the 1980s. But they can't deny his weight loss or that of countless others who have dropped 20 or 50 or 100 lbs. after cutting carbs from their meals. Exactly why all those pounds melt away when we give up potatoes and bread remains something of a mystery to the dieting public. Is it mostly the temporary loss of water weight? Do low-carb fanatics lose weight while consuming more calories, as a Harvard study suggests, or do they end up eating less because they simply get bored with the high-protein life? Or is there some sort of metabolic magic when steak, eggs and cheese replace the starches in our diet? The late Dr. Robert Atkins, who got the ball rolling in 1972, controversially ascribed the weight loss to ketosis, the fat-burning state a body reaches when deprived of carbs. His critics have bordered on fanatic, their stridency growing in proportion to the diet's increase in popularity.

Many Americans figure they will let the nutritionists hash all this out—and take all the time you please, thank you. In the meantime, as Saltzman discovered, there are pounds to drop and profits to crop. It seems as if everyone is giving the low-carb culture a whirl. Whoopi Goldberg does it. So do Jennifer Aniston and Bill Clinton. What's good enough for the stars is, of course, appealing to the rest of us. Some 26 million Americans are on a hard-core low-carb diet right now. And 70 million more limit their carb intake without formally dieting, according to a new poll by Opinion Dynamics Corp.

Counting carbs has become as powerful a fixture in the economy as it has in society. Some 586 distinct new low-carb foods and beverages hit the grocery shelves last quarter, up from 633 in all of last year and 339 in 2002, bringing the total over just two years to 1,558 new entries. The average carb-conscious shopper spends \$85 a month on specialty foods. Low-carb-related sales from such consumables as Michelob Ultra beer and books like *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution* are ex-

WINNING BY LOSING Saltzman went on Atkins and launched Pure Foods at the same time

CHRIS CORBIETTER FOR TIME



pected to hit \$30 billion this year, reports *LowCarbiz*, a trade publication that owes its existence to carbophobia.

Carb awareness is building by the day—to the consternation of companies even loosely in the business of selling the dreaded carbs. They are fighting back any way they can. Anheuser-Busch, which has launched Michelob Ultra and helped publicize that all light beers (including Bud Light) are relatively low in carbs, spent nearly \$1 million for full-page ads that ran in 31 major newspapers last Friday. The ads pointedly attack the claim in Dr. Arthur Agatston's *South Beach Diet* that beer is laden with the carb maltose, a sugar. "The South Beach diet is enormously popular," says Francine Katz, a spokeswoman for Anheuser. "But there is

information in there about beer that is incorrect, and a call to any brewer would have cleared it up." She says that all maltose turns to alcohol and carbonation in the brewing process and that Anheuser won't rule out legal action if Agatston fails to set the record straight.

Those with less at stake are embracing the trend. When baseball opened for business this spring, many ballparks were promoting low-carb concessions, from bison burgers on low-carb buns at Cleveland's Jacobs Field to braised pork "wings" at St. Louis Busch Stadium. This month burger chain Hardee's signed baseball great Mark McGwire, known as Big Mac, to flog its bunless Thickburger, playing catch-up with the other Big Mac, McDonald's, which is phasing out supersize portions and offering adult Happy Meals that are carb conscious. Burger King is launching an Angus steakburger that can come wrapped in lettuce and slathered with

**\$30
BILLION**

Expected sales of low-carb products this year. That's more than Coca-Cola generates in revenue from soft-drink sales worldwide

low-carb steak sauce. Krispy Kreme says it will have a low-sugar—and therefore lower-carb—doughnut by year's end.

Even before the food chains caught on, local eateries were offering Atkins-friendly menus. "We'll never take French fries and onion rings off the menu," says Miles Angelo, a chef at the upscale Caribou Club in Aspen, Colo. "But I was forced to read the Atkins book and immerse myself in the whole diet. Now 50% of our menu can be prepared Atkins-approved."

