



Rethink Your Plate: Go Veg-Centric

by Golda Ewalt, MS, RD, CCC

How can I modify brownies to make them lower in calories? How can I make muffins lower in fat? How can I prepare a healthier salad dressing? As a chef and registered dietitian, these are typical questions I am asked about recipe modification. Modifying recipes is important, but why not concentrate more on how to build a healthy plate, one that is veg-centric?

Many people focus on foods they feel they need to avoid for one reason or another. Consider changing this negative mindset to a positive one by planning meals around

vegetables and fruits. Protein is so often the largest part of our plates. Shrink that animal portion and increase the vegetable serving size to make your plate veg-centric. Eating veg-centric modifies the nutrition content on your plate, adding vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients, and fiber while cutting calories.

Often people think they don't like a certain vegetable, even if they haven't tried it or eaten the item since childhood. Our food likes, dislikes, and preferences are influenced by different things and often are shaped when we are chil-



HOW TO BUILD A HEALTHIER PLATE



dren. It is important to remember that our tastes change over time, and we should continue to try foods that we don't think we like or haven't eaten before. It may also be that the vegetable was processed or prepared in a way you didn't like. For example, canned beets taste different than roasted beets. Roasting beets brings out their sweetness and earthy flavor profile, which is a different flavor than comes through when canned. I grew up in a family that always had a garden and was exposed to fresh, in-season produce as a very young child.

One early memory is helping my grandfather pick vegetables out of his garden in northeast Missouri. We would pull turnips together, and I loved their purplish, deep lavender color. I always wanted to eat one right after pulling it, so using his pocketknife, my grandfather would cut back the outer skin, leaving the green stems intact. He would hand me the peeled turnip. I would hold it by the stem, like a popsicle, and eat it right in the garden. He also had a large watermelon patch, separate from the rest of the garden. It was located in an area of the farm where the soil was sandy, the type of soil preferred by melons. I would beg him to visit the watermelon patch when our family visited in the summer. He would let me pick a melon. I can remember the fruit's sweetness, still warm from the sun, and the pink juice dripping down my arms. These

TASTE REIGNS SUPREME

when it comes to people's food preferences. Minimal preparation is needed when produce is fresh and harvested at the peak of the season.

early childhood memories of gardening with my grandfather influenced me in many ways, especially my liking for fruits and vegetables. Later in life, I became a dietitian and learned about the connection between diet and health, especially the connection related to a diet rich in fruits and vegetables. Plant foods are rich in phytonutrients.

"Phytonutrients are the protective compounds found in plants that help us ward off chronic illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes," says Maria Alamo, MPH, RD, president of Salud Consulting, Inc., Evanston, Ill. She further explains the benefits of phytonutrients. "The plant makes these substances to protect itself against danger and, in turn, protect us when we consume them. Frequently concentrated in their skins, they are responsible for their color, hue, scent, and flavor. Eating a plate full of various colorful plant foods ensures we obtain these anti-aging, immune system-boosting and disease-preventing nutrients. Eating one cup of each of these five color categories: red,

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yellow/orange, purple/blue, green, and white is ideal for a daily dose of these phytonutrients so vital for optimal health. In fact, experts recommend more like nine servings of fruits and vegetables a day. Build your plate with color in mind.”

The National Restaurant Association (NRA) recently released the top food trends for 2016. The American Culinary Federation surveyed more than 1,600 professional chefs who identified the top food trends in 2016.

Here are the top 10 food trends forecast for the coming year:

1. Locally sourced meats and seafood
2. Chef-driven fast-casual concepts
3. Locally grown produce
4. Hyper-local sourcing
5. Natural ingredients/minimally processed food
6. Environmental sustainability
7. Healthful kids' meals
8. New cuts of meat
9. Sustainable seafood
10. House-made/artisan ice cream



Chefs across the country see the importance of locally grown produce, as it has been a top trend on the NRA list for many years. Erin Meyer, RD and Executive Director of Spence Farm Foundation, Fairbury, Ill., understands the impact of supporting the local food movement. She states, “Supporting your local farmer impacts the social, environmental, and economic future of your community. From reducing the use of fossil fuels, working with

community members, building stronger local economies, enhancing the local food system, and enjoying fresh and healthy food is entirely about supporting your future and those around you.”

