



How This Meat- and Cheese-Loving Chef Lost 100 Pounds and Saved His Health on a Plant-Based Diet

By Joey DiMaggio
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A little over three years ago at 36 years old, I was constantly sick and very overweight. My LDL (“bad”) cholesterol level was nearly 300, and I was prediabetic and on the verge of a heart attack.

I was born and raised in the Italian restaurant that my grandparents opened on Lake Michigan in 1957. In the Italian culture, food equals love! We ate homemade meatballs, sausage, pizza, and pasta for just about every meal. There was always a salad, but it was filled with fattening dressing, cheese, and often more meat on top. Antipasto salad was a big favorite as well.

Big family dinners were served family style—large bowls of food were placed in the middle of the table, and everyone helped themselves to as much as they liked, as often as they liked. We would eat a big dinner, relax on the couch in front of the TV for a while, and then get up and eat seconds—and sometimes thirds.

I struggled with weight throughout my life. As a child I became very chunky ... well, overweight. I was in and out of diet centers and weight-loss programs to no avail. My love for food and family mealtime was more important to me than any benefits that a “healthy” eating program could provide. I loved my red meat as rare as could be. I loved escargot, calamari, shrimp, and seafood of any kind. The more butter and cheese, the better!

When I went away to college, I realized for the first time just how heavy I had started to get. I came home for my

first Christmas break and decided I wanted to make a change and lose some weight. I convinced my parents to take me to a weight-loss doctor, who prescribed me phentermine. I was one of the youngest and first patients to be prescribed the powerful weight-loss drug in the '90s. After two years of college, I moved to NYC. I furthered my career in the hospitality industry by tending bar, serving, and eventually managing bars, restaurants, and nightclubs. I trained extensively in the culinary arts. While in Manhattan I seemed to be able to keep my weight down. Walking many miles a day certainly helped.

Getting Older, Heavier, and Sicker

After about six years, I decided to move back to Michigan to be closer to my family. I took a position as a bar/restaurant manager. I settled back into the Midwestern life and I started packing on the pounds again. I was offered a guest chef spot on a show called “Dinner & a Book” on the local PBS affiliate WNIT.

As time went on, my culinary tastes got richer and more decadent. I would look for ways to take food to the next level by adding as many rich, delicious, and fatty ingredients as I could. I lived to eat! I realize now that I loved food more than I loved myself.

As my clothing kept getting larger and larger, I didn't think much of it. I just thought I was getting older and cooking better than ever. Unfortunately heart disease runs rampant in my family. I have watched just about every man in my family suffer heart attacks, strokes, and invasive surgeries. My father has suffered several heart attacks and has had many stents put into his heart and arteries as well.

In 2012, I came home from a devastating doctor's visit where I was told either to lose at least 50 pounds or start a lifetime regimen of dangerous blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes medications. I decided enough was enough. I went online and started researching heart disease and weight-loss solutions. I had always struggled with weight, even as a child and had tried absolutely everything (well, everything except healthful eating). I

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watched *Forks Over Knives* and something inside me clicked: “I have to give this a chance,” I told myself ... just for two weeks to start. I owed myself at least that.

Going Plant-Based

The very next day, I threw away everything in my fridge and replaced all of my meats, cheeses, and dairy products with plant-based alternatives. Literally, within three days I felt like a different person. My terrible allergies started to go away, I was able to breathe and sleep more easily, and best of all I started to drop weight.

Over the last few years, I have gone from 275 pounds to my current weight of 175. My cholesterol and all bloodwork levels are now perfect! My transformation started to become evident right away, and the pounds just fell off. Early on in the process I attended a vegan/raw seminar at a local library. I met a naturopathic doctor named Karen Edwards, who helped guide me in new ways to take control of my health.

The staff at my restaurants were the first to notice. I stopped eating steaks, burgers, and seafood. I started eating things like salads with garbanzo beans, vegetables, mushrooms, and avocado. I ate veggie burgers with guacamole, and pasta with tons of fresh vegetables ... but no meat, no cheese, no eggs, and no dairy. Everyone thought I was crazy. I decided I had to prove not only to myself, but also to others, that it could be done.

Working in restaurants, especially late at night, presents unique challenges to choosing a healthy plant-based lifestyle. Our guests ask me all the time “What do you eat here?” I remind them there are options on the menu; you just have to get creative! There’s a kale salad; just order it with no cheese and add some avocado and quinoa. Get a wrap, but substitute garbanzo beans and avocado for the grilled chicken! Despite the challenges, I feel very fortunate to work in restaurants, because I have just about every fresh vegetable available to me at all times!

I have literally changed and transformed my life from the brink of disaster to the healthiest I have ever been. I do yoga almost every day and am very active at work. I will be 40 next year, and I plan to be in the best shape and health of my life. I am so grateful for *Forks Over Knives* for helping me take my health into my own hands and control my future, rather than letting heredity (or more accurately, inherited ways of eating) make my

choices for me! This documentary saved my life!