In grocery stores, niche firms like Atkins Nutritionals, founded by Atkins (the bulk of it was recently sold for more than \$500 million), and Ketogenics have so far been responsible for most of the low-carb breakfast bars and other packaged foods to hit the grocery aisles. But now the big boys are crowding into the act.

Frito-Lay has unveiled Tostitos and Doritos Edge, in which soy protein is used in place of starch to lower the chips' carb count. Unilever has a Carb Options line of 32 products that include reformulated Ragú sauce, Wish-Bone salad dressing and Lipton tea with fewer carbs. Coors has begun marketing its new low-carb Aspen Edge to compete with Michelob Ultra. "The mainstream food and beverage manufacturers have finally made low carb a priority," says Suzanna Prong Eygabroat, an analyst at market-research firm Productscan Online.

**26
MILLION**

**The number of
Americans on a
hard-core low-carb
diet right now**

What has shaken the food giants to act is surveys like the one from research firm Mintel International showing that 3 of every 5 low-carb dieters say they plan to limit carb intake for life. Half the people who tried a low-carb diet in the past 12 months and 1 in 3 who tried a low-carb diet more than a year ago are still limiting their carb intake, according to a Morgan Stanley study. Says Morgan analyst Bill Pecoriello: "Carb watching should hold pretty steady long after low-carb diets lose their popularity."

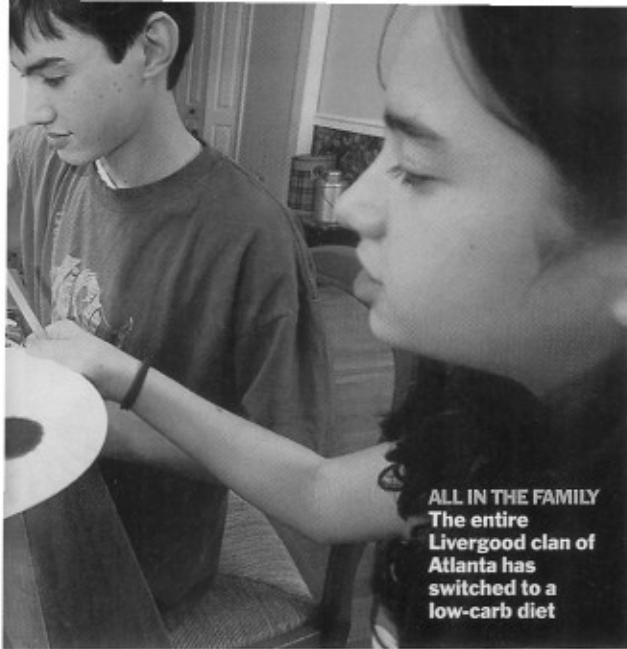
Americans are the most overweight population on the planet, and obesity is fast becoming a national health crisis. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that poor diet and lack of exercise, which killed 400,000 Americans in 2000, may soon overtake tobacco, which killed 435,000 people that year, as the leading preventable cause of death in the U.S.

You would think that any development—fad or not—that takes an inch or two off our collective girth would be well received. "Other countries are laughing at us," says Harry Balzer, vice president at NPD Group, a market-research firm that studies eating patterns in the U.S. Those slim, wine-drinking, chain-smoking Europeans chuckle at our diet and health obsessiveness, since we continue to overeat. Yet there are signs that carb counting may be working. In its



latest annual report, NPD found that after six consecutive years of weight gain, the number of overweight adult Americans fell 1 percentage point, to 55%. Was it carb counting? No one really knows. But at fast-food restaurants, salad orders (low in carbs) rose 12%, while French-fries consumption (carb mountain) fell 10%.

The more carb counting becomes ingrained in our lives, the more worried many nutritionists grow. They argue that low-carb weight loss, while real, will not last for many folks, who once they stop dieting will obey their taste buds and return to the junk foods they love. "I work with a lot of people who have obsessive-compulsive food issues," says Darlene Kvist, a nutritionist in St. Paul,



ALL IN THE FAMILY
The entire
Livergood clan of
Atlanta has
switched to a
low-carb diet

ANN SILVER FOR TIME

into sugars, which then circulate in the bloodstream. As sugar levels in the blood rise, so does insulin. Peaks of insulin push the body to store excess sugar as fat. By cutting carbs, you effectively cut sugar surges and not only store less fat but also start to burn off more of the fat you have. If this were the whole story, of course, there would be little controversy and none of the colossal food frenzy being waged among companies desperate to get on the right side of the carb culture.