Another trend is hyper-local sourcing, which refers to growing your own produce. This might be something for you to consider in your establishment. Growing your own produce can bring a real sense of pleasure to those caring for the plants and create positive feedback when featured on the menu as a healthy and fresh option. You can start small with a few tomato plants or herbs, such as chives or dill. Many types of vegetables grow successfully in pots if your space is limited. Your staff or residents can help in caring for the plants and you might be amazed at the positive response you get when you start talking about a garden project. Caring for plants, seeing them grow and thrive, working in the fresh air and sunlight can all have positive effects on a person’s sense of well-being. The produce that’s grown on-site can be featured as part of a menu special. You can highlight the nutrition facts of the produce and describe the history of the plant as part of the menu special.

Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital in Michigan is a notable healthcare leader for hyper-local sourcing produce. They have integrated a greenhouse and a farmer on their campus, using the garden’s bounty to help feed their patients and their staff and guests in the cafeteria.

Why does seasonal, locally grown produce taste so good? Anne Patterson, RD and owner of Living Earth Farm, Farmington, Ill., explains, “As a farmer and a registered dietitian, one of my primary goals is producing fruits, vegetables, and herbs with the best flavor. I need an ‘Oh my gosh, this is the best stuff I’ve ever tasted’ moment, every time. The health of my soil is a key element to great flavor. The more living organisms I have in my soil, the more they work to break down the organic matter and convert it into useable nutrients. Strong plants with lots of phytonutrients are needed in order to defend against harsh growing conditions and pests. Increased flavor is believed to be strongly tied to the increased antioxidant content of organic produce.”

As a chef and RD, my focus is finding delicious ways to enjoy nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables. Taste reigns

supreme when it comes to people's food preferences. Minimal preparation is needed when produce is fresh and harvested at the peak of the season. Gain recipe inspiration by visiting local farmer's markets and reading cookbooks. To expand your repertoire of vegetable cookery, cookbook recommendations are provided here to inspire your veg-centric plate. Here are a few of my favorites featuring plenty of vegetable-based recipes:

- The New Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone (2013) and Vegetable Literacy (2013) by Deborah Madison
- Prune (2014) by Gabrielle Hamilton
- Ottolenghi: The Cookbook (2013) by Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi

Eating locally grown food when you can has a positive impact on our health and the environment. Explore what you can do in your work setting to continue the journey to serve healthy meals and become more veg-centric. **E**



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Review Questions

CULINARY CONNECTION

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- Phytonutrients are:
 - Protective compounds found in plants that help us ward off chronic illnesses
 - Found in animal proteins
 - Always antioxidants
- Eating a plate full of a variety of colorful plant foods ensures:
 - We will decrease weight
 - We will reverse diabetes
 - We obtain these anti-aging, immune system-boosting and disease-preventing nutrients
- Our taste and food preferences:
 - Don't change over time
 - Do change over time
 - Are separate from our childhood experiences
- One of the top 10 food trends stated by the NRA is:
 - Edible insects
 - Healthier processed foods
 - Locally grown produce
- What is the term for growing your own produce?
 - Rain gardening
 - Hyper-local sourcing
 - Facility sourcing
- Increased flavor in fruits and vegetables is believed to be strongly tied to the increased:
 - Water content
 - Amount of fiber in the produce
 - Antioxidant content of organic produce
- What is *not* a benefit of supporting local farmers?
 - Weaker local economy
 - Reduction in the use of fossil fuels
 - Enjoying fresh and healthy food

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