

Tulane Med Students Learn to Cook for Their Patient's Sake

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Leah Sarris (second from left), leads a class at the Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine at Tulane University in Mid-City.

Photo courtesy of the Goldring Center.

For all that New Orleans kitchens have given the food world, insights into healthy eating may not be top of mind.

But one kitchen here is now devoted to showing how food can influence our health, and its message has been spreading swiftly.

The Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine began in 2012 with a curriculum to teach Tulane University medical students about food and nutrition. It's based on the notion

that the more they know firsthand about sourcing, planning and preparing meals, the better they can counsel patients on the everyday food decisions that impact their health. So in these classes, they trade their stethoscopes for cutting boards and get cooking.

The message behind it all is elementary: Eat healthier food, live a healthier life. The innovation has been creating a program that develops ways to make this part of mainstream medical training.

From New Orleans, the Goldring Center's curriculum has spread to more than 50 medical schools across the country, and one in the U.K.

"We spend a freak ton of money on health care in this country, and one reason why is that we, as medical professionals, aren't doing a good job addressing how food affects our patients' health," said Dr. Timothy Harlan, a physician and executive director of the Goldring Center.

"There was a demand there; we created something to meet it," he said. "That's why we have become the thought leaders in culinary medicine in the United States. It's happening here."

In June, the community of practitioners pursuing this approach will also gather here to share ideas and insight. The center's annual conference, called Health Meets Food, is June 14-17. The Sunday session, held downtown at the Jung Hotel, is open to the public, with a focus on issues of antibiotics in the food supply and ways culinary and health care professionals can help address it.

At the intersection of food and health

The Goldring Center's reach is growing at a time when food and health issues are resonating in both the medical and culinary fields.

That's why celebrity chef Mary Sue Milliken is coming to New Orleans as a keynote speaker for the conference. Known for her contemporary Latin cuisine, the Los Angeles-based chef is also an outspoken activist on food and social issues.

"It's igniting this intersection of food and health and putting it into practice in a way that's doable," Milliken said of the culinary medicine program. "Tim Harlan has a laser focus on a really important part of what's going on in society, and that's why it's spreading like wildfire from there."

Milliken said she is particularly interested in how chefs and doctors together can help shape the public discourse on food.

“The most important impact chefs can have is to influence people and make it sexy to eat healthy food,” she said. “There’s a creative, problem-solving passion that chefs bring. We’re all about the flavor and presentation, and thinking how do we get people excited about it.”

Although the idea of food as medicine is timeless, medical school programming for it is new. When Tulane launched its curriculum, it was the first of its kind in the U.S.

Once an elective, culinary medicine classes are now part of Tulane medical students’ required course load. The Goldring Center also has continuing education classes and community classes, which are free and open to the public.

Its home base is a teaching kitchen within the ReFresh Project, the complex at 300 N. Broad St. that includes a Whole Foods Market and the nonprofit cafe Liberty’s Kitchen. As they work over stove tops, students here can look through a glass wall to see shoppers pushing grocery carts into the store.

“This is where we’re building it every day,” said Leah Sarris, the center’s program director. “We develop it here, test it out here, work out the kinks and then deploy it to other schools to use it.”

At the start, its leaders did not foresee expanding the program beyond New Orleans. But as other institutions kept approaching them, its potential became clear.

“That’s when we realized this is something that could be a national and even international movement,” said Harlan.

“Home ec for the 21st century”

Karen Karp, a board member of the Goldring Center and president of the New York-based food consulting firm Karen Karp & Partners, helped take the culinary medicine program national. She believes it has found an eager reception because decades of advocacy work connecting diet to health set the stage, while the health care costs tied to heart disease and diabetes and other conditions made the issue impossible to ignore.

“People are now asking questions about where their food comes from, how it was grown or produced, the ethics of the companies we've put trust in for so long to produce safe and healthy food,” Karp wrote in an email interview. “And I know that more people are coming to their doctors’ offices asking ‘what can I do to be healthier?’ ”

As these questions grow more common, doctors need to know how to talk with patients about diet and food choices.

“Doctors don't enjoy not being experts and the smartest people in the room, so now they're motivated to learn more about food,” she wrote.

In New Orleans, the center has had to work past some assumptions and doubts. Not every medical student foresaw their formal training extending to a kitchen. And there can be skepticism in the community that healthy eating will be satisfying and affordable.

“There are still some old fashioned ideas of what healthy eating is,” Sarris said. “It’s not this unrealistic ideal. We’re making spaghetti, we’re making burritos and tacos. It’s how you make it and showing how you can do it affordably.”

In the center’s classes, recipes are budgeted to cost no more than \$2.50 per serving. There are classes for family and a kids summer camp, corporate teamwork classes and classes in Spanish and others aimed at older people. Sarris sometimes calls these community classes “home ec for the 21st century.”

“People find their blood pressure is getting better, they’re on fewer medications, there are outcomes we can track that show they’re getting healthier,” Sarris said. “There’s a health impact, an economic impact and there’s just the quality of these people’s lives.”



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--Dr. Timothy Harlan