

Miracle fruit comes to the rescue; thousands of cancer patients taste food again

December 29 2016, by Monique O. Madan, Miami Herald

Her water tasted like rusty pennies; the pepperoni pizza like metallic cardboard.

The more chemotherapy sessions Monica Faison-Finch got, the faster her taste buds gave out. Over time she became thinner and thinner as her appetite diminished. Everything that touched her tongue was tasteless.

But then, a miracle happened.

"When I tried the miracle fruit before my meal, my life changed," said Faison-Finch, who was being treated for cervical cancer. "It was like the first time I had tasted food in about five or six weeks. It was like I was having my first meal."

Miracle fruit (*Synsepalum dulcificum*), which grows on a small emerald tree, is a red berry native to Ghana. People have known for centuries that eating the tiny tropical fruit, the size of a large jelly bean, affects the way food tastes. Scientists say the fruit binds the taste receptors on the tongue. After eating just one berry, the flavors of the food a person eats within the next hour are greatly enhanced.

Lemons taste like lemonade, strawberries as if they were on steroids.

Homestead brothers Erik and Kris Tietig, owners of the Miracle Fruit Farm in Redland in South Dade, have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of miracle fruit to cancer patients at local hospitals, charity

organizations and research universities since 1972.

Over the decades, as the fruit became more popular, more people began to request it and the orders became too voluminous to handle. That's when the brothers, who grew up on their parents' farm, Pine Island Nursery, built a separate farm to cultivate, sell and donate the fruit in larger quantities.

"We are called and visited by people in one of the hardest times of their life," said Erik Tietig, 40. "When we're able to help them with the miracle fruit, mask that metallic sensation and actually enjoy a meal, it's really a small victory."

The fruit itself doesn't have much nutritional value. It's the unique glycoprotein called miraculin that conceals undesirable flavors and intensifies the natural flavors of the food.

"One of the most common complaints nowadays with our patients is the very strong, metallic taste that occurs in the mouth of the patients undergoing treatments," said Dr. Mike Cusnir, director of medicine at the Mount Sinai Comprehensive Cancer Center in Miami Beach.

Cusnir said one of his patients introduced him to the fruit in his office. He said he was shocked that researchers were not doing much with the revelation that the fruit can improve taste, which "has been such a common complaint of our patients for decades."

After losing a family member to cancer a few years ago, the Tietigs were determined to help people battling the illness. They came face to face with the reality that patients often suffer extreme nausea and aversion to eating and as a result, struggle with unwanted weight loss.

"Miracle fruit is not a fad. It doesn't cure cancer or even help prevent

cancer," Erik Tietig said. "But what it does do is help alleviate terrible symptoms of chemotherapy in a very real and a very immediate way."

Although the Tietig family had been donating miracle fruit from Pine Island Nursery since 1972, the Miracle Fruit Farm didn't come into existence until 2012.

"People knew we had it through word of mouth, but over the years, we went from people calling in a dozen times a year to dozens every day," Erik Tietig said.

The farm sits in Redland, Miami-Dade County's agricultural district. The Tietigs asked that the exact location not be disclosed. The family farm grows, packs and ships the fruit four days a week for both retail and wholesale customers. Right now, the farm has about 7,000 trees, which live in a shade house. In January, another 7,000 miracle fruit trees will be planted.

The berries, which are in season year-round, are sold for 50 cents to \$1 each. The majority of the farm's production gets donated.

"The fruit is available for purchase because it's the farm's primary source of business and income," Erik Tietig said. However, he said the farm consistently donates the fruit to local hospitals, cancer centers and universities. This year, recipients included the University of Florida, Miami Cancer Institute and the Soroptimist of Homestead, an international organization that aids women and girls in need. A few local hospital systems have received hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of fruit for their patients.

"The objective of cancer care is to add life to the years more than years to the life," Cusnir said. "Anything we can do to keep the quality of life to the patient, so that we can keep the patient on the treatment by itself,

it's going to be beneficial, and it becomes a win-win situation."

But it hasn't been that easy.

Because the fruit is difficult to harvest, it took the brothers years to discover how to produce the fruit in large quantities

"The fruit itself goes bad anywhere from one to three days after being picked off the tree. Most farmers had shunned the berry, because it has no commercial viability and is highly perishable. Consequently, patients were having a tough time finding it," Erik Tietig said.

"You don't realize how important a meal is until that satisfaction is taken away from you. And the miracle fruit has the ability to restore that. We were determined."

Adamant that they would make it possible, the brothers invested their own money and built the miracle fruit farm themselves.

After years of research and trial and error, the brothers found a way to get the plant to mature quicker, a process they are keeping secret.

"We learned that we can grow them from cuttings," Tietig said. "We developed ways to clone them without altering its DNA and then grow them in a controlled environment."

In the last six months, the brothers even rolled out miracle fruit tablets, designed to have a longer shelf life than the fruit.

Their success in bringing the fruit to South Florida has broken barriers. Cancer patients swear by the fruit, saying it has brought new life during their toughest times.

Faison-Finch was able to tolerate the smell of food again; her husband didn't have to cook outside. Lynne Guadamuz of Homestead said she was able to drink water and get the nutrients she needed. Carol Sheppo of Vero Beach said spaghetti and meatballs tasted like they were supposed to taste - like spaghetti and meatballs.

"It just opened up the whole flavor of food again, and life," Sheppo said.

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Citation: Miracle fruit comes to the rescue; thousands of cancer patients taste food again (2016, December 29) retrieved 12 August 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-12-miracle-fruit-thousands-cancer-patients.html>

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