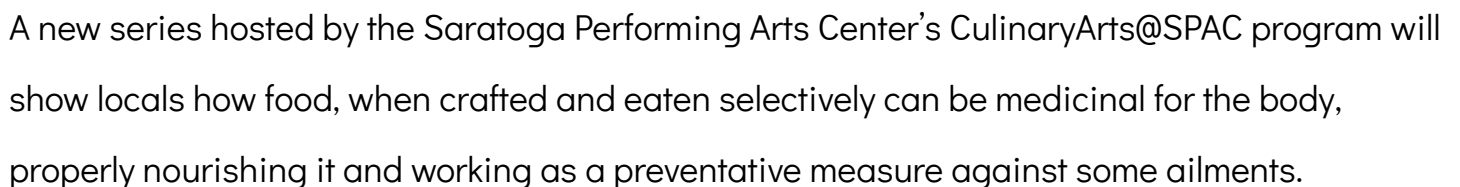




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The Food is Medicine series includes two installations. The first, scheduled for Jan. 27, will be a conversation with Dr. Annie Fenn. She is an obstetrician turned chef who has authored a book emphasizing foods that can help people prevent Alzheimer's disease. The second session, March 25, will feature Dr. Katie Takayasu, an integrative medicine physician who will enlighten the audience about putting plants first in your diet for better overall health.

Pam Abrams, a co-producer of the event, said many people wipe the slate clean at the start of a new year to focus on what they can do better. Now is an optimal time to host such a series.

"Cooking is a way to improve health and who isn't interested in that"? Abrams (who also occasionally writes for the Times Union), said many people are interested in eating better but don't exactly know the recipes or best foods to do so.

After practicing her specialty for 20 years, Fenn retired and decided it was time to do something different – culinary school.

Shortly after graduation, she began teaching healthy cooking classes and conducting a culinary dementia prevention program at her local hospital until 2015, when Rush University published a study on the MIND, or Mediterranean-Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay Diet, showing that what you eat can significantly reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's.

Fenn's mother was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment, an early stage of cognitive ability or memory loss. The impairment doesn't always cultivate into Alzheimer's, but in Fenn's mother's case, it was an early stage.

The diagnosis pushed Fenn to do a deep dive into the study and figure how she could potentially use food to slow cognitive deterioration. She ended up birthing the Brain Health Kitchen, which promotes food as preventive medicine, and sources recipes backed by science.

The MIND Diet study provided Fenn with fundamentals, several brain-healthy food groups to prioritize such as leafy greens, vegetables, fish and seafood, nuts and seeds, beans and lentils, whole grains, olive oils and berries. Leafy greens, for example, contain phytonutrients that can combat oxidative stress in the brain and slow brain aging, she said.

“These are just whole foods that are really inexpensive and really easy to cook with. People just need to know what dose is recommended,” she said.

The study further outlined food groups to avoid and limit, which consisted of fast and fried food, pastries or sweets, dairy, ultra-processed foods, artificially sweetened drinks and alcoholic beverages.

It may, at first, be surprising to hear about some of the ingredients that go into simple meals Fenn has re-created, such as the utilization of cashews to make a nut-based cheese for your grilled cheese. But adding just a little with some grated Gruyere cheese can make all the difference. Now, instead of having processed slices of cheese, you have a homemade flavor profile that is just as rich and provides brain health, according to Fenn.

“I always have little touches of lusciousness and decadence in all of my recipes,” she said.

Shawn Mack, a health coach in the Capital Region, echoes much of this to his clients. He works with individuals to tailor diets to their circumstances with an emphasis on eating whole foods rather than hyper-processed foods chock full of preservatives and additives.

“It's nourishment on a different level than if you eat unprocessed food. It's like nourishing your mind and spirit as well,” he said.

Working with groups such as Root3d in Albany and Community Fathers in Schenectady, he tries to show people that food should be viewed holistically. Mack believes what you consume is interconnected with your mental and physical health.

“It's really about the choice as well. When someone is making a choice to eat more fruits and vegetables, not only is their body going to get those nutrients that they need, but mentally, they are going to feel better because they're making a good choice for their body, so they're going to get that dopamine rush and feel good about themselves,” he said. “It's about the mindset as well. So, I've tried to incorporate all that into each individual plan.”

What Mack accentuates is the opposite of what fad diets and social media trends push. He said the issue with fads is that they send people to extremes and once the diet ends, their bodies revert to what they did before or leave them depleted. Often those trends have a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to consider every person is different, he said.

What it really comes down to is helping people make the connections, whether it be one cashew or strawberry at a time.