

# Beginning My Whole-Food, Plant-Based Journey

From the forthcoming memoir, *A Sustainable Life*

by Deb & Jason DeSalvo

In the fall of 2019, my wife Deb and I purchased an old farm property in Oldwick, New Jersey, and over the following two years transformed it into a sustainable homestead where we farm organic cereal grains, fruits, berries, and vegetables (chronicled in the Summer 2023 issue of *Health Science*). As lifelong foodies, one of the first things we did after purchasing our property was to search out the finest local, organic farms so that we'd have great food to eat while we lived in a rental and built our farmhouse. Little did we know that finding The Doctor's Farm Market at Ethos Farm in Long Valley, NJ, would completely change our lives.

In early 2022, I was 54 years old when, at my annual physical, I learned that my cholesterol had clocked in at a new lifetime high of 235. I'd been seeing the same primary care physician for over a decade, and despite being a competitive cyclist and marathoner who ate a Mediterranean diet and outwardly looked physically fit, we'd watched my cholesterol steadily climb to a level that could no longer be ignored. My doctor and I chalked it up to "bad genes," but the fact that both my grandfathers had had serious heart disease (with my paternal grandfather dying of a massive heart attack at 78 years old) left me uneasy and scared for my future.

My doctor suggested that I start on a statin, but I balked. The thought of being on a statin for the rest of my life ran completely counter to the natural, healthy lifestyle I wanted for myself. Still, even my father (who is a physician) thought I should try a low-dose statin, so I left her office with a prescription for Lipitor, feeling utterly defeated.

Throughout the remainder of the first half of 2022, I was in denial about the need to take decisive action to change my health trajectory. For several years I'd also been suffering with what I assumed were early

symptoms of arthritis in my hands, knees, and shoulders that I chalked up to the normal aging process. A mere annoyance before we moved to our farm, they had grown more obvious and debilitating now that Deb and I regularly engaged in long hours of physical labor. Between the aches and pains in my joints and my family history of heart disease, what would farming be like at 65? Would I even be able to do it?

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These concerns weighed heavily on me one Saturday morning in 2022 as I drove up the picturesque, winding gravel driveway to do our weekly shop for vegetables at Ethos Farm. Deb and I have visited farmer's markets all over the world and have never come across finer vegetables than those grown at Ethos. The excellence of their regenerative, organic farming practices could be tasted in every delicious bite of food they grew—kale, lettuce, radishes, green beans, kohlrabi, collards, fennel, onions, scallions, you name it! Today, however, was all about tomatoes. It was late July in New Jersey and that meant some of the best tomatoes on the planet were both ripe and abundant.



On my way to the cash register and struggling with my usual haul of fresh veggies plus two large boxes of tomatoes, Nora Pugliese (Ethos Farm's manager extraordinaire) and another regular patron, Iris Kadosh, came over to help me carry everything. By now Deb and I had been shopping there long enough that Nora and Iris knew we loved nothing more than composing our meals around whatever was fresh and abundant at market.

"What deliciousness is in the DeSalvo family's future?" Nora asked.

"Pasta sauce. And lots of it! My grandmother's recipe."

"Make sure you don't use any oil!" Iris chimed in.

I had frequently heard things like this spoken by patrons at The Doctor's Farm Market. "Don't use oil when you cook; eat whole, plant-based foods; avoid animal proteins; use only whole-grain flours for baking," and so on. When Deb and I shopped together and were safely out of earshot, we would often chuckle about how kooky some of the customers sounded when talking about food.

But on this day, rather than just smiling and casting Iris's comment aside, I asked, "What's wrong with cooking with great olive oil?"

"Because it's unhealthy," Iris said, smiling with a caring tone in her voice. "Look it up online."

"Sure thing, Iris. As soon as I get home and finish turning these tomatoes into a glorious pasta sauce with lots of garlic, fresh herbs, and olive oil," I shot back sarcastically.

On the way to my car, I noticed Dr. Ron Weiss (profiled in the Fall 2019 issue of *Health Science*) planting flowers outside his medical office that is also located on Ethos Farm. We'd known each other as fellow local farmers for several years, and he looked up from his work, smiled, and asked me how I was doing. Call it fate, divine intervention,

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"Ron, would you be comfortable being my doctor even though we are friends?" I asked.

