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shares her tricks for re-awakening taste buds*

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Finding Comfort, Joy, and Healing in Food

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*“At a moment in life when nothing
may feel in control, taking the time to
create a simple delicious dish
can be a lifeline, a reaffirmation
of your humanity.”*

Rebecca Katz, “One Bite at a Time”

Preparing and enjoying a delicious meal can be one of life’s greatest pleasures—a source of comfort, joy, and healing for both body and soul. Yet if you are someone battling cancer, that can be challenging. Cancer and cancer treatments—radiation, chemotherapy, and some medications—can wreak havoc on taste buds and create taste changes that make food unappetizing. Fatigue and other side effects may leave you too tired to shop or to cook, and that creates yet another roadblock to eating well. Luckily, even in the midst of cancer, there are simple ways to overcome some of these obstacles and enjoy delicious, nutritious meals.

“You have to make food your ally as you march through treatment,” says Rebecca Katz, the author of “One Bite at a Time” (Celestial Arts), a pioneering cookbook and nutritional guide for cancer patients and caregivers that is now in its fourth printing. Food isn’t a cure or a replacement for treatment, but it can help you enormously, not only by providing you with the physical strength you need but a psychological boost—the power of “yum” as she calls it.

Katz is senior chef at the Commonweal Cancer Help Program in Bolinas, Calif., one of the nation’s most highly

respected cancer wellness centers. Praised by oncologists and cancer wellness professionals for her fresh, yet scientifically informed, approach to health supportive cuisine, Katz has developed ways of using simple ingredients, such as olive oil and maple syrup, to season dishes and overcome, or compensate for, taste changes that cancer patients sometimes experience and that can sour them on eating.

She has worked with many cancer patients who were on restricted diets who had little interest in eating until she served them a delicious bowl of soup, for example. “You have to grab people by their taste buds,” she says with a smile.

Katz wrote “One Bite at a Time” in part because when her father was diagnosed with throat cancer in 1999 she could find few resources to guide her in cooking for him. She was a chef at one of Northern California’s finest organic restaurants at the time and had not yet started working with cancer patients. She needed to find meals that her father, who was in the food business and loves good food, could easily swallow and, just as importantly, enjoy. The few resources she could find took a utilitarian approach that seemed to ignore the importance of flavor and the complexities of taste.

“Most people feel totally overwhelmed at first,” Katz says. “Food becomes a very emotional issue.” Katz, who refers to herself as a culinary translator, shows people how to creatively translate what their doctor or dietitian has told them they can eat into delicious meals they can enjoy. One of her goals in writing “One Bite at a Time,” she says, was to give people recipes built around ingredients that would not only bolster the immune system but work well with healthy substitutions.

Putting “FASS” To Work for You

Eating is a sensory experience, an intricate interplay of smell, taste, and sight. Taste buds, the tiny sensory organs on the surface of the tongue, allow us to perceive the flavors in the food we eat and the liquids we drink. However, cancer and cancer treatments can knock your taste buds for a loop, making food just not taste right. For example, chemotherapy, radiation, and some medications may cause an increased sensitivity to sour or bitter tastes, or create a metallic taste; food may taste bland or taste like cardboard. These taste changes may be temporary or permanent.

“If your sense of taste is off you can lose your connection to food and become less interested in eating,” Katz says. To overcome this, Katz has developed a simple tool that she calls “FASS” (“Fat,” “Acid,” “Salt,” and “Sweet”) for “tricking the taste buds and making the natural flavors in any dish soar.”

FASS Tip Sheet:

FASS stands for fat, acid, salt, and sweet. This is a method that uses simple, healthy ingredients to balance out flavors in dishes and make them taste their best. Be sure to discuss with your doctor or dietitian any dietary restrictions or requirements you have first.

Fat

Fats coat the tongue and allow flavors to spread around the tongue and mouth. Fats also add heft to a dish and give you a satisfied feeling.

What works well: Cold-pressed extra virgin olive oil has a nice, clean taste. Naturally occurring, unhydrogenated vegetable oils, such as canola, safflower, sunflower, or other olive oils, will also work.



Acid

Acids—especially citric acid—counterbalance the sweet flavor in a dish.

What works well: Fresh lemon and lime. Many types of vinegar, including brown rice, red wine, and balsamic, also work nicely.



Salt

Salt “unlocks” the flavor in every food it comes in contact with.

What works well: Sea salt. Sea salt has more flavor than regular table salt, but table salt can be used, too.



Sweet

Adding a sweet ingredient can cut an acid or bitter taste in a dish.

What works well: Grade B organic maple syrup. It has a more complex, satisfying flavor than refined sugar, and you need much less of it. Honey, brown rice syrup, and agave nectar will also work in a pinch.



You can put FASS into action with only four ingredients, says Katz: extra virgin olive oil (the fat); lemon juice (the acid); sea salt (the salt); and Grade B organic maple syrup (the sweet). These are ingredients that you use while cooking or preparing a dish.

For example, if you have mouth sores, you need to cut back on acids (especially citric acid) and add a little fat, such as extra virgin olive oil, and sweet flavoring to dishes, Katz says. The fat creates a coating action that smoothes over mouth sores, and the sweet teases the taste buds at the front of the mouth, in turn coaxing the appetite. She recommends Grade B organic maple syrup because it is more flavorful than refined sugar and does a great job of cutting the acid and bitterness in any dish.

