

Food for Thought

WHEN IT COMES TO ACCESS TO GOOD FOOD, I COUNT myself among the very fortunate.

I was raised in São Paulo, Brazil, and my earliest memories feature Saturday-morning jaunts to our local farmers' market where my mother and I would fill our bags with fragrant herbs and flowers. Ma would always let me pick out a treat to munch on as she placed orders for cases of fresh eggs and produce to be delivered to our home in the afternoon. Invariably, I would ask for a freshly baked *pão de queijo*, literally "bread of cheese," but not like any other bread I have ever tasted—crispy on the outside, pillowy soft and slightly chewy with sharp cheese melted on the inside. I think "morsels of heaven" would be a more fitting name; I could have eaten a half-dozen of these at a time, but my mother would only let me have one, so I would eat ever so slowly and savor every bite.

My parents are resourceful Chinese immigrants who learned to embrace the food of their new South American homeland while maintaining their ancestral culinary traditions. With the financial backing of a tightly knit group of compatriots, they opened a small restaurant that served Brazilian fare, including ice-cold pressed sugar cane juice, *kibe*, *pastel*, *coxinha*, *churrasco*, and *feijoada*. At home, they distilled rice vinegar, cultured water chestnuts, and pressed soybeans through cheesecloth to keep us supplied with fresh soy milk and tofu. In the process, they shared a wealth of culinary adventures with my siblings and me.

As toddlers, we were weaned to explosions of flavors: jackfruit, passion fruit, guava, sweetsop, pickled mustard greens, gingered celery root. On hot summer afternoons, we sipped young coconut juice served by street vendors who would deftly hack the top off the fruit, which they kept chilled in gigantic, ice-filled coolers.

Throughout our childhoods, Ma and Pa would tell us colorful fables to illustrate lessons in humility, courage, honesty, and moderation . . .

A long time ago, a young peasant boy left his meager village home to seek a better life in the central city. He promised his mother that he would rise to the highest echelons of society as he bid her good-bye. His mother, a wise woman, tried to dissuade her son by telling him: "A mountain of gold does not happiness make," to no avail. The ambitious young man set out on foot and traveled for 99 days until he reached the central city. There, he outcompeted every soldier in the imperial army to become the emperor's chief commanding officer. The night of his inaugural dinner, he ordered the imperial cook to serve him the world's most delectable foods. After he finished a basket of xiaolong bao (soup dumplings), he asked for another, then an-

other. After he finished his 43rd basket, the imperial cook pleaded with him to stop eating, but the strong-headed officer ordered him to bring the next basket immediately. No sooner had he bitten into a dumpling than he fell over—his belly ripped open at the seams, unable to accommodate another bite. The moral of the story? "Do not be greedy. Eat in moderation, and appreciate every mouthful as if it were your last mouthful." Ma would often chime, "Measure your stomach," to remind us to gauge our hunger.

I firmly believe that exposure to palettes of flavors and feeding behaviors entrained in early life are critical to developing the ability to experience foods in a healthful fashion. Our family clan will try just about anything (at least once), and eat only until satiated.

Dr Karen Le Billon describes a similar phenomenon in her book *French Kids Eat Everything*.¹ She cites research showing that French mothers feed their infants a significantly greater variety of vegetables compared with their German counterparts in order to support "taste development,"² a milestone endorsed by French pediatricians and parenting books. On her eponymous website, Dr Le Billon also posts weekly French school menus that have a greater resemblance to chic restaurant menus than to any school menu my children have ever brought home. Here is a sample from Annonay Schools:

Monday April 30

Leeks with vinaigrette

Beef bourguignon with gratin dauphinoise (scalloped potatoes baked in a béchamel [white] sauce—a French classic!)