But there is a second

front in carb wars—good carbs vs. bad carbs. The good ones are found in whole-grain breads, beans, fruits and vegetables. They contain fiber and break down slowly when digested, avoiding those damaging sugar and insulin spikes. The bad ones are found in white rice, potatoes, most commercial breads and all manner of processed crackers, cookies, chips, soda and candy bars. Bad carbs break down more quickly and result in sugar overload.

Minn. "Once they get that taste back in their mouth, then it's really hard for them not to want more and more."
What if they stay off carbs indefinitely? This is where the jury is out. A growing body of medical evidence supports the notion that in the short term, low-carbing can work for weight loss and that getting slimmer is beneficial in fighting heart disease and diabetes. The study of long-term effects is only now getting under way, and one worry is the higher cholesterol counts that can accompany a diet rich in fatty meats. Unequivocally, high cholesterol levels contribute to heart disease.

How does carb counting work? In simple terms, carbs are digested or broken down

As you might imagine, those in the carb business are trying to claim that their carbs are the benevolent ones. The most extensive push has come from pasta manufacturers, which in February footed most of the bill for a global summit in Rome, gathering scien-

tists, physicians, nutritionists and chefs to address the carb issue. Their somewhat predictable finding: pasta is wonderful; the cereal grains used to make some types contain critical nutrients that break down slowly.

If science is unavailing, there is always marketing. The U.S. Potato Board and Idaho Potato Commission, alarmed at a 5% drop in potato consumption, have launched separate ad campaigns playing up the vitamin C and potassium in spuds and the energy value of carbs for active people. Orange-juice manufacturers are bitter over a similar decline in consumption that they attribute to Agatston's South Beach diet, which holds that o.j. carries an excessive sugar load. "Obesity? Diabetes? These are not a by-product of people drinking too much orange juice," says Eric Boomhower of the Florida department of citrus. At one point, citrus growers looked into whether they could use an obscure state law against disparaging agriculture to sue Agatston. "There is a shift in consumer demand," Agatston responds. "People should get on the bandwagon and stop complaining." The growers have done both. They launched a \$7 million ad campaign last week playing up their product's nutritional value, and they have started offering lower-carb juice.

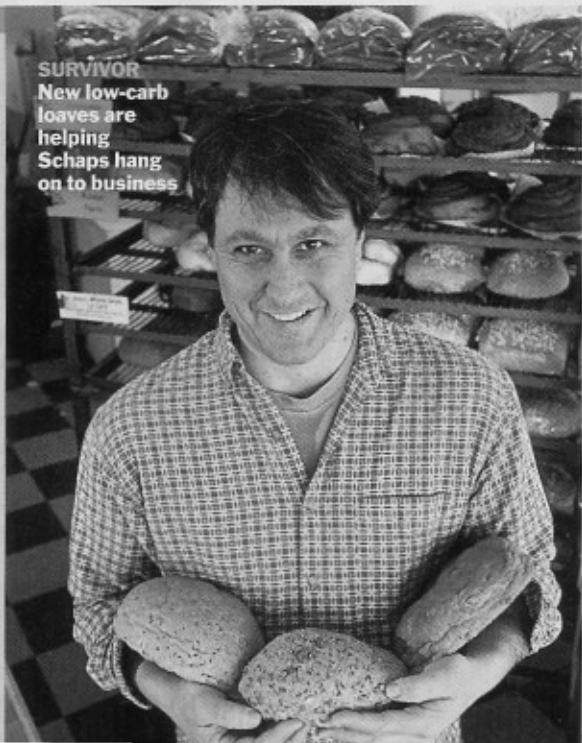
ALL THIS SPIN CAN MAKE THE LOW-CARB UNIVERSE difficult to navigate. But there are a few simple things to keep in mind. First, any bald-faced low-carb claims can get food-makers into trouble—call it carbage. That's because the Food and Drug Administration has yet to define what constitutes a low- or light- or reduced-carb anything. Hence the proliferation of fuzziest labeling terms like carb smart, carb conscious, carb aware and carb fit. Russell Stover, for example, received a warning letter from the agency about the name of its Low Carb line of chocolates. The company has offered to change the name but hopes it won't have to since the FDA announced in March that the agency will come up with a definition for *low carb*.

