

A popular new weight-loss book,
The South Beach Diet,
says shedding pounds is
easy if you rely on a
simple ranking of foods.
Here's how to digest
the claims.

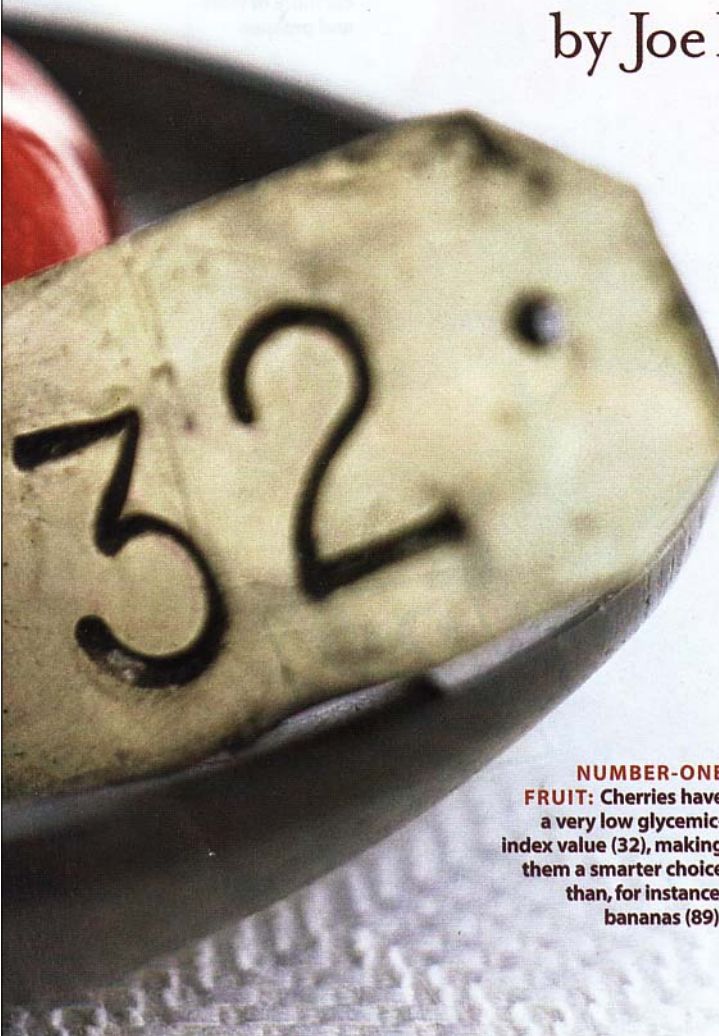
eat by the numbers?

by Joe Mullich

photography by Troy Forrest

Carol Berns searches for a word to describe her family health history and finally settles on “pathetic.” She rattles off a long list of relatives who died in their 30s and 40s from cardiovascular woes, including her father, maternal grandmother, and brother. That Berns has already reached the age of 52 gives her little comfort. When she sought counsel from a cardiologist last year, she received troubling news: Her cholesterol and triglyceride levels were way too high, and she had type 2 diabetes.

But Berns' life changed that day at her doctor's office, near her home in Miami. Knowing that she carried more than 200 pounds on her 5-foot-6-inch frame, the physician asked her to try a new diet he had developed. He said it would help her lose weight by eliminating the “bad” carbohydrates in her life (the kind found in French fries, soft drinks, and hard candy) while stifling her cravings for them. The plan was simple, too,



NUMBER-ONE FRUIT: Cherries have a very low glycemic-index value (32), making them a smarter choice than, for instance, bananas (89).

clearly delineating which foods were healthy or unhealthy.

At first, Berns was skeptical. "Like most fat people," she says, "I'd done all the diets." Atkins had not worked. Jenny Craig was too restrictive. Weight Watchers' point system was too much of a pain.

This plan, though, worked wonders. Berns lost 50 pounds and saw her cholesterol and triglycerides drop considerably. She felt like a new woman.

What was her doctor's secret? It turned out to be no secret at all, but a diet based largely on the glycemic index (GI), a rating system developed two decades ago by nutrition researchers in Canada. The index ranks foods

Berns swears by the South Beach diet, and it's fair to say that she's following a straightforward weight-loss plan. Still, you have to wonder, is the regimen worthwhile? There are hundreds of diet books, and most pack big disappointments alongside their bold promises. Is this one any better?

To answer that question, you first have to get to know the GI. And doing that is worthwhile, no matter what you think about today's hottest diet book.

The index classifies foods according to how much they elevate blood-glucose levels. A piece of white bread is the baseline, with an arbitrary value of 100. So oat-bran bread (GI value = 68) raises your

blood sugar less than a hamburger bun (87); neither can compare to a French baguette (136), which breaks down even more quickly than white bread.

Experts agree that staying away from foods with high GI numbers (such as cookies, chips, sodas, and sugary cereals) and eating abundant amounts of foods that are relatively low on the scale (like broccoli, cherries, and yogurt) can help you control your weight, prevent diabetes, and reduce your risks of heart disease, stroke, and cancer. But the medical establishment also criticizes many fad diets for relying on the index, because such plans generally ignore crucial complexities in the concept.

Getting to know the glycemic index is worthwhile, no matter what you think about today's hottest diets.

by how quickly they break down into sugar after you consume them. That process happens slowly to nutritious foods but lightning-fast to the bad stuff, or so the theory goes.

This idea has endured years of criticism in the medical community. But recently it's found new life, among doctors and beyond. A 2002 article in *The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* claims that the GI can indeed help people lose weight and even prevent disease. And down at your local bookstore, people are lining up to read about the index, thanks to Berns' doctor. He is Arthur Agatston, M.D., author of *The South Beach Diet*, which at press time was number one on *The New York Times'* list of hardcover advice best sellers.

VEGGIE VICTORY: Tomatoes, like most vegetables, rank low on the GI scale. Eat more of them and prosper.

