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When Eating Right Is A Grass-Roots Effort

By Jennifer LaRue Huget
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Most everyone agrees: Americans are too fat. We eat too much salty, sugary, fatty food. And our diets are making us unhealthy, fostering chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer that exact enormous personal and societal prices.

As for how to go about addressing and even reversing those situations, opinions differ.

Some propose broad government actions aimed at shaping Americans' food habits by enacting laws and levying taxes. Those who favor a soda tax, for instance, hope that making people pay more for soft drinks will encourage them to consume less. Plus, they say revenue could go toward subsidizing production of healthful foods or to support community-based efforts to promote healthful eating.

Others believe in working from the ground up, teaching people, one by one, the value of sound nutrition and how to avail themselves of healthful foods.

Juliette Tahar is among the latter.

Tahar, a former private chef and caterer, runs a nonprofit organization called Healthy Living, aimed at showing the ways in which good food can enrich life, reflect culture and history and even enhance spirituality, even as it contributes to our physical well-being. Her fee-based programs, for which anyone can pay to hear Tahar talk about food and take part in a cooking demonstration, help support the outreach work she does for free at community centers and shelters in the Washington area; a small number of grants cover the rest. (Tahar says she donates her time.)

Having lived in West Africa until she was 16, Tahar grew up in an atmosphere where "food was fresh, abundant and part of life," she says. "Then I came to the States. In the late 1960s in Washington, we experienced our own food desert." The lack of access to the kinds of food she'd grown accustomed to eating "awakened a desire," she says. "Where can I get fresh food?"

In many ways, much of Washington remains a "food desert," a term used to describe areas where access to affordable, nutritious food is limited (usually by a dearth of grocery stores and of transportation options). A [report](#) issued in June by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service includes a map of Washington's food deserts. It coincides pretty closely with the areas where Tahar offers her outreach programs.

Tahar disagrees with the notion that unhealthy eating stems solely from lack of money. "With all due respect, it's not an issue of income." Instead, she believes people eat what they have easy access to -- and what they know about. A boy who attended one of her programs, she says, "did not know you could go to Safeway and get an apple." Similarly, she frequently meets "people who are still cooking with canned food. They don't know how to cook with fresh food because they have no access to it."

When working with women at homeless shelters, Tahar tries to help them see "how they can take baby steps toward making healthful choices in their life, even if they have a tiny budget." If there is a kitchen, she picks one resident as an assistant chef, and together they make a meal for the group, using simple recipes and fresh ingredients. One recent meal featured fall lentil soup, quinoa pilaf with mushrooms, steamed kale and butternut squash pie.

As they cook, they discuss what food they're cooking (the value of whole grains, for example) and related concerns. "Some of them have health issues, and they want to better understand which food might best support their recovery," she said.

If no kitchen is available, Tahar whips up a quick snack such as a couscous salad, on her own, and the discussion goes on.

"They're learning what goes into the food they buy," Tahar says. "If they have a dollar to buy a snack, maybe they'll learn to choose fruit rather than a salty snack, water instead of a soda. . . . I also bring in the idea of seasonal foods, help them see what's out there. A lot of them have never eaten fresh food."

Though she follows macrobiotic principles (which emphasize whole, locally grown foods and simple cooking methods) in her diet, Tahar doesn't impose them on others. "I don't tell people what to eat. I work with people, making them responsible for their choices." Many of the women she has worked with at shelters have chosen to become vegetarians, she said. "I think it's wiser for people to come to a decision made from the space within. They may say, 'I need a little bit of fish, a little meat,' [now and then]. It's when we eat mindlessly -- that's when trouble begins." Most of all, she tries to help people figure out why they eat what they do. "That comfort food you eat is a substitute for what?"

Corporations have every right to produce the foods they do. "But you don't have to eat it or drink it," she says. "Nobody puts a gun to your head. . . . I just bring awareness of the role of food in people's lives. They can choose food that is destructive to their body or supportive of their life."

In the end, Tahar feels strongly that people need specific guidance, not just blanket recommendations, for improving the way they eat. "People go to the nutritionist and leave with pages and pages of recommendations, but they're clueless," she says. "They wonder, 'Where do I start? How do I cook this food?'"

"It's absurd to ask someone who's been eating canned and frozen foods all their lives to go right into eating organic food. You can't tell them to go to Whole Foods and get organic kale. You need to walk in at the level people are at and show them where to go."

Healthy Living will hold a free open house Thursday at 5 p.m. at the Jelleff Branch of the Boys and Girls Club of America (3265 S St. NW).

Check out Tuesday's Checkup blog post, in which Jennifer shares Juliette Tahar's observations about what foods shelters for the homeless need most. Subscribe to the Lean & Fit newsletter by going to <http://www.washingtonpost.com/health>.

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