Second, there is the confusing notion of net carbs. Some manufacturers subtract the good carbs from the bad ones and advertise the difference. This is a slippery slope because the FDA insists that a carb is a carb is a carb. So net carbs are not the same as fewer carbs.

Third, some low-carb products are so loaded with extra calories that they pose an unnecessary hurdle to weight loss. Take Subway's traditional 280-calorie 6-in. sandwich, the one that helped Jared slim down and find a gig as Subway's pitchman. That's about half the calories of the Atkins-friendly

SURVIVOR
New low-carb
loaves are
helping
Schaps hang
on to business

ROBERT A. O'NEIL FOR TIME



Next door to Schaps' Illinois shop, another starch purveyor has launched a counteroffensive. The Homemade Pizza Co. is whetting local interest with reformulated, reduced-carb pies. The shop claims to slice 40% off the carb load by replacing white flour with whole wheat and eliminating sugar from the dough. But those modifications surely won't cut it for some. Bearno's pizza chain, based in Louisville, Ky., is finding a ravenous market for entirely crustless creations that feature a base of mozzarella cheese to support the sauce and toppings. "It's pretty flimsy," admits managing partner Robert Mooney. But not in terms of sales, which are increasingly robust. Still, the concoction begs another question: Is a pizza a pizza without any dough? "So far, no one has questioned it," says Mooney. They're too busy wining

Subway chicken bacon ranch wrap. Want real results? Order the traditional sandwich on the tortilla wrap for fewer carbs and fewer calories.

Finally, some low-carb products never had many carbs to begin with. Wish-Bone Carb Options ranch dressing has zero carbs, but the regular version has just 1 g per 2-tbsp. serving. Unless you're knocking the stuff back like beer at a frat party, the difference is a joke. And speaking of beer, Miller Lite now markets itself as a low-carb brew though it never changed the recipe. It just happened to be low carb all along (3.2 g per 12 oz., vs. 12 g for the typical beer).

No matter where you stand on the carb issue, what should be clear by now is the staying power of a trend that is sending tremors through the economic food chain. Not even December's mad-cow scare has put a dent in beef consumption. Pork bellies, which give us bacon, are trading at record high prices. Egg prices have hit a 20-year high. The stock price of Cal-Maine Foods, a leading fresh-egg producer, has soared nearly sevenfold in 12 months. Some economists go so far as to credit the low-carb culture as a chief force in revitalizing our farm-belt economy.

Here is how a diet revolution is rippling through the economy:

■ THE FOOD GIANTS WEIGH IN

THE LOW-CARB CRAZE IS ALSO ROILING THE world's biggest food-manufacturing companies. H.J. Heinz Co., whose frozen entrées have been hammered by the low-carb lifestyle, is taking carbs out of its Smart Ones lineup; Nestlé is doing the same with Lean Cuisine. Heinz pulled 75% of the carbs out of its flagship ketchup for a One Carb version that hit stores last week. Hershey has introduced 1 gram Sugar Carb chocolate bars.

Meanwhile, General Mills has acknowledged that higher egg demand suggests that many consumers are eating omelets instead of cereal. The company, which partly attributed poor financial results last quarter to carb counting, is responding with a higher-protein/lower-carb version of Total cereal. It will unveil 40 new products in May, including low-carb Hamburger Helper. Kraft is working on a CarbWell line of salad dressings and barbecue sauces, and is recasting its marketing to feature the meager carb content of sugar-free Jell-O. Breyers is rolling out CarbSmart Klondike bars.

