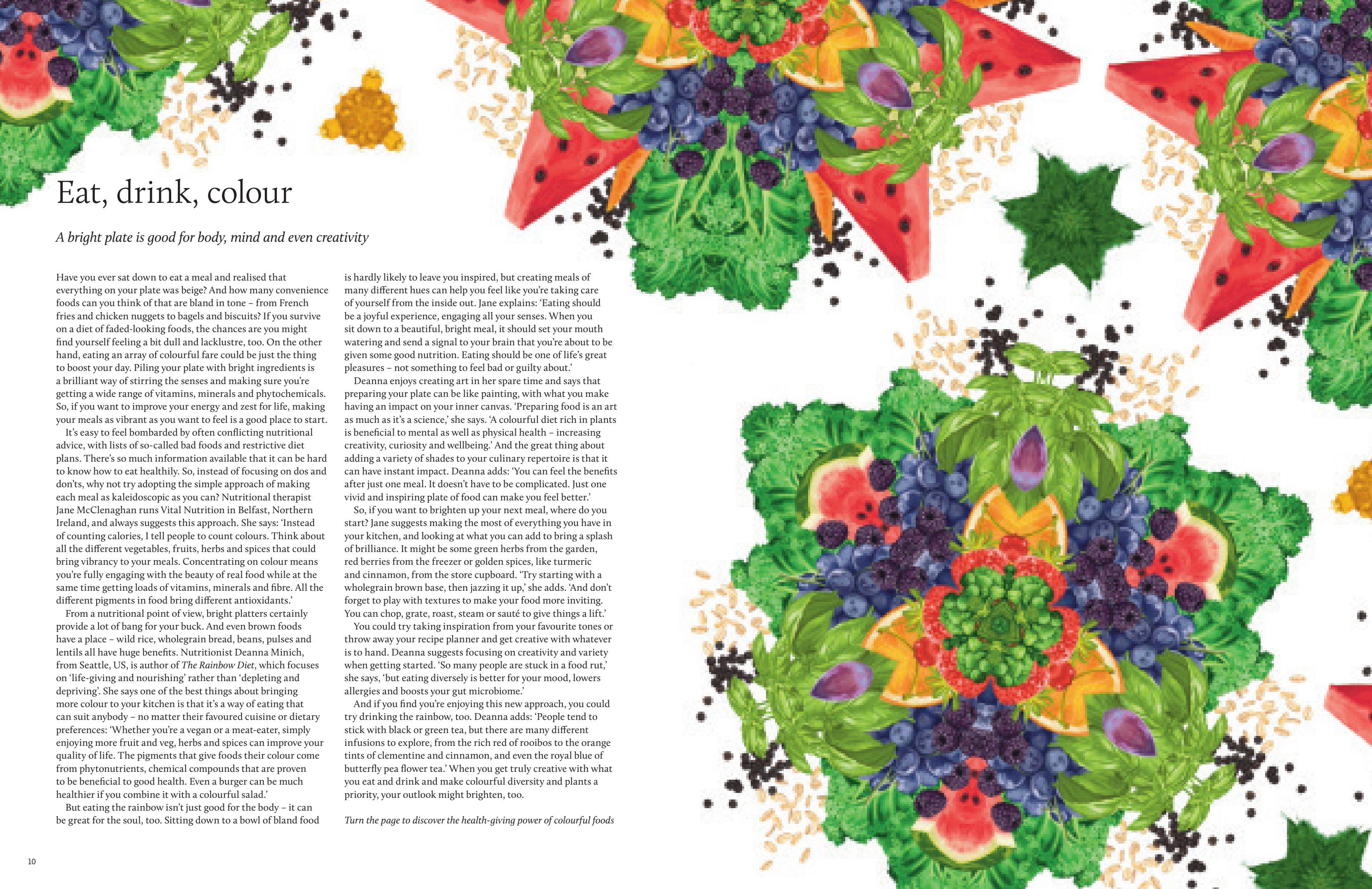




Eat, drink, colour

A bright plate is good for body, mind and even creativity

Have you ever sat down to eat a meal and realised that everything on your plate was beige? And how many convenience foods can you think of that are bland in tone – from French fries and chicken nuggets to bagels and biscuits? If you survive on a diet of faded-looking foods, the chances are you might find yourself feeling a bit dull and lacklustre, too. On the other hand, eating an array of colourful fare could be just the thing to boost your day. Piling your plate with bright ingredients is a brilliant way of stirring the senses and making sure you're getting a wide range of vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals. So, if you want to improve your energy and zest for life, making your meals as vibrant as you want to feel is a good place to start.

It's easy to feel bombarded by often conflicting nutritional advice, with lists of so-called bad foods and restrictive diet plans. There's so much information available that it can be hard to know how to eat healthily. So, instead of focusing on dos and don'ts, why not try adopting the simple approach of making each meal as kaleidoscopic as you can? Nutritional therapist Jane McClenaghan runs Vital Nutrition in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and always suggests this approach. She says: 'Instead of counting calories, I tell people to count colours. Think about all the different vegetables, fruits, herbs and spices that could bring vibrancy to your meals. Concentrating on colour means you're fully engaging with the beauty of real food while at the same time getting loads of vitamins, minerals and fibre. All the different pigments in food bring different antioxidants.'

