

# The New York Times

*New York Times*

[To Heal, First Eat: Doctors Learn to Cook Healthy, 'Crave-able' Foods](#)

By Patricia Leigh Brown

April 10, 2012



*Medical professionals in a cooking class at the annual "Healthy Kitchens/Healthy Lives" conference in California. [View multi-media slide show.](#)*

SOME people cannot travel without Advil or a neck pillow. Dr. David M. Eisenberg, an associate professor at the Harvard Medical School and the Harvard School of Public Health, feels incomplete without his beloved paring knife and eight-inch Wüsthof cleaver.

He was wielding both with sweaty zeal the other day on the dais of the [Culinary Institute of America at Greystone](#), demonstrating a stir-fry with perfectly browned shiitake mushrooms and a heavy dose of sake to the 400 or so pediatricians, endocrinologists, dietitians and other health practitioners who were spending three and a half days in the Napa Valley learning how to cook. "This isn't [neurosurgery](#)," Dr. Eisenberg said as he whacked a garlic clove with the cleaver. "This is hearty, affordable, cravenly delicious food."

The son of a Brooklyn baker, Dr. Eisenberg is the founder and chief officiant of "[Healthy Kitchens/Healthy Lives](#)," an "interfaith marriage," as he calls it, among physicians, public health researchers and distinguished chefs that seeks to tear down the firewall between "healthy" and "crave-able" cuisine. Although physicians are on the front lines

of the nation's [diabetes](#) and [obesity](#) crises, many graduate from medical school with little knowledge of [nutrition](#), let alone cooking. It is a deficiency that is becoming increasingly apparent as the grim statistics climb. (By 2050, for example, as many as 1 in 3 adults will develop diabetes if current trends continue.)

To Dr. Eisenberg, flavor is a health issue. Now in its eighth year, the sold-out event is in the vanguard of a major shift in attitude among a young generation of medical professionals who grew up with farmers' markets. Their ranks include students at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, who have hired a chef to teach cooking skills, and a doctor in suburban Chicago who was so inspired by "Healthy Kitchens/Healthy Lives" that he went home and installed a demonstration kitchen in his medical office.

Doctors like Jim Fox, a 51-year-old cardiologist from Traverse City, Mich., exchanged stethoscopes for chefs' toques to immerse themselves in the fine arts of "Mastering Healthy Marinades and Grilling Techniques" and "Healthy Cooking With Nuts and Legumes."

"I want to help my patients not need my services," Dr. Fox said as he chopped rosemary for a mustard-crusting seared lamb loin. "I'd love to be put out of work."

In a place that celebrates perfect pairings (say, a riesling with a spicy chicken Madras), the combination of James Beard Award-winning chefs with heavy guns from the Harvard School of Public Health, including Dr. Walter Willett, an epidemiologist and international authority on the health consequences of food choices, could at times feel surreal.

A sold-out session called "Wine: The Latest Research on the Health Impacts Plus a Guided Tasting," taught by [John Buechsenstein](#), a winemaker, and [Eric B. Rimm](#), a cardiovascular epidemiologist from Harvard, preceded a tasting of a Washington State gewürztraminer and other wines accompanied by a geeky PowerPoint presentation. It detailed an experiment in which mice with lousy diets were given [the equivalent of 8 to 10 bottles of wine a day](#) (they did as well as regular mice). Cheers!

At a knife-skills class, Dr. Kriston J. Kent, a facial plastic surgeon from Naples, Fla., learned to make incisions in potatoes and celery. "Easier than avoiding important blood vessels," he said. He is now pursuing a public health degree. "The emphasis shouldn't all be on the knife," he said of his practice. "How you look has a lot to do with how you feel."

Satiety (rhymes with anxiety) was the mantra of the \$1,200 conclave, which serves as continuing medical education despite pleasures like chocolate-dipped apricots (a healthy snack) and recipes by well-known chefs like [Suvir Saran](#), late of the restaurant Devi in New York. Mr. Saran prepared guacamole with toasted cumin seeds, a touch he called "the Indian version of bacon bits."

“I think they’re hungry,” he said of the medical crowd. “Many doctors treat food as a clinical procedure rather than the sensual act it ought to be.”

For Dr. Eisenberg, 56, a passionate cook who spent weekends as a child filling cream puffs and sprinkling cinnamon and nuts on rugelach in his father’s bakery, deprivation in the form of low-fat diets and bland overcooked vegetables is an enemy of doctors and patients. “For years we’ve told people ‘Don’t eat that’ or ‘Here’s your problem,’ ” he said of the physicians’ party line. “Sometimes,” he added of his own thrice-yearly yearning for steak, “you have to feed your inner jerk.”