On it goes. Launching a new food line is no small undertaking. Consumer research and continual tinkering with the formula can cost millions of dollars and require two years from concept to shelf. Diet foods are trickiest because a company must determine the



HOLD THE FRIES Fast-food outlets, like this Carl's Jr. in Los Angeles, now offer a full menu of low-carb options, including garden salads and bunless burgers

trade-off between taste and calorie count that will please the most people. Sara Lee, recognizing that its carb-centric baked-goods line is vulnerable, has begun marketing Delightful breads with fewer carbs. The company sees a secondary market for low-carb products: the world's 171 million diabetics, for whom carbs can be a deadly sin. The number of diabetics will grow to 366 million by 2030, according to World Health Organization estimates released this week. "Low-carb products will make it easier for diabetics to control their diets while giving them access to foods that were formerly strictly limited," says Edward O'Neill, associate director of the food-processing center at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. The diabetic market alone can sustain many of the low-carb products coming to life, he notes.

Unilever is investing more aggressively than most in carb counting. It rushed the Carb Options line—the company's largest brand launch in two years—to market in a blistering 12 months, half the usual time for new products. Mike Polk, chief operating officer of Unilever Bestfoods North America, predicts that sales of low-carb packaged foods will almost double, to \$700 million, this year and will rise to \$1 billion in 2005. "We want to be a big share of that market," he says. One reason that Unilever is embracing low carbs is that its Slim-Fast line of meal-replacement shakes (low calorie but not so low carb), whose sales peaked at \$1 billion in 2002, has dropped off the radar; sales fell 21% last year. Kraft's SnackWells and other diet

products have ridden the same roller coaster. Slim-Fast's recovery plan is to tailor 40% of its products to low-carb dieters.

■ THE LOW-CARB AISLE

YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED THE ADDITIONAL shelf space that low-carb goods are getting in your supermarket. The Albertson's chain now offers more than 100 low-carb products, compared with just 10 less than a year ago. "We found it's having a profound effect," says Andrew Kramer, Albertson's director of ethnic marketing and specialty foods. Sales in his category more than doubled last year, led by growth in low-carb lines. Meanwhile, the central action alley at Wal-Mart SuperCenters

crammed some 200 low-carb products into a 16-ft. run during prime dieting season after New Year's. The company is considering launching its own line of low-carb foods, which would surely narrow the price premium that many of these items carry.

■ THE LOW-CARB MENU

YOU SIMPLY CANNOT BE IN THE DINING BUSINESS these days and not have a low-carb lineup. Since sub-shop chain Blimpie's introduced its Carb Counter menu in October, sales have kept fattening up, 8% to 10% each month. Mirroring that success, T.G.I. Friday's says its restaurant traffic bumped up 10% for a couple of months after it introduced an officially Atkins-approved menu in December.

Friday's CEO Richard Snead says he came around on Atkins last summer, when waiters at the company's 500 or so U.S.

1,558

Number of new low-carb products that have hit stores since 2002

restaurants began to notice a big wave of customers substituting vegetables for potatoes, which left the restaurants holding a surplus of spuds and struggling to fill the side orders. "It didn't take a lot of research to understand that America was under the influence of the Atkins revolution," Snead says. Enter menu items like the Tuscan spinach dip and the tuna-salad wrap. Ruby Tuesday, which was one of the first to start serving Atkins-friendly Splenda on the table next to the traditional Sweet'n Low, Equal and sugar packets, now has some 40 low-carb items on its revamped menu.

12%

The increase in salad orders at U.S. fast-food outlets from 2002 to 2003

■ PUBLISHING'S PROFIT CENTER

AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT, a quarter of the adult population is on a diet, a figure that has remained fairly steady for decades. Not surprisingly, the publishing world has built a reliable revenue

stream serving this market, pumping out titles addressing any and all diet concerns of the day. Book publishers "will jump on any bandwagon," notes Nora Rawlinson, editor in chief of *Publishers Weekly*.

