



## Healthy, oldest and wisest

A long and healthy life does not just depend on your genes, but also on good habits. Indeed, the US National Institute on Aging has sent a group of demographic researchers to places where people live significantly longer than the rest of us and where the ratio of female to male centenarians is one to one (unlike the situation in the US, where it's four to one—and testosterone is erroneously fingered as the culprit).

There are two places on earth that share the distinction of being home to the world's longest living humans. And making a study of some of their distinctive aspects has been very instructive.

### Sardinian survivors

In Silanus, a village of 2400 people located in central Sardinia, 91 people who were born in the two decades before 1900 have now lived to be a 100 and beyond. This figure represents something like 3 per cent of the population, an extraordinarily high proportion.

Apart from the fact that none of these centenarians has ever smoked, what does their lifestyle consist of?

- ◆ First of all, both the husband and wife share the burden of work in equal parts, and both always stay active.
- ◆ Second, they drink locally grown sulphite-free red wine (but in moderation), which has been shown to contain two to three times the usual quantity of plant polyphenols and other special antioxidant molecules that (in red French wines) are credited with life-prolonging effects.
- ◆ Third, both the husband and wife live in close and constant contact with their respective extended families, involving the youngsters in all of the daily work, and enjoying the Sunday meal together around a long table that can seat some 20 to 30 family members.
- ◆ Fourth, they all share a strong sense of community spirit, and there is a widespread tradition of hand-crafts that has remained untouched by outside influences. The oldest members of the family are respected and considered spiritual leaders, which gives them a great sense of purpose.

What about their diet? They have access to plenty of locally—and, of course, organically—grown fruit and vegetables such as aubergines (eggplant), baby marrow (courgettes or zucchini), tomatoes and fava beans (*Vicia faba*). These are foods that may help to keep the risk of heart disease and bowel cancer low.

They eat relatively small amounts of pork, mutton, fish and poultry. They also drink the milk from their non-pesticide-laden grassfed sheep and eat pecorino cheese (made from sheep's milk), which provides them with protein and omega-3 fatty acids.

They eat a type of flatbread that is almost see-through thin—like a poppadom without the little bubbles—called *carta da musica*, because it is as thin as sheet

music. The local greeting, *a kent'amos*, providently calls for 'health and life for 100 years'. It is also the standard local toast—no truer word. . .

### Long life in Japan

On the other side of the world, in the seaside village of Ogimi, on the Japanese island of Okinawa—where rain falls for 180 days a year—are to be found what appear to be the world's longest-lived people. What's more, the elders here live out their final several decades completely free from the usual age-related disabilities.

To what do these Okinawans ascribe their longevity? They say, "Ikigai helps us!" The word *Ikigai* translates as "that which makes one's life worth living". They maintain their friendships and their social activities. They have what they term a *moai*, a group of friends, neighbours and others who all get together about twice a week to provide reciprocal support—be it social, emotional and, when needed, financial—throughout life.

These people are also all imbued with a strong sense of purpose. This strong feeling of having a direction, together with their *moai*, may well act as a buffer against stress and diseases such as hypertension.

The villagers all remain constantly active throughout their entire lives. They consume a lean diet: a plate of home-grown vegetables, tofu, miso soup, and a little fish or meat—this provides fewer calories (or kilojoules) than a standard Western hot dog. They live by the Confucius-inspired adage: '*hara hachi bu*'—which translates as 'eat until your stomach is four-fifths full'. They grow almost all their own food. This way, despite all that rain, they all have regular exposure to sunlight—an important source of vitamin D, which helps to prevent osteoporosis.

Greg Plotnikoff, a traditional-medicine researcher at the University of Minnesota, calls the vegetable gardens kept by these centenarians "cabinets of preventive medicine". These gardens include herbs, spices, fruits, and vegetables such as Chinese radishes, special mushrooms, garlic, scallions, cabbage, turmeric, onions and tomatoes. He adds, "Each meal contains compounds that may block cancers before they start". Here, too, the oldest are respected and considered spiritual leaders.

Researchers from the US National Institute of Aging, who fanned out to various parts of the world to interview centenarians (not just those in Sardinia and Okinawa), all reported the most astonishing single characteristic common to every population they looked at: there wasn't a single grump among them anywhere (for the full report, see *National Geographic*, November 2005, pages 2–26).

Here, if ever there was, is the 'best practice' to emulate.

**Harald Gaier**

*Harald Gaier, a registered naturopath, osteopath, homoeopath and herbalist, practices at The Health Equation, 11 Harley Street, London W1G 9PF (tel: 020 7612 9800/07917 662 042) and The Irish Centre of Integrated Medicine, Co. Kildare [tel: 00353 (0) 4588 3224]. Also see [www.drGaier.com](http://www.drGaier.com)*