His commitment to healthy food began when his father, a cake artist who “always smelled like a cross between a cinnamon stick and a whiff of Old Spice,” died of a [heart attack](#) when Dr. Eisenberg was 10. An expert on integrative medicine, Dr. Eisenberg was one of the first United States medical exchange students to the People’s Republic of China. He started “Healthy Kitchens/Healthy Lives” in partnership with the Culinary Institute and the Harvard School of Public Health, based on the radical notion that if doctors could learn to channel their inner Julia Child (sans butter), they could serve as role models and cheerleaders for their patients.

It’s not about ego. Over the years, research has shown that doctors who practice healthful behaviors like exercising, using sunscreen and not smoking have a greater likelihood of advising patients to do the same. A study last month in the journal *Obesity* reported that overweight doctors may be less prone than other physicians to discuss diet and exercise with their patients. “We’re all human,” said Dr. Matt Everett, a now-gangly 55-year-old physician from Marysville, Ohio, who was inspired to lose weight after seeing patients in their 40s and 50s having strokes and heart attacks. “We all struggle with the same things.”

For doctors like Martin Abrahamson, the chief medical officer for the Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston, there were revelations within Greystone’s cool, monasterylike stone walls, where chefs in white glide up and down staircases with nary a glance at the school’s historic corkscrew collection. “I’ve never cooked in my life,” he said, wearing a pinstripe suit beneath his apron, his hands drenched in marinade.

Dr. Abrahamson and his cronies listened raptly as the chef Tucker Bunch talked about “the little worm that unfurls” in overcooked quinoa (he advocates toasting it). “Doctors treat salt like an exacerbator of disease,” Mr. Bunch observed somewhat wryly. “So they under-season food with religious fervor.”

Nevertheless, they soaked up the dazzling feats of culinary derring-do, especially when the chef Patrick Clark sliced an onion in 10 seconds that fell into Sydney Opera House-like curves on the cutting board.

The collaboration between the Culinary Institute and Harvard epidemiologists and nutritionists goes back to 2002, when Dr. Willett, chairman of the institute's scientific advisory board, began researching the health benefits of the Mediterranean diet. The team is now [working with chefs from mega-chains](#) like Applebee's, Starbucks and Subway, to encourage them to reduce sodium and add more whole grains, nuts, legumes and healthier oils to their menus.

Dr. Eisenberg would like to see teaching kitchens in the places that need them most: [medical schools](#), hospitals, universities, public schools and military bases. "What if teaching kitchens were as prevalent as computer labs in schools?" he asked. (He is working on a prototype.) Nutritionists often don't know how to cook, Dr. Eisenberg pointed out, "which is a little bit like [psychiatrists](#) who are all screwed up."

Yet after three days of thinking deep thoughts, all the while gorging on aromatic wheat-berry [salads](#) and peanut limeade (sounds revolting, tastes great), there was a palpable sense of a wellness tide turning.

For instance, Dr. John Principe of Palos Heights, a Chicago suburb, said that he seriously thought about quitting medicine, fed up with "a pill for every ill." Fantasizing about a second career as a chef, he attended "Healthy Kitchens" five years ago and realized that he might be able to combine the two.

He now holds a culinary boot camp in the 2,400-square-foot kitchen and lecture room he built below his medical office, where he teaches people how to whip up cauliflower crust pizza and other dishes. (The sessions qualify for insurance under the group medical appointment model.) "Instead of being in the downtrodden mode, it's given me a zest for life," he said.

At the Baylor College of Medicine, Jasdeep Mangat, a 24-year-old medical student, was a founder of Choosing Healthy, Eating Fresh (CHEF), enlisting a chef from a local bistro to teach classes for 20 students using five portable gas burners in the student lounge. "We need to walk the talk," he said.

And seven years ago, Dr. Daniela Connolly, now 40, and her husband, Patrick, bought a farm in Chester, N.H., to feed their five children healthy and reliable food.

She often runs into her patients while selling eggs at the farmers' market and sometimes when they unknowingly show up at the house to pick up their [Field to Fork Farm C.S.A.](#) boxes. They are invariably surprised by how dirty she is.

After three days of "Healthy Kitchens," she is now convinced she needs to teach her patients healthy cooking. "In a perfect world, I would have my patients meet me at the farm," she said. "That would make me a really happy doctor."