They have truly swarmed this one. More than 140 low-carb books are in print, and 51 more are due out this year, up from just 15 in 1999, reports Simba Information, a publishing-research firm. The crush of new titles exploits every crevice of the low-carb market: *Low-Carb Cocktails*, *Low-Carb Slow Cooker Recipes* and *Low-Carb Smoothies*. There is *Low-Carb Dieting for Dummies* as well as *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Low-Carb Meals*. It was only a matter of time before a book came along to compare the low-carb diet books. When it did, in mid-January, Jonny Bowden's *Living the Low Carb Life* briefly displaced *The Da Vinci Code* as the best-selling title on BarnesandNoble.com.

In all, diet and health books rang up an estimated \$500 million in sales last year, and much of that loot was low-carb related. The frenzy continues to be led by *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution*, which has been on the *New York Times* best-seller list for nearly seven years. Even the upstart *South Beach Diet*, which hit print just last year, has spent 53 weeks on the list. Magazines are jumping on the bandwagon too. *Low Carb Energy* will join *LowCarb Living* on newsstands nationwide next month. "No one could have forecast that this cyclone was coming," says Jim Capparell, publisher of *LowCarb Living*. He sat on his idea for nearly a year before acting.

Are They Selling Us Baloney?

Converts to low-carb diets don't need scientists to tell them they can lose weight eating bunless bacon cheeseburgers for a couple of weeks. The bigger issue is the long-term health effects of protein-heavy diets. Very little data is available, but many researchers are worried that such diets can lead to kidney and liver problems. Research also suggests that too much protein can leach calcium out of the body, increasing the risk of osteoporosis. Dieters still need to be concerned about the risks of shedding pounds while slurping eggs Benedict and lobster thermidor. The bottom line is the same: calories matter, and so does a balanced diet.

You can lose weight on any calorie-restricted diet. It can be pickles, pie or cabbage soup. Eat

fewer calories than you burn, and pounds melt away. The monumental problem dieters face is making the shift from quick weight-loss schemes to healthy eating. It's a tall order, and the vast majority of dieters fail. After a few months of abstinence, most revert to old habits and gain back everything—and often more. The secret of dieters who keep pounds off for good is that they skip gimmicks altogether and focus from the very beginning on healthy eating habits they can sustain for a lifetime.

One thing scientists do know is that much of the yummy stuff in low-carb diets—think filet mignon with béarnaise sauce—comes loaded with artery-clogging saturated fats. Low-carb mania has not upended the scientific consensus that saturated fats are the enemy: a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

That's the bad news. The good news is that there are good carbs and bad. All foods can be divided into combinations of three different nutritional categories based on their chemical components: carbohydrates, proteins and fats. Carbs are broken down by the body into sugars that course through the bloodstream and serve as the body's key source of energy.

White bread, pasta and potatoes earn a bad rap because they are simple carbs that are very quickly broken down into sugar in the body. Most excess sugar is stored as fat. Some fruits, vegetables, beans and whole grains, on the other hand, are also carbs, but they are complex ones that break down slowly and are rich in vitamins, minerals and especially fiber. A diet rich in fiber can lower cholesterol and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

So what's a healthy diet that people can stick to long term? Listen to Dr. David Katz of the Yale School of Public Health: "Diets rich in fiber and complex carbohydrates, found in fruits, vegetables, beans and whole grains, have been shown in a wide array of studies," says Katz, taking a deep breath, "to be associated with longevity, lasting weight control, reduced risk of cancer, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, reduced risk of diabetes, reduced risk of gastrointestinal disorders and overall health promotion. In other words,

the notion of cutting carbs is a step in the opposite direction from everything we know about healthful eating."

Bear in mind too that carbs are linked to the regulation of a key neurotransmitter called serotonin, which, says M.I.T. brain researcher Judith Wurtman, "is essential for feelings of fullness as well as a good mood." And again, complex, not

simple, carbs are the best way to maintain an even keel when it comes to both appetite and mood.

So what's the optimal mix of carbs, fat and protein?

