



FOOD WITH PURPOSE

Roxbury, MA

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But I Don't Like Veggies...

by Didi Emmons



The teenagers in my class are laughing and bouncing off the kitchen walls, and one of them, Gina, is singing (“Should Have Let You Go”) full throttle into a rubber spatula, thrusting herself onto her buddy Giselle. I’m thinking she really could pursue a future as the next MTV star, but I force myself to move on as we have a lot of ground to cover. “Hello everyone. Today we are making a pizza with our own organic dough, tomato sauce, fresh mozzarella, red peppers, sweet potatoes and caramelized onions.” I get no reaction.

“Okay, from 1 to 10, how psyched are you about today’s recipe?” Two give me a 10 and then four teens in a row give me a one. Then it’s Giselle’s turn. Looking as if I’ve just punished her, she grumbles “Zero. That pizza is nasty.” I interject, “Giselle do you remember what we say instead of nasty?” She says carefully, “I don’t care for vegetables, thank you” then follows it with “they make me throw up every time.”

I often feel like a killjoy populating their beloved foods with vegetables. But there is a reason for my antics and although the classes may illicit fear and loathing, there is a lot to learn. Our mission: To learn the difference between good food and junk food, the impact junk food has on our body, and most importantly, how to cook.

Soon, knives flail, the onions are sliced, sweet potatoes cubed, peppers cut. The students are bright, inquisitive, engaged and intent on getting the job done right.

We started cooking classes just after opening the Haley House Café, a nonprofit café that serves healthy affordable food to the Dudley Square neighborhood in Roxbury, three years ago. Boston Police officer Bill Baxter (aka Donut) teaches gang resistance in the public schools and came up with the idea to bring his students to the café for cooking classes. As a child, he had taken cooking classes. As an adult he became conscious that the way we prejudge foods (such as “I plain hate onions”) is the same mental mechanism that we use to prejudge people and groups. Such prejudice is based on fear and is often mistaken while cutting us off from enjoyment, growth and connection. Officer Baxter sees the kitchen as a laboratory. He constantly informs the youth during class “always be willing to take in new information.” “If you hate onions on burgers, you might like them in soup, so check it out.”

The whole-wheat pizza dough is ready and laid out on a big sheet pan. It was made earlier by the Haley House Café training program. I invite the students to touch and get familiar with the way fresh dough feels. Darrius, 14, squeezes the edge of the dough and asks with excitement, “can you chew this like gum?”

Later in the class, we pull the onions out and they’re overdone. Well, blackened actually. Personally, I like them this

way. But I know the students will have a different opinion. So I explain how this happened. “The sugars in the onion come out when exposed to heat and then the onion caramelizes and starts to taste sweet. These onions here are extremely caramelized so that, well, lets just say we just invented onion candy” and I pop a few in my mouth. The teens start putting their hands out so I can drop a piece in their palms, one after another until all I can see is a sea of palms.

To Officer Baxter, our funders and the parents in the community – this victory is no small matter. Getting kids to enjoy, let alone eat vegetables has always been tough, but, these days, it is tougher than ever. If our country grew all the vegetables we needed for a healthy diet, the farmland would need to double. Instead, the United States is losing 120 acres of farmland every hour.

“Nobody can ignore the fact that there’s been an explosion of obesity, which really comes from an increase in carbohydrate intake,” says Dr. Walter Willett chair of Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. An increase of about 500 calories a day occurred in our country in the last quarter century (until then it was relatively stable), primarily due to increases in dietary carbohydrates.

No one suffers worse from obesity and it’s related health problems than those on low incomes. In *The Cost of a Healthy Diet*, a report from the Boston Medical Center, they explain: “To prevent family members from feeling hungry, low income households purchase a limited variety of cheap, energy (calorie) dense foods and poor in nutritional quality. At the same time, food insecure households reduce their consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy, fish and vegetable protein.” In other words, calories are high and nutrients are sparse. Nutrient deficiencies impair the body’s ability to fight off infections, and, in children, have been linked with deficits in cognitive development, behavioral and emotional problems.

To no surprise, the poorest neighborhoods in Boston have the highest rate of overweight/obesity. 70 percent of Mattapan residents are obese or overweight compared with 34 percent of residents in the Back Bay. Diabetes is equally vexing. It is predicted that one in two African American and Hispanic children born today will develop Type 2 diabetes in their lifetime, and White Americans one in three. Diabetes shortens life spans an average of twelve years. Alice Waters comments: “It’s shocking that because of the rise in Type 2 diabetes experts say that the children we’re raising now will probably die younger than their parents — the result of a disease that is largely preventable by diet and exercise.”

“Lower education levels, lack of health insurance, inade-

quate healthcare, and lack of safe places to exercise all contribute to this disparity. There is also a direct biochemical connection between (living in) poverty and the stress people are under and their blood sugar control. When stress hormones are high, they continue the production of glucose,” says Dr. Donald Warne, in *Unnatural Causes*, a recently released documentary on health disparities.

By teaching youth to cook with vegetables we are empowering them to make better choices about what and how much to eat.

In the last few months at Haley House, we set out to discover what specifically the youth were eating. So we distributed disposable cameras to all of our classes and asked each teen to shoot what they ate until their film ran out. Out of 340 food photographs we received, only seven photos had vegetables that could constitute a single serving. Three photos were of shredded iceberg lettuce and tomato salads, while nearly void of nutrients, at least have fiber.