From a nutritional point of view, bright platters certainly provide a lot of bang for your buck. And even brown foods have a place – wild rice, wholegrain bread, beans, pulses and lentils all have huge benefits. Nutritionist Deanna Minich, from Seattle, US, is author of *The Rainbow Diet*, which focuses on 'life-giving and nourishing' rather than 'depleting and depriving'. She says one of the best things about bringing more colour to your kitchen is that it's a way of eating that can suit anybody – no matter their favoured cuisine or dietary preferences: 'Whether you're a vegan or a meat-eater, simply enjoying more fruit and veg, herbs and spices can improve your quality of life. The pigments that give foods their colour come from phytonutrients, chemical compounds that are proven to be beneficial to good health. Even a burger can be much healthier if you combine it with a colourful salad.'

But eating the rainbow isn't just good for the body – it can be great for the soul, too. Sitting down to a bowl of bland food

is hardly likely to leave you inspired, but creating meals of many different hues can help you feel like you're taking care of yourself from the inside out. Jane explains: 'Eating should be a joyful experience, engaging all your senses. When you sit down to a beautiful, bright meal, it should set your mouth watering and send a signal to your brain that you're about to be given some good nutrition. Eating should be one of life's great pleasures – not something to feel bad or guilty about.'

Deanna enjoys creating art in her spare time and says that preparing your plate can be like painting, with what you make having an impact on your inner canvas. 'Preparing food is an art as much as it's a science,' she says. 'A colourful diet rich in plants is beneficial to mental as well as physical health – increasing creativity, curiosity and wellbeing.' And the great thing about adding a variety of shades to your culinary repertoire is that it can have instant impact. Deanna adds: 'You can feel the benefits after just one meal. It doesn't have to be complicated. Just one vivid and inspiring plate of food can make you feel better.'

So, if you want to brighten up your next meal, where do you start? Jane suggests making the most of everything you have in your kitchen, and looking at what you can add to bring a splash of brilliance. It might be some green herbs from the garden, red berries from the freezer or golden spices, like turmeric and cinnamon, from the store cupboard. 'Try starting with a wholegrain brown base, then jazzing it up,' she adds. 'And don't forget to play with textures to make your food more inviting. You can chop, grate, roast, steam or sauté to give things a lift.'

You could try taking inspiration from your favourite tones or throw away your recipe planner and get creative with whatever is to hand. Deanna suggests focusing on creativity and variety when getting started. 'So many people are stuck in a food rut,' she says, 'but eating diversely is better for your mood, lowers allergies and boosts your gut microbiome.'

And if you find you're enjoying this new approach, you could try drinking the rainbow, too. Deanna adds: 'People tend to stick with black or green tea, but there are many different infusions to explore, from the rich red of rooibos to the orange tints of clementine and cinnamon, and even the royal blue of butterfly pea flower tea.' When you get truly creative with what you eat and drink and make colourful diversity and plants a priority, your outlook might brighten, too.

Turn the page to discover the health-giving power of colourful foods



THE PALETTE FOR YOUR PALATE

Red

Many red foods are loaded with powerful antioxidants, such as lycopene and anthocyanins, which can help to soak up potentially damaging free radicals and might help prevent heart disease, stroke, macular degeneration and prostate cancer. Choices include strawberries, cherries, red peppers, tomatoes, watermelon and beetroot.

Orange

Well known for containing carotenoids, such as beta-carotene, which the body converts to vitamin A to benefit vision, orange foods are also often rich in vitamin C. Among the choices are carrots, mangoes, squash, sweet potatoes and, yes, oranges. Many yellow and orange spices also give a powerful boost to health. Turmeric, for example, contains curcumin, which is a strong antioxidant and anti-inflammatory.

Green

Leafy green vegetables contain the green pigment chlorophyll, a powerful antioxidant that's been linked to everything from wound healing to reducing the risk of dementia. Try watercress, kale, spinach, salad greens and herbs like basil. Types of blue-green algae, such as spirulina, are also nutrient-dense, while brassicas like broccoli contain iron, magnesium, a range of vitamins and anti-inflammatories.



Blue

Blue and purple foods get their vibrant colour from beneficial bioactive compounds called polyphenols, which can help to improve heart health and reduce the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers. They're also high in fibre and vitamins. Choices include blueberries and blackberries, concord grapes and damson plums.

Words: Jade Beecroft

For more information, visit vital-nutrition.co.uk and deannaminich.com.

Brown

Healthy wholegrains are full of fibre, vitamins, minerals, protein, antioxidants, iron and magnesium. As complex carbohydrates, they're a vital source of energy. Try brown rice and wholegrain bread, quinoa, spelt and oats. Beans and pulses are also an energising source of low-fat protein.

Black

Some black foods are high in energy and have powerful antioxidant properties, thanks to pigments called anthocyanins, which give the deep dark colour. Try chia seeds, black beans, black tea, black pepper and black garlic. Then there's activated charcoal, which traps toxins and chemicals in the gut and can be used to help reduce gas and soothe hangovers or an upset stomach.