If food tastes bland, or like cardboard, try adding a few drops of an acid flavor, such as lemon, lime, or vinegar, Katz says. The acid flavor will animate the other flavors in the dish, making them easier to taste. If you're experiencing a metallic, sharp taste in your mouth, try adding a few drops of a healthy fat like olive oil and a

little bit of sea salt, she says. Katz prefers sea salt over regular salt because it doesn't have the bitter taste that regular, iodized salt does. Many supermarkets, as well as organic food and specialty stores, carry sea salt.

Honing your taste buds takes trial and error. Be willing to experiment and give yourself permission to "taste, taste, taste" as you go, Katz says. (To learn more about FASS, see "FASS Tip Sheet" on p. 63.)

Getting Ready to Eat Well During Treatment

Once treatment begins, the last thing you may feel like doing is shopping and cooking. Yet your need for good nutrition is especially important at this time. It's important to have a "culinary game plan" in place, Katz says. Ideally, you should do this before treatment begins but if your treatments have already started, it's not too late. Here are some tips Katz offers to ensure that you have a variety of palate-pleasing meals on hand at all times:

In the Kitchen with Rebecca Katz

Jicama and Red Cabbage Salad

with Mint and Cilantro Tossed with Sweet-and-Sour Asian Dressing

INGREDIENTS

Nuts

- ½ cup sliced almonds
- 1 teaspoon maple syrup
- Pinch of cayenne

Dressing

- ½ teaspoon seeded and diced jalapeño
- 3 tablespoons rice wine vinegar
- 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
- ¼ cup tamari
- 3 tablespoons maple syrup
- 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger
- Pinch of sea salt

Salad

- 1 pound red cabbage (about 6 cups chopped)
- ½ pound jicama, peeled small julienned (about 4 cups)
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh mint
- ¼ cup finely chopped fresh cilantro or fresh basil

INSTRUCTIONS

Preheat the oven to 350° F.

Toss the nuts in a bowl with the maple syrup and cayenne. Spread on a sheet pan and bake 10 to 12 minutes, until golden and fragrant. Remove from the oven and cool to room temperature. Use a metal spatula to loosen the crispy nuts.

To make the dressing, whisk together the jalapeño, vinegar, lime juice, tamari, maple syrup, sesame oil, ginger, and salt. Set aside.

To make the salad, cut the cabbage in half, remove the core, and shred with a sharp knife.

In a large bowl, combine the cabbage, jicama, mint, and cilantro. Toss with the dressing. Sprinkle the nuts on top and serve.

Serves 6 to 8



Scott Peterson

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next steps...

- **Get a list of foods that you can and can't eat** from your doctor or dietitian. Start going through your pantry and refrigerator to make space and get your kitchen organized.
- **Invite a friend to be a "cooking buddy"** and help you start cooking and freezing nutritious meals in small (2-cup or 4-cup) containers that can be ready and reheated in a flash. (See the recipe for "Magic Mineral Broth" at www.Caring4Cancer.com. Enter "Katz" in the search box. "Magic Mineral Broth" is packed with minerals that can be depleted by the side effects of cancer therapy. It also freezes well.) Clearly label and date each container. Food can be stored in the freezer for up to 3 months.
- **Consider forming a "culinary support team."** Remember, friends will want to help but may not know what you need. Assign chores that you know you'll need done but may not have enough energy to do once treatment begins, such as stopping at the farmer's market, keeping your kitchen stocked with paper products, and so on.

find more tasty recipes



Never run out of recipe ideas: Subscribe to Caring4Cancer's Recipe-of-the-Week e-newsletter by visiting Caring4Cancer.com and using the eNewsletter Sign Up button.

Find additional recipes from "One Bite at a Time," such as "Chicken Roasted All the Way to Yum," "The Best Oatmeal Ever," and "Tuscan Bean Soup," by visiting www.Caring4Cancer.com and using the search term "Katz."

make nutrition your ally



Visit the Nutrition section at www.Caring4Cancer.com to learn how to use nutrition to your benefit during and after treatment and to find answers to cancer patients' commonly asked nutrition questions.

get going in the kitchen: freezing and thawing tips



Ensure that you always have something great-tasting and nutritious on hand to eat when you don't feel like cooking by freezing delicious broths, soups, and stews in small airtight containers.

Freezing tip: Cool down homemade broths, soups, and stews to room temperature before ladling them into 2-cup and 4-cup plastic containers for freezing.

Thawing tip: Remove the frozen container from the freezer 15 minutes or so before you are ready to eat and place the container in a shallow bowl of cold water. When the frozen food begins to loosen in the container, plop it into a pan and thoroughly warm or microwave. Make sure that the temperature is not too hot before serving.

learn how to be an effective 'culinary' caregiver



Read Rebecca Katz's tips for family and friends on how to be an effective "culinary" caregiver. Visit www.Caring4Cancer.com and enter the word "Katz" in the search box.

Food Talk

Rebecca Katz, left, chef and author of "One Bite at a Time," and Caring4Cancer nutritionist Suzanne Dixon met recently to discuss effective ways to nourish individuals in cancer treatment. "Rebecca's Magic Mineral Broth is one of my all-time favorite recipes," Dixon says. "It is a great example of Rebecca's commitment to making delicious, enticing dishes for individuals with cancer. I love Rebecca's approach and belief that just because someone has cancer, doesn't mean they shouldn't enjoy wonderful, nourishing food." Visit Caring4Cancer.com and enter the search term "Katz" to find the recipe for Magic Mineral Broth.



Kevin Monko

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