A lot is stacked against a teenager getting a good dose of daily vegetables. Here are some of the roadblocks:

1) Big business has taken over our food production: 90 percent of the calories we consume in this country are from processed food. Walter Willet comments: “What the food industry is doing is reshaping refined starches, sugar and partially hydrogenated fats and repackaging those three ingredients in different ways, because they’re cheap and provide huge profit margins. Unfortunately, they have really negative effects on human health.”

And big business tries to convince us that they are providing us with solutions to health. Along Malcom X Boulevard in Roxbury there is a large ad that pictures a cold glass of Nestea Iced Tea and the sun’s rays glowing behind it. In big letters it states: Water + Lemon + Tea Antioxidants = Superhero. Unfortunately, all the calories come from high fructose corn syrup. Michael Pollan writes in his new book *In Defense of Food*: “A health claim on a food product is an indication that it’s not really food.”

2) Carb Cravings: Refined carbs lure us because they are a quick energy source—causing a sudden and sharp increase in blood sugar. If this blood sugar is not used by the body, it is stored as fat. “High glycemic foods (refined carbs) push the body to refuel,” says nutrition scientist Marlene Most from Pennington BioMedical Research Center. “In low glycemic foods (such as brown rice or vegetables), there is a constant flow of glucose and insulin, so we don’t need to refuel as much.”

3) Eating Outside the Home: The teens we teach consume most of their calories outside the home at fast-food outlets, school, vending machines, take-out shops and convenience

stores. Many parents act as good role models for their teen children and worry about their diets, and many teens worry about their own diet—it is just that teens are busy and eat wherever they can.

4) Time: Most of the teens we teach come from homes with single working moms or where both parents are working. Based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, researchers think that the seven-hour-per-week increase in average work hours that occurred between the mid 1970s and the mid 1990s may explain between 12 to 35 percent of the increased incidence of childhood obesity.

5) Education: The big problem today is many youth (and adults) aren’t sure what a healthy diet looks like. Hugh Joseph, assistant professor at Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, suggests we take a significant chunk of food stamp dollars and put it into nutrition education for schools.



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6) Access: Many families in low-income neighborhoods lack cars or reliable mass transit which means lugging groceries (vegetables are heavy due to high water content). In addition, there are fewer supermarkets in low-income areas (the ones that are there are often stocked with wilted vegetables). Therefore, many families are forced to do their grocery shopping in convenience stores.

7) Cost Factor: For people on a budget, energy (calorie) dense foods are more economical. A ten-ounce bag of spinach may cost \$1.79, but there are a lot more calories in a \$1.19 box of mac and cheese.

8) Lack of Exposure: The less exposure a person has to a certain food, the less likely they will enjoy it. People say it takes 11 tries before a child learns to like a food.

9) Quality and Nutrients: It is not only the quantity of vegetables but also the quality that poses a problem. Many youth, because of reasons stated above, don't get really fresh produce on a regular basis. Canned and frozen vegetables don't taste as good and are usually not as healthy. Polyphenals that exist in fresh vegetables play a large role in keeping us healthy. It is the freshness of the vegetable as well as the quality of the soil that dictates how much polyphenal any given vegetable has.

10) Lack of Cooking Knowledge: Traditionally, recipes are passed down between generations. Because moms are too often busy working, they are not in the kitchen cooking, thus the passing down of oral traditions has been interrupted.

In terms of combating obesity and diabetes, eating more vegetables isn't the whole answer. In the documentary *Un-natural Causes*, Dr. Toni Iton comments, "Those countries where wealth is more equitably distributed are healthier. Other countries have found ways to break the tight linkage between health and wealth. They invest in better education systems, housing support, childcare, healthcare and better access to recreation."

A half hour later, while the rest of the girls are setting the table, Giselle, who was lamenting about the vegetable pizza one hour ago, watches me closely like a hawk as I pull the pizza from the oven. I'm guessing she's watching so she can choose the slice of pizza with the fewest vegetables. But she asks me how to know when a pizza is done (the underside of dough becomes golden) and I let her cut the pizza into squares, a job that takes considerable strength but she handles it with confidence.

At the next class she is impatient to start chopping and raises her hand first for every task. By the sixth class, I overhear Giselle boast to Gina that she plans to go to culinary school. Best of all, she has been eating (and keeping down)

a portion of vegetables in each class.

For me it is a constant learning process. Fulani Haynes, a jazz vocalist and our most popular guest chef, and I tour the nearby Tropical supermarket before we take the kids the following day. I mention to her that dried beans are awesome, at a fraction the price of canned beans. Fulani says, "Yes, but many mothers like to use canned beans." In a moment of frustration I blurt out "who cares what their mothers think, I'm a Trained chef!!" Fulani waves her finger, "Girl, that attitude is not going to win any votes, better to remind them that you too once did not know— you could say: 'I was completely in the dark that dried beans were so economical until one day a friend pointed out to me the huge price difference.'"

Despite the flack I get about vegetables, the youth generally love the food. Obviously, our edge is that they made it, and they are proud of it, and there are no mysteries. The youth are usually the ones to give ideas of what to make next. We talk about the foods they love and then I "healthify" them. ♦

Didi Emmons is the chef of the Haley House Youth Cooking Program in Dudley Square, Roxbury. In addition to teaching, she is currently writing her third cookbook. Didi also caters parties, bringing her creativity and knowledge into people's homes. She can be reached at didi@haleyhouse.org.

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