"Would you be comfortable listening to me as your doctor?" Dr. Weiss replied with a broad grin.

"As long as you are comfortable with the fact that I will *never* give up eating olive oil or drinking wine!" I stated emphatically, making it clear that changing my eating habits would have limits.

"Of course, Jason. I will simply show you the science, and you'll decide where to go from there."

I placed the produce in my car, walked up the pathway to Dr. Weiss' office, introduced myself, and announced that I was a new patient. The staff emailed me an extensive set of digital forms about my health history and goals later that day, and before my pasta sauce was done that evening, I had become Ethos Primary Care's newest patient. My whole-food, plant-based journey had begun.

A week later at my initial consult, Dr. Weiss spent over an hour with me reviewing everything in my medical history in minute detail, asking thoughtful questions about what I ate, how I felt, and what concerns I had about my health. This was a completely different experience than my last several 10-minute annual "well visits," for sure!

Dr. Weiss ordered a comprehensive battery of blood tests and told me that we'd meet again in mid-August. He assigned numerous learning experiences for me about the importance of nutrition in human health including books, movies, and videos, and he suggested that I investigate the National Health Association (several copies of past issues of *Health Science* were available in the patient waiting room).

As soon as I got home, I ordered *How Not to Die* and *The Pleasure Trap* and read them cover-to-cover within days of their arrival. I also immediately joined the NHA and dove into the wealth of educational material on their website.

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health and longevity and that animal proteins had long been implicated in an astounding variety of chronic diseases, including heart disease and inflammatory processes?

Setting aside my anger, I soon realized the power this new knowledge gave me. Those "bad genes" that I long thought destined me to struggle with heart disease and a never-ending series of prescriptions did *not* need to become my reality! I had the ability to change my diet and prevent both heart disease and the aches and pains that I had associated with normal signs of aging. This created an incredible, new, positive energy in me.

Within a week after my first appointment with Dr. Weiss, I stopped eating all animal proteins and eliminated added salt, oil, and sugar from my diet. Within four days after that, I was no longer waking up in the morning with aches and pains in my joints. A week later, I found myself with nearly boundless energy, and by my second appointment with Dr. Weiss in mid-August, I had lost over eight pounds!

At this appointment we reviewed my lab results and learned that in addition to high cholesterol I had several other significant markers for heart disease, several markers for inflammatory-based diseases, and a visceral fat level of 11 that Dr. Weiss hoped I would be able to lower to 4 over time. Most importantly, however, I learned that the conditions these blood markers previously made seem inevitable were, in fact, completely reversible! A detailed care plan that included more reading and changes to my diet, exercise, and sleep regimens was provided, and I was off to the races.

## DEB'S PERSPECTIVE

I remember the moment with such clarity. Jason called me into his study, looked directly at me, and then looked away. I could see he was struggling to say something in a delicate way. He turned to me again and hesitantly said, "I think I am going to start seeing Dr. Weiss." He knew I understood what this meant and that his decision would impact us both. Although I had seen it coming, I was taken aback when he made this announcement, and a torrent of thoughts and feelings came rushing over me. The first one was absolute dread.

I didn't want to make any changes to the way I ate. I had always thought of myself as a relatively healthy person. I loved fresh produce and incorporated fruits and vegetables into all my meals. Yet, I loved butter. And eggs. And I loved to bake cookies, scones, pies, and cakes. Since my 30s, I had exercised and eaten relatively healthily; yet now I was in my late 50s, and I had put on some extra pounds and my cholesterol was around 260. I was in denial. I thought I had plenty of time to bring my cholesterol to a healthier level and lose the extra fat on my body. I liked the way I lived my life, and I *loved* the way I ate.

I was angry at Jason for making this change, as I felt that he was forcing my hand. In the next couple of weeks, however, my perspective changed. I decided he was being bold and brave and that if I didn't like what this new regimen was like, I could create one that worked for me. So, I started seeing Dr. Weiss, too. I started to shed the pounds. I had more energy. I felt clean. And eventually, my cholesterol got to a healthy level of 177. I lost 40 pounds, and I started running again. Now, though I miss baking in a traditional way using butter and eggs, I am learning to bake things within the WFPB, SOS-free parameters. Best of all, it makes me happy to know that Jason and I have given our kids and ourselves the greatest gift: our health and longevity. And I haven't looked back.