Cheese: Whipped fromage blanc—an even lighter version of the French classic

Dessert: Kiwi

The tab? An average of \$3 per meal including drinks (only water is served). This compares favorably with the prices charged for much less imaginative fare at most US schools. In France, the nutritional content of school meals is tightly regulated, vending machines are banned, and random snacking is discouraged. French kids will happily eat "an impressive range of vegetables, all kinds of fish, a huge variety of cheeses [yes, even the stinky blue kind] along with dishes such as roasted guinea fowl for preschoolers." Obesity is 4 times as prevalent in the United States as in France. Le Billon poses interesting questions: "What lessons can we learn from the French approach? What are the links between culture,

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parenting practices, children's eating behaviors, and outcomes like weight status?"

Now, as a pediatrician engaged in the battle against obesity, I try to impart a sense of adventure as I encourage parents to discover new tastes with their finicky children. Getting children to eat their vegetables appears to be a particularly vexing challenge to many American families. "My child won't eat any vegetables and picks everything out even if I hide them in the food" is a common complaint.

So I probe deeper: "No one in your family likes vegetables? Do you like vegetables?"

The answers are usually "No" and "No."

I continue: "How do you cook your vegetables?"

Nine times out of ten the answer is "We boil them."

I counter: "But have you ever tried stir-frying spinach with some minced fresh garlic or maybe roasting cauliflower with a little sea salt, freshly ground pepper, and olive oil until caramelized? You can also try roasting butternut squash and almost any vegetable you thought you didn't like. And to mix things up a bit, you can try adding some onions or a sprinkle of your favorite herb."

Unfortunately, herbs and olive oil are not part of the cooking repertoire of most US families, many of whom do not understand how to properly prepare and present foods so that they are both healthful and appetizing. Several of my families don't even know what a cauliflower looks like. Teneka Williams, featured in HBO's *The Weight of the Nation*,³ is an emblematic mother. She tells me that she just can't find healthy foods in her local grocery store and doesn't think she would know what to do with them if she did.

Recently, attention has been drawn to the importance of not only telling but also showing patients how to cook and eat healthful meals. Physicians, dietitians, nurses, and health educators are signing up for cooking classes so that they can practice what they preach. Teaching kitchens are sprouting up in WIC offices, community health centers, and early-care and education programs.

Every now and then (usually over a bottle of good wine), my friends and I will debate the merits of various solutions to world problems: deforestation, overfishing, global warming. To combat obesity, I offer up the idea of franchising "healthy fast-food outlets" that would offer quinoa pilaf served 6 different ways, zucchini au gratin, jicama slaw, fresh custard apple. Then I wake up the next morning to an ever-growing agenda.

My first patient in a recent clinic session was 3-year-old Maria, accompanied by her mother Lisa (not their real names). Lisa is a single mother studying for her GED who

has also struggled with her weight for most of her life. This morning, Lisa beamed with pride as she told me that she had finally quit buying soda and was now working on limiting Maria's juice intake. Cutting out soda was no small feat, as ginger ale had been Lisa's main beverage for as long as she could remember. Once in a while, she had also let Maria "have a little sip." I congratulated Lisa on achieving this important milestone and asked her how they were doing with the juice. Lisa responded, "That is hard! Maria loves her juice but not her water, and only drinks milk with her cereal. She throws huge tantrums if she doesn't get her way; so sometimes I do give in. But it's all 100% juice. Isn't that supposed to be good for you?" In response, I showed them the Sugar Stacks website⁴ and asked Lisa to help Maria count out the number of sugar cubes in a container of apple juice. Lisa's jaw dropped: "Wow, that is a lot of sugar!" I also pulled out an American Academy of Pediatrics Oral Health flip-chart⁵ to show them pictures of how the juice Maria drank during the night could hurt her pretty teeth. Lisa shifted Maria on her lap and told her: "Mommy can't give you all that juice anymore. OK?" Maria protested: "No! I like juice!" But Lisa reasserted: "We are going to drink more water, you hear?" I suggested that Lisa try serving the water chilled. To help the transition and give Maria a sense of control, Lisa could also try asking Maria if she would prefer to have one or two small frozen juice cubes or a squeeze of fresh lemon or orange in her water. As Maria continued to whine, Lisa turned to me and asked: "Is this what you call *tough love*?" I smiled in return: "I'd just call it *love*."

We never got around to discussing vegetables during that visit. But that's OK. I am planning to see them again in a month.

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