



FLAVOR-FIRST CHEF

By Paul Wynn

Diabetes-friendly food that tastes delicious is a real possibility—especially if you follow the flavorful recipes developed by Jennifer Stack from The Culinary Institute of America.

Jennifer Stack surprised herself when she became a chef and an author of a diabetes cookbook. During her training at The Culinary Institute of America, she discovered the need to cook healthy meals, but not give up on taste and flavor.

“Many people with diabetes stay in denial about their health and don’t get the help they need because they are fearful they will have to give up good food,” said Stack, associate professor at The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. “It’s a food lover’s nightmare to hear you have diabetes. You are often told not to eat many of your favorite foods. And many people expect healthy foods to be bland and flavorless. Although not every meal can be a fabulous party in your mouth, food should taste really good, or you are unlikely to continue eating it.”

Stack recently spoke with *Diabetes Self-Management* about why she wrote her book, *The Diabetes Friendly Kitchen*, and what it means to adopt a flavor-first approach.

DSM: You started your career as a dietitian, so how did you get interested in cooking?

JS: My story starts in New York City, where I completed my internship after getting a bachelor’s degree in dietetics. Living in the city, I had little need to cook, so mastering the culinary arts was not even on my radar screen. My first years working as a dietitian qualified me to become a Certified Diabetes Educator [CDE]. Becoming a CDE was an opportunity presented to me rather than one that I pursued because of a personal experience with diabetes. I got my first opportunity to cook for professional reasons by developing recipes for *Cooking Light* magazine in 1989. After 10 years of various cooking assignments while still working as a dietitian and CDE, I decided to go to culinary school.

DSM: What made you want to become a culinary chef?

JS: When I was working as a dietitian, my husband and I moved to the New York suburbs. There was a Williams-

Sonoma store in a new mall. On a whim, I applied for a part-time job. I fell in love with the equipment and cooking. The first year I worked, I spent \$300 more than I made on all the gorgeous equipment and outfitted my kitchen. As I was going through the catalogs, I just loved it and said to myself, maybe I should be making a career out of this. I like to find a way to make things happen, so I applied to The Culinary Institute of America and got accepted.

DSM: While you were studying, did you get niched into being the diabetes cook?

JS: I purposely tried to stay away from that and immersed myself in food to learn about all styles of cooking and ingredients. One of the mistakes that a lot of dietitians make is they don't fully develop their palate and don't learn all the wonderful ways that food can taste. I remember early on in a culinary fundamentals course, when I was making broths and sauces, my instructor said to me that I needed to add more salt and then told me the same thing again, and again. He eventually reached out for the Diamond Crystal kosher salt and threw in several tablespoons. I nearly had a dietitian's heart attack, but realized the appropriate amount of salt can help the flavor of the food shine through. The same thing happened when I was making sauces. Tablespoons of whole butter are whisked into an almost finished sauce to give it the exquisite taste we associate with excellent food. These were some of the shockers that I had to get accustomed to in school. So I was determined to bring out the best taste in food, and figure out how much can I dial back the salt and animal fat and compensate with other flavors.

DSM: What led you to write a diabetes cookbook?

JS: The publication of my cookbook, *The Diabetes-Friendly Kitchen*, was inspired by spending time in the world of "foodies" and noticing the lack of a flavor-first approach to cooking for special diets. Since then, we have started to see a shift in the public consciousness. Health-care professionals, chefs and people with diabetes are recognizing that delicious, diabetes-friendly food does exist and is becoming more available not just through cookbooks, but in restaurants, too.

DSM: What do you mean by a flavor-first approach?

JS: Flavor first means that you're making truly delicious food. Even if someone had no health problems he or she would look at this dish and want to eat it. We can't expect every meal to be a gastronomical delight. Sometimes food is just the fuel to keep us going and in good health. However, looking for ways to make healthy food taste good needs to be a priority. Without a flavor-first focus, the likelihood of maintaining healthy eating habits and sticking with it long enough to see the health benefits won't happen.

DSM: What ingredients should you have in a diabetes-friendly kitchen?

JS: I think some of the most helpful and healthy ingredients to keep in your kitchen are nonstarchy vegetables

such as bell peppers, cabbage, cauliflower, celery, mushrooms, kale or other cooking greens. These vegetables are low in calories and carbohydrate and hearty enough to hold up in the refrigerator for more than a few days. Frozen vegetables like broccoli are convenient and taste really good when prepared on a baking sheet with a little bit of oil and roasted in the oven at 400 degrees. Roasting vegetables is a great way to develop delicious flavors that you don't get when you steam or sauté them. These vegetables can be added to dishes that are not diabetes friendly, like macaroni and cheese. Take a small portion of the mac and cheese and add roasted broccoli or other nonstarchy vegetables to make the small portion of the indulgent food more filling.

DSM: What are some of the biggest mistakes when making diabetes-friendly food?

JS: One of the biggest mistakes is eating large portions of the good carbohydrates like whole grains, beans and fruits. Too much carbohydrate, even when it is from healthy choices, can raise blood sugar. You can scale back the amount of carbohydrate by adding more of the nonstarchy vegetables. A great example is mixing grated cauliflower with rice. Other options could be finely minced celery, onions and bell peppers mixed with a grain or starch. Add the vegetables just before the grains finish cooking. This will make your meal healthier by bringing down the carbohydrate and calorie count and increasing the fiber.

Another mistake is the tendency to overcook chicken and make it dry and flavorless. We're so fearful of salmonella—and we certainly should be. But overcooking chicken doesn't make it safer. Use the thermometer and cook the chicken to an internal temperature of 165 degrees for at least 15 seconds. I steer people to boneless, skinless chicken thighs because they have a lot more flavor than the chicken breasts do and don't dry out as much.

