Parent Care: Kitchen fun is recipe for a healthy diet

by Marsha_Kay_Seff

Living alone is no excuse for ignoring healthy and appetizing dining. And it's not necessary to rent a boat to catch a fish in order to eat well, according to kitchen guru Marilyn Biggica.

Marilyn, who has taught food and nutrition for San Diego Community College District Continuing Education for 23 years, encourages her older students to continue cooking as long as possible.

Don't fall into the fast-food trap, she cautions. Some restaurants offer a senior discount on coffee, she points out, hoping older customers will end up buying a less-than-healthy burger or fried-fish sandwich.

It's OK, Marilyn says, to dine out occasionally. But look for healthy restaurants, ones that offer a senior menu and ones that will make accommodations for different dietary requirements, such as low-fat foods.

I asked her if it was a good idea for children to cook in bulk for their parent. But Marilyn believes it's better to spend the time cooking with Mom or Dad. It's a great excuse to spend quality time with them.

"Don't be intimidated by recipes," she advises older people. "Don't panic; improvise. Some of my best recipes have been from making mistakes."

If a recipe calls for one teaspoon of basil, and you don't have any, use oregano. If the recipe calls for a spice you don't like, leave it out.

"Recipes are not in stone." Be flexible.

As for grocery shopping, it's important to read labels. Take a magnifying glass with you.

Instead of buying more expensive single portions, she suggests buying enough for six to eight servings. You can take care of several meals at a time, instead of cooking and washing seven days a week.

And don't turn up your nose at leftovers, she says, pointing out that the taste usually is better because the

spices have soaked in.

To add variety to bulk cooking, Marilyn suggests adding new ingredients each night.

"Cooking is an opportunity to be creative."

Though protein is important to everyone's diet, Marilyn says, meat and fish can be expensive, and older folks tend to skimp on them. There are, however, relatively inexpensive proteins.

Marilyn suggests mixing legumes, such as red beans or lentils, with a grain, such as rice or pasta, for complete proteins. These types of proteins are nutritious without the saturated fat of red meat.

Speaking of fat, Marilyn, who admits she once was considerably overweight, has learned that moderation and balance are the keys to eating well and staying trim and healthy.

She teaches her students that it's OK to go to a party and eat what they normally stay away from. She says eat then exercise and increase your fruit and protein the following day.

Having healthy snacks readily available also keeps you from grabbing high-calorie or junk foods. She suggests keeping prepped vegetables, leftover salad and reduced-fat cheese in the fridge. Heat leftover oatmeal or rice with Parmesan. Garbanzo beans, dried fruit and rice crackers also are good snack choices.

Eating is a social activity. Invite a friend for lunch or even tea or coffee.

In addition to cooking, many older people enjoy lunch at a senior center. Cost is relatively low, and it's nice to have company. If you don't drive, consider buying a bus pass. Some centers offer transportation.

"Food is a way of expressing love. If you love yourself, you will take care of your body."

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