THE RICE IS RIGHT

We envy Madonna, Nicole Kidman and Gwyneth Paltrow for their model-like figures, but it turns out their size-0 jeans aren’t the result of the Atkins diet craze. More and more celebrities—and ordinary people—are adopting a health-conscious macrobiotic lifestyle. BY REBECCA ROSNER

If you’ve heard of macrobiotics, chances are you thought it was too new age and restrictive. You might have passed by Philadelphia’s Essene Market and wondered why everyone was chewing his or her brown rice so many times or looking so, well, serene. And the macrobiotic concept of balance and yin and yang? You have enough trouble balancing your checkbook, let alone your breakfast.

“A lot of people hear ‘macrobiotics’ and think, ‘Oh yeah, that’s the brown rice stuff,’” says Victoria Emerson, former associate director at the Strengthening Health Institute in South Philadelphia. “But it’s so much more.”

Macrobiotics literally means “great life,” and that’s what those who practice macrobiotics believe anyone can achieve by following its basic principles and guidelines. And they say it’s truly a great life: free of stress, exhaustion and mental and physical disease. Macrobiotics is sought out by people suffering from debilitating conditions such as chronic fatigue syndrome, autoimmune disorders like fibromyalgia and life-threatening diseases including cancer, AIDS, diabetes and heart disease. For many of these people, not only does macrobiotics bring them back to health, it also gives them a sense of spiritual balance and happiness they never achieved before. All from a bowl of rice.

CHEW ON THIS

The modern macrobiotic movement that began in the 1960s was led by George Ohshawa, who felt that people have the capacity to change their lives and what they eat directly impacts their lives for better or for worse. In macrobiotics every food has a degree of yin (expansion) or yang (contraction), and eating food in the right balance of yin and yang will create harmony. Eating something with one extreme will make you crave the other. It’s why when you eat a Philly cheesesteak (meat is very yang), you have to have it with an Amoroso roll (white bread is very yin).

But macrobiotics advises avoiding this extreme yin and yang eating because it puts a great deal of stress on the digestive system and overall well-being. If your body is working too hard to process food, it can’t reap the nutrients and energy from that food.

HEALTH & BEAUTY (WELL-BEING)

eating practices (54.2 percent survival rate among macrobiotic patients compared to 10 percent in others). The study concluded: “A strict macrobiotic diet is more likely to be effective in the long-term management of cancer than are diets that provide a variety of other foods.”

Hope is what Christina Pirello needed when she was diagnosed with leukemia in 1983. Her doctor didn’t give her a good prognosis. A friend introduced her to macrobiotics, “I didn’t think macrobiotics would work, but I had nothing to lose,” she says. “And talk about shallow—I didn’t want to lose my hair.” Pirello recovered within 14 months after adopting a macrobiotic lifestyle. “Now everything in my life has changed,” she says.

Victoria Emerson of the Strengthening Health Institute also recovered from cancer with macrobiotics. “There’s been a recent upswing in people with diabetes, heart disease and cancer realizing that medicine is not the complete answer,” she says. Most macrobiotic teachers recommend continuing medical treatment and using macrobiotics to strengthen oneself during and after treatment. Emerson says that along with just beating the disease, there are a multitude of other health benefits. “Contrary to what Dr. Atkins believes, brown rice will give you sustained energy over a longer period of time, but protein burns energy very quickly. And the average person practicing macrobiotics loses 33 pounds over six months.”

Unlike the oh-so-popular South Beach and Atkins diets, macrobiotics focuses on whole grains—in fact, half of each meal should be a whole grain (and one meal a day should include brown rice). Vegetables make up about a third of the meal, and soups, sea vegetables, fruit, white fish, tea and desserts round out the diet. But those desserts aren’t Tastykakes; anything with sugar, white flour or artificial sweeteners should be avoided, as well as anything chemically refined or processed. Animal products such as meat, dairy and eggs are too constricive (too yang) and should be avoided also.

Particular attention is paid to how food is eaten: Food should be chewed at least 50 times, and meals should be eaten sitting down, undistracted by TV or reading and should last for at least 20 minutes. “There’s a misconception that macrobiotics is restrictive, but there’s actually more variety in this way of eating than any other way. The idea is to make your diet more varied,” Waxman says.

Waxman’s entire approach to macrobiotics makes it unrestrictive to newcomers. “By adding things to the diet and lifestyle, it’s about what to eat and not what to eat,” he says. “You add simple lifestyle practices and make healthier choices. In fact when people eat a grain and vegetable diet, they quickly lose their taste for animal and dairy.” Before long, the body actually craves macrobiotic food and the other food is naturally avoided.

Between the Strengthening Health Institute, the Christina Cooks show and a multitude of macrobiotic educational programs and cooking classes at Essene Market, Philadelphia has one of the largest macrobiotic communities in the world.

These other health and spiritual benefits are attracting people of all ages and degrees of wellness to macrobiotics. “Other than the group with minor to serious health problems, we have another group of participants in our programs, those who are generally healthy and looking for a new approach to diet and lifestyle. This group is growing more and more,” Waxman says. The Strengthening Health Institute’s programs include five-day intensives on basic macrobiotic principles and cooking and a yearlong comprehensive study that meets monthly. The programs attract people from all across the country and from Canada. “These programs really transform people,” Waxman says.

THE CITY OF BLUBBERLY LOVE

It seems odd that Philadelphia, home of cheesesteaks and recent titleholder of the fattest city in America, would be a hub for super-healthy macrobiotics. But between the Strengthening Health Institute, the Christina Cooks show and a multitude of macrobiotic educational programs and cooking classes at Essene Market, Philadelphia has one of the largest macrobiotic communities in the world.

According to Waxman, everything has a counterculture, so it’s only natural that macrobiotics would exist in Philadelphia alongside Pat’s and Geno’s. “The country was basically developed in Philadelphia,” he says. “It’s been a spawning ground for valuable ideas and movements.” And undying devotion to Philadelphia contributes to this idea breeding. “Philadelphia’s not like New York or Boston, which have more transitory populations. People stay for long periods of time,” Waxman says. Because the study of macrobiotics takes time and requires a supportive community, the fact that Philly residents tend to stick around may be one reason there are so many people who practice macrobiotics here.

Pirello thinks that this large macrobiotic community can be credited to the teachers and ideas that emanate from Philadelphia. The range of people who attend her lectures and cooking classes continues to amaze her. “I’m astonished at the wide demographic,” she says. “Philadelphia and macrobiotics go hand in hand.”