Experts disagree as to exact numbers, but a middle-of-the-road menu calls for 25% of calories from healthy oils, 20% from lean protein and 55% from complex carbs. So if the low-carb mantra has made you cut simple sugars and refined carbohydrates from your diet, great. But if you are skimping on produce and whole grains and instead shoveling animal and dairy fats into your body, you are short-changing your health. "The diet-industrial-complex is now pushing low carbs full steam ahead," says Wurtman. "It may take a long time, but 10 years from now, people are going to look back on this and say, 'Boy, were we really stupid.'" —By David Bjerklie

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 1 Bar (37g)
Servings Per Container 5 Bars

Amount Per Serving

Calories 160 Fat Cal. 60

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 7g 11%

Saturated Fat 3g 15%

Cholesterol <2mg 0%

Sodium 110mg 5%

Potassium 140mg 4%

Total Carbohydrate 14g 5%

Dietary Fiber 5g 20%



"If this is a fad," he adds, "I hope it's as long-lived as low fat, which took 22 years to come and go."

■ DIET INC. DOWNER

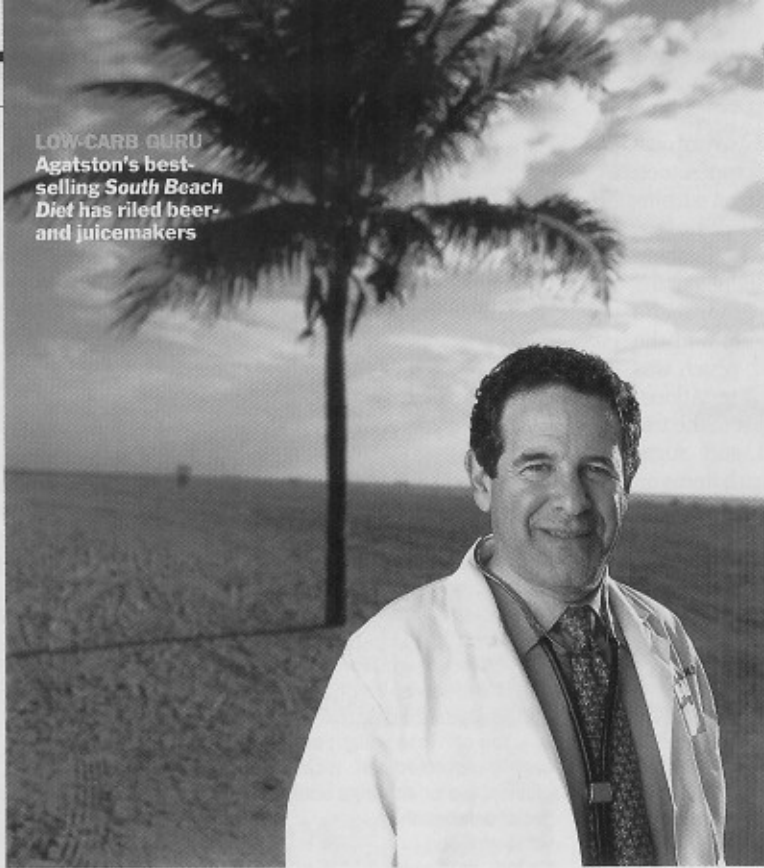
THE DIET INDUSTRY IS IN distress. Massive numbers of dieters have migrated to low-carb strategies in the past couple of years, exiting programs that emphasize portion control. The heavyweights of the diet industry, Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig, are feeling the pinch. "Any time there is anything new in the market, it is going to affect clients who want to lose weight quickly," says Cozette Phifer, spokeswoman at Jenny Craig. She concedes that new business is depressed but asserts that the dip won't last long. Both companies say they have refrained from introducing low-carb items because their nutritionists oppose the idea and think it's a fad that will fade. "We believe carbohydrates are an important part of a balanced diet," says Jim Evans, CEO of Jenny Craig.

