

Column for Manila Bulletin
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Of Trees and Forest

Paradox of the Miracle Tree (Second Part)

MANILA, Philippines --- PERHAPS the most damaging misconception about the coconut, particularly coconut oil, is that it causes heart disease.

This is a misconception, according to Bruce Fife, an internationally recognized expert on health and the nutritional aspects of coconut and related products, caused by “a combination of misconception, ignorance, and greed.”

In his Coconut Research Center online publication, Fife relates that tropical oils (coconut and palm) were viewed as unhealthy because they contained highly saturated fats, which were considered bad for health although no study had proved it.

The anti-saturated fat campaigns launched by the soybean industry and special interest groups, Fife said, “succeeded in frightening the public away from using coconut oil, and food manufacturers and restaurants eventually replaced it with hydrogenated soybean oil. By 1990, coconut had virtually disappeared from American and European diets. Even in coconut-growing regions of the world, such as Malaysia and the Philippines, coconut oil was viewed as an artery-clogging fat and largely avoided. As a consequence, demand for coconut products plummeted and the coconut industry fell into a deep depression that lasted two decades.”

Today, Fife says “it is now known that the fat in coconut oil is a unique and different from most all other fats and possesses many health-giving properties. It is now gaining long overdue recognition as a nutritious health food.”

The New York Times, in an article written by Melissa Clark and published on March 1, 2011, said the coconut oil’s bad reputation caused a panic in 1994 when the Center for Science in the Public Interest released a study claiming that a large movie-theater popcorn contained “as much saturated fat as six Big Macs.”

In her article, “Once a Villain, Coconut Oil Charms the Health Food World,” Clark quoted Michael Jacobson, executive director of the center, as saying: “Theater popcorn ought to be the Snow White of snack foods, but it’s been turned into Godzilla by being popped in highly saturated coconut oil.”

Clark noted that coconut oil “has recently become the darling of the natural-foods world,” citing Errol Schweitzer, senior grocery coordinator at the Whole Foods chain, who said that “annual sales growth at Whole Foods has been in the high double digits for the last five years.”

Two groups helped to correct the misconception about coconut oil, Clark said. One is made up of scientists, many of whom backtracked on the worst accusations against coconut oil. The other is the “growing number of vegans, who rely on it as a sweet vegetable fat that is solid at room temperature and can create flaky pie crusts, crumbly scones, and fluffy cupcake icings, all without butter.”

Clark also quoted Thomas Brenna, a professor of nutritional sciences at Cornell University, who said a large part of the stigma against coconut oil could be traced to one major factor: “Most of the studies involving coconut oil were done with partially hydrogenated coconut oil, which researchers used because they needed to raise the cholesterol levels of their rabbits in order to collect certain data,”

For his part, Fife explained that 98 to 100 percent of the fats and oils in people's diets are composed of long-chain fatty acids (LCFA). On the other hand, the saturated fatty acids in coconut oil and palm kernel oil are predominantly medium-chain fatty acids (MCFA), which do not have a negative effect on cholesterol. Instead, Fife says MCFA helps "to lower the risk of both atherosclerosis and heart disease."

"Although coconut oil has gained controversy over the years, it is actually one of the healthiest fats in the world for you," according to Loren Brill, founder and CEO of Sweet Loren's ready-to-bake desserts. "Coconut oil is made from pressing the mature fruits of coconut palm trees. It's very popular in tropical parts of the world like the Philippines, where there is incidentally less cases of heart disease and cancers than compared to the Western world."

In an article published online by Huffpost Healthy Living on May 19, 2012, Brill wrote: "Coconut oil provides a great source of fuel, energy, and the highly beneficial fatty acid, lauric acid. Coconut oil is metabolized efficiently and converted into energy immediately, rather than getting stored as fat (the way butter or unhealthy oils can). Medium-chain fatty acids do not have a negative effect on blood cholesterol and help protect against heart disease." (To be continued.)

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