



SOUL FOOD MAKEOVER

By Sheree Crute

Cooking program shows churchgoers how to nix the fat, salt, and sugar while keeping the flavor.

On the bulletin board at First Philadelphia Church in Louisville, Kentucky, congregants will find something other than the latest church news. The church's culinary staff posts colorful photos of delectable but healthful soul food fare accompanied by budget-friendly recipes to encourage healthful eating habits.

In another part of town, the folks at Oak Grove Missionary Baptist Church inspire their community by sharing low-fat, low-salt yet delicious recipes printed in their annual church calendar.

The churches are just two of the more than 40 Louisville-based parishes that have participated in the Harriett B. Porter Culinary Institute for African American Churches, a program of the James Graham Brown Cancer Center at the University of Louisville. "Harriet Porter was a cancer survivor, educator, and health advocate who was deeply concerned about the health of her community," explains Virginia Bradford, RN, program director. "When she passed, her family funded this program in her memory. Our program is a multifaceted model that encourages pastoral leadership to help us help others to eat healthier."

Respecting Tradition and Cuisine

"Every three to four months, we bring the men and women who cook for our local churches here to Sullivan University's National Center for Hospitality Studies," says Cynthia Chandler, RD, the program's nutritionist. Working with Chandler, Bradford, and a chef, program participants learn about health and nutrition from information provided by the National Cancer Institute's Body & Soul peer-based education project, which incorporates healthful lifestyle education, church events, and peer counseling to promote healthful eating. Each church also receives a copy of *The New American Heart Association Cookbook* and a stipend to help implement a nutrition program.

"Most of these women are better cooks than I am," Chandler says, "but they come to us with a genuine concern for the health

of their community. They want to change the disease risks they see in their fellow church members." Like many black communities around the country, the residents of Louisville have high rates of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and other lifestyle-related health issues that also can increase their cancer risk.

But Chandler also is deeply aware of the important role long-cherished soul food meals play in black church culture. "I do not think that soul food should ever be considered bad for you. It's delicious food that brings people together to connect with each other, so it should be filled with flavor and tradition. We just want to make it as healthful for the heart as it is for the spirit," she explains.

To accomplish this, Chandler takes a gradual approach to changing time-honored favorites in the hopes of helping people increasingly lower their dietary salt, sugar, and fat intake. "We tweak Southern food to make it healthier but maintain the flavor," she says.

Art of the Swap

In addition to seasoning food with fresh herbs, garlic, pepper, or onion before even touching a saltshaker, Chandler removes unhealthy ingredients and replaces them in ways that are better for the body but nearly undetectable to the palate. "We use a 50/50 whole wheat/white flour blend that adds fiber and nutrients without affecting taste," she says. "Smoked turkey or turkey sausage is used instead of ham hocks and pork links. Skim evaporated milk adds flavor instead of the full-fat version. Reduced-fat milk and mayonnaise are used as well. Also, never fry your food when roasting or baking will produce great results. And try roasting yams with a little honey butter rather than the high-sugar candied version."

While Chandler understands that some people object to artificial sweeteners, "I think they're a saving grace, especially for people with diabetes. I make a cobbler using Splenda, and it's excellent." She also swears by the low-carb Dreamfields pasta for macaroni and cheese and macaroni salads. "It's so good, you can barely tell the difference."

Subtle Shifts

Whenever possible, Chandler introduces new foods. "To help our cooks find ways to use healthier oils, we held an olive oil tasting," she explains. "Instead of just placing pitchers of sweet tea on the table, we suggested pitchers of water with slices of lemon or club soda with just a splash of fresh fruit juice. We also replaced bread baskets with trays of crudité with a Greek yogurt dip."

Program participants also learn to make trendy new treats that satisfy without adding lots of calories and fat. "They loved the kale chips made in the oven with a little bit of olive oil, smoked paprika, garlic, and onion, and black bean brownies," Chandler recalls.

Young church members who attend the Porter Institute's one-day kids' camp get a crash course in selecting and

preparing good-for-you fare. “We teach them how to prepare veggie pizzas for their snacks. Using word games and tastings, we also try to introduce them to a wide range of fruits and vegetables,” Bradford says. “Each child is given a potted herb to take home and grow.”

Secrets to Success

In addition to working magic in the kitchen, Chandler advises dietitians who want to create or participate in community-based programs to follow a few, important guidelines:

- **Ask before you instruct.** “Don’t assume that you know what the issues are in a community. Allow people to express their concerns and explain their key issues, and really listen to them before you offer solutions,” Chandler says. “Don’t attempt to be the sage on the stage.”

- **Improvise rather than eliminate.** “Don’t try to make big changes in the soul food diet. Learn to work with traditional ingredients, with small adjustments to lower sodium, fat, or sugar,” Chandler advises.

- **Partner, don’t push.** “Make it clear that you’re there to work with people, not criticize their cooking or cuisine,” she says.

“It helps to remember that soul food was historically very healthful food. It was primarily beans, vegetables, and grains, with a little bit of meat,” Chandler says. As American eating habits changed to include more calories from meat, sugar, and fat, soul food changed as well. “Our program puts the emphasis back on vegetables and high fiber—nutritious foods.”

Chandler says her favorite part of the program was getting to know the church cooks who participated at the institute. “More than any other group I’ve worked with, these women were so grateful for having a chance to help other church members. When they come to us, they’re reflecting their faith by working to improve the health of their church community. We’re delighted to help them achieve that goal.”

— Sheree Crute is an independent journalist based in Brooklyn, New York, who writes about various health topics.

Cauliflower and Potatoes With Roasted Garlic

Serves 12

Ingredients

- 2 heads roasted garlic
- 3 lbs potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 2 heads cauliflower
- ¼ cup reduced-fat cream cheese
- ¼ cup reduced-fat sour cream
- 1 tsp kosher salt
- 1 tsp pepper

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. Wrap whole garlic in aluminum foil and place in preheated oven for 35 minutes, until fork tender. Peel off

tough outer coating and mash.

3. Boil potatoes over medium-high heat until tender. In a separate pot filled with hot water, add cauliflower and cook until tender.

4. Drain both potatoes and cauliflower and mash. Stir in cream cheese, sour cream, mashed garlic, salt, and pepper. Serve while warm.

Nutrient Analysis per serving

Calories: 141; Total fat: 6 g; Sat fat: 2.5 g; Trans fat: 0 g; Cholesterol: 10 mg; Sodium: 243 mg; Total carbohydrate: 20 g; Dietary fiber: 3.4 g; Sugar: 0 g; Protein: 4 g

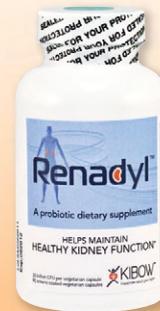
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Reference:
 1. Ranganathan N, Ranganathan P, Friedman EA, et al *Adv Ther.* 2010;27(9):634-647

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