DSM: What makes your recipes different from other diabetes recipes?

JS: My recipes will work when you try them in your kitchen, and that's very important. If someone goes to the trouble to buy the ingredients and spend the time cooking, you want the dish to be successful. It's not uncommon for cookbook authors to not thoroughly test their recipes before publishing them. My nutritional analysis is also accurate. Some cookbooks will use the minimal amount of an ingredient or not put in salt or oil to keep the nutritional numbers low. When you do that, the recipe doesn't taste good and the cook is going to add in more on his or her own and the nutritional information will be off. For people with diabetes, who need to know the calorie, carbohydrate, saturated fat or sodium in a recipe, it's helpful to have recipes that are well tested so the analysis and the recipe actually match up. ■

Paul Wynn, a writer based in Garrison, N.Y., has covered health-care trends for the past 20 years.

3 SUMMER FAVORITES

Jennifer Stack developed more than 125 recipes for her cookbook, *The Diabetes-Friendly Kitchen*. Each recipe was judged and rated by the chefs at The Culinary Institute of America. When they tried the recipes, none of them were aware that the recipes were for a diabetes cookbook. “They evaluated each and every recipe to see if it tasted good, not whether it was good enough for people with diabetes,” said Stack. She selected three favorite recipes from her book for the summer months ahead.



SUMMER STYLE LENTIL SOUP

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

The brothiness of this lentil soup gives it a lighter texture so you can enjoy it in the warmer months. It is quick and easy to make, so don't relegate lentils to just the fall and winter. Note: Scallions can be used in place of leeks, and the celery can be increased to 2 cups if celeriac or salsify is not available.

Nutritional information per serving:

Calories 237, Protein 14.5g, Carbohydrates 38g, Fiber 9g, Saturated Fat 0.5g, Sodium 388mg

- 1 ounce bacon, minced
- ½ cup diced onion
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 cup diced leek, white and light green parts
- 1 cup carrots, sliced
- 1 cup celeriac or salsify, sliced
- 1 cup celery, sliced
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 parsley sprig plus 1 tablespoon chopped
- 1 thyme sprig
- 1 whole garlic clove
- 3-4 black peppercorns
- 8 cups low-sodium chicken or vegetable broth
- 1½ cups dried French lentils
- 3 strips lemon peel
- 1 tablespoon white wine (optional)
- 1 tablespoon sherry vinegar or red wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon chopped chives

- 1.** In a medium soup pot, cook the bacon until the fat renders and the bacon is crisp. Add the onion and minced garlic and sweat until the onion is translucent, 4 to 5 minutes.
- 2.** Add the leek, carrot, celeriac and celery. Cover the pot and sweat until the vegetables are tender, 4 to 6 minutes. Add the tomato paste and sauté until it begins to brown, about 2 minutes.
- 3.** Tie the bay leaf, parsley, thyme, the whole garlic clove and peppercorns in a piece of cheesecloth to make a sachet. Add the broth, lentils, lemon peel and sachet to the soup pot. Simmer until the lentils are tender, about 20 minutes.
- 4.** Remove the sachet and lemon strips. Add the wine, vinegar, salt and pepper. Serve the soup garnished with chives.



CHICKEN, QUINOA AND PARSLEY SALAD

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

This dish calls for chicken that is already cooked, so it is a convenient way to use leftover chicken. Quinoa is a whole grain that is rich in complete protein and available in different colors. Red quinoa is wonderful because the color contrasts beautifully with the chicken and parsley.

Nutritional information per serving:

Calories 354, Protein 19g, Carbohydrates 22g, Fiber 4g, Total Fat 22g, Saturated Fat 2g, Sodium 287mg

- ¼ cup plus 1 tablespoon almond oil
- ½ small onion, diced
- ½ cup celery, diced
- ¾ cup red quinoa
- 1¼ cups vegetable broth, divided
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt, divided
- 1 cup chopped parsley
- 12 ounces cooked chicken breast, chopped
- 1 cup sliced toasted almonds, divided
- 4 teaspoons fresh lemon juice

- ½ teaspoon mustard
- ½ small head green leaf lettuce
- ½ small head red leaf lettuce

1. Heat one tablespoon of the almond oil over medium heat. Add the onion and celery and sweat until soft. Add the quinoa, 1½ cups of the broth and ½ teaspoon of the salt. Bring to a boil, cover, and simmer until quinoa is soft and the liquid absorbed, about 15 minutes. Allow the quinoa to cool.
2. Stir the parsley, chicken and ½ cup of the almonds into the quinoa.
3. Combine the lemon juice, mustard, remaining ¼ cup broth and remaining ½ teaspoon salt. Whisk in the remaining ¼ cup almond oil. Toss quinoa salad with half of the dressing. Toss the lettuces with the remaining dressing.
4. Serve the quinoa on a bed of lettuce leaves and top with the reserved ½ cup almonds.

ARUGULA AND SPINACH SALAD WITH RASPBERRY DRESSING

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

The natural sweetness of the raspberries tastes fantastic with the slightly bitter arugula and also pairs beautifully with the spinach. The bright berry flavors are complemented by the red wine and balsamic vinegars in a vinaigrette that is extremely easy to make.

Nutritional information per serving: Calories 78, Protein 0.5g, Carbohydrates 5g, Fiber 1g, Total Fat 7g, Saturated Fat 1g, Sodium 70mg

- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 cup mashed raspberries
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 cups baby spinach leaves
- 3 cups arugula
- Freshly ground black pepper

1. For the vinaigrette, combine the vinegars and the salt and add the raspberries. Whisk in the olive oil.
2. Add the spinach and arugula to the vinaigrette and toss gently. When the greens are lightly coated, transfer to chilled plates and finish with a generous grinding of pepper.