At Weight Watchers, which is publicly traded, the stock has been sputtering in a strong market since October 2002, and net income has been flat for two years. The firm gets most of its revenue from memberships, which have been flagging, says analyst Kathleen Heaney at the Maxim Group, a New York City brokerage firm. That's temporary, according to Eliot Glazer, vice president of North American marketing for Weight Watchers. "A lot of what is behind low carbs is pseudo science," he says. He reports seeing a flood of disheartened low-carb dieters come to Weight Watchers as "they find they really need help to lose weight."

■ THE BAD-NEWS BEERS

BEER IS WIDELY SEEN AS BAD NEWS FOR ANYONE counting carbs, which helps explain why beer consumption was down 1.6% last year and why Anheuser is determined to wrest a correction out of Agatston. Interestingly, Anheuser stumbled on the maltose issue when one of its St. Louis-based brewmasters, John Serbia, read Agatston's book before starting the South Beach diet this winter. Serbia ignored

LOW-CARB DRUG
Agatston's best-selling *South Beach Diet* has riled beer- and juicemakers



BRINN SMITH FOR TIME

the part about abstaining from beer and lost 15 lbs., says Anheuser spokeswoman Katz.

Still, while beer sales have gone flat, volume increased 3% last year for spirits, which generally contain no carbs. Alcohol of any sort is frowned upon in almost every diet because it contains calories and can act as an appetite stimulant. In some cases the body may turn to the more readily available alcohol instead of stored fat to burn as an energy source.

194

The number of low-carb books that will be in print by year-end, up from 15 in 1999

Despite all that, the spirits industry has made hay with its low-carb status. Distillers, including Bacardi and Diageo, have launched ad campaigns to trumpet their spirits' carblessness. Diageo, which makes Smirnoff, the world's top-selling premium vodka, created the website LowCarbParties.com to tell drinkers how to decarb their cocktails. "The spirit is not the problem," says food and wine expert Ted Allen from *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, who helped launch the site. "It's the mixer." Liquor and grocery stores are beginning to carry products like Baja Bob's low-carb margarita mix, which has been sold online and in specialty stores for four years and is now getting space at Meijer and other supermarkets in the Midwest and Northwest. Sales were up 380% last year.

This spirited success spawned the growth of new low-carb beers, which started with phenomenally successful Ultra and

now include Coors Aspen Edge and Rolling Rock's Rock Green Light. As a class, these brews are saving the day because "everything else went into the doldrums," says Harry Schuhmacher, editor of the newsletter *Beer Business Daily*. Anheuser attributes its record U.S. beer sales last year (103 million bbl., up 800,000) in large part to Ultra, which was launched in late 2002 and whose sales have more than quadrupled initial projections. "It became the fastest-growing beer brand since Miller Lite was introduced in 1975," says Schuhmacher. The company quietly reformulated its Natural Lite to add to the low-carb train. Promoting low-carb beer got a little trickier this month when the Feds warned against ads portraying these drinks as even remotely healthy.

CAN ANYTHING STOP THE LOW-CARB CULTURE? Not likely anytime soon. It will be years before we have conclusive long-term research on health risks. The arrival of big food companies in this fray means big money is at play and low-carb living will be marketed with a vengeance. The undisputed benefit of low-carb products to diabetics means a durable customer base. And extreme weight-loss methods like having your stomach stapled—though it worked for lovable TV weatherman Al Roker—have proved ineffective for up to 20% of those who tried them. So the fast results and pure simplicity of cutting carbs promise lasting appeal.

That is, until we get sick of it. In the end, the biggest risk to the culture may be the inevitable false or misleading low-carb claims and influx of products that ladle on heaping calories in exchange for carbs. If enough people are seduced by these foods and fail to lose weight, low carbs will go the way of low fat: a strategy that works when you stick to the rules but fails when marketers rush in with promises no one can keep. —With reporting by Julie Rawe, Alice Park and Daren Fonda/New York; Wendy Cole/Chicago; Jeanne DeQuine/Miami; Rita Healy/Denver; Marc Hequet/St. Paul; Hilary Hyton/Austin; Laura A. Locke/San Francisco; and Sean Scully/Los Angeles