

Future doctors and nurses learning to treat patients with food

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The click-clack of knives chopping on cutting boards and the savory smell of sauteed onions filled the air on a recent evening.

Eight students from the University of Minnesota training to be doctors, nurses and counselors raced around the classroom, donning aprons instead of lab coats. Their assignment: Prepare a delicious, healthful meal to treat patients' specific health problems.

"Smells like a steak," Theodore Wang said, as he sprinkled a pinch of salt over [shiitake mushrooms](#) simmering in olive oil.

It was his last class in the six-week course, Food Matters for Health Professionals, which pairs the art of cooking with the science of using food as medicine.

Taught by a doctor and a chef, the novel course, offered through the university's Center for Spirituality and Healing, reflects a growing awareness of the link between food and health.

Instructors Dr. Kate Shafto and Jenny Breen developed the class to teach aspiring health professionals how to care for both their patients and themselves through nutritious meals and mindful eating habits.

For too long, Shafto and Breen say, information about how to cook and eat healthful foods has been the missing ingredient in [health care](#) education. They're in the vanguard of a culinary medicine revolution.

Nationwide, at least 10 medical schools teach culinary medicine, according to the medical journal Population Health Management.

"There is a growing movement across the United States to incorporate cooking and food into health care," said Shafto, an assistant professor at the U's Medical School. "Food is one of the most important things, because it's something we engage in every day of our lives."

The chef and the doctor joined forces after discovering they shared a passion for food and its power to heal.

Breen, who has a master's degree in public health, had connections to the Good Acre, an agricultural hub in Falcon Heights that provides space and support to local farmers. The class for health professional students takes place in the Good Acre's teaching kitchen and uses fresh produce grown by the local farmers.

Breen, who also teaches a class for undergraduate students called Cooking on a Student's Budget, and Shafto saw a pressing need to design a practical course for aspiring [health professionals](#).

"For a long time, we were focused on treatment instead of prevention," Breen said. As a society, "we're not incorporating this idea that eating and lifestyle are preventive medicine."

Obesity, diabetes and hypertension are just a few of the serious health problems caused in part by poor diets.

The shift from an agricultural-based society to an industrialized one has affected the food system and brought "innumerable health consequences," Shafto said.

"Our diets have been stripped of rich vitamins, fiber and minerals," she

said, adding that industrialization also has made us more sedentary and has exposed us to more pollution and stress.

PHYSICIAN, FEED THYSELF

The Food Matters for Health Professionals course covers topics such as diet and inflammation and the importance of eating healthy fats.

And because burnout and stress are common among [health care providers](#), the course also includes information about self-care. Students learn how to eat mindfully, taking deep breaths before eating, sitting down to dine with others and slowing down enough to taste their food.

Throughout the course, the students kept a journal and recorded their eating habits.

"They were amazed at how much they weren't paying attention," Breen said. They also reflected on how much their [eating habits](#) might be affecting their personal health and their ability to care for others.

For their final assignment, the students formed teams and received case studies of fictitious patients struggling with different ailments. Each team needed to make a main dish and a side dish designed to help their patient.

They moved through the kitchen with swagger, but that wasn't always the case.

"Before this course, I wouldn't say I was much of a cook at all," said McKenna Campbell-Potter, 23, a medical student. "I am becoming more confident."

Her patient was "Maria," a woman struggling with her weight. Maria

worries about heart disease and has tried several diets in the past without success.

Campbell-Potter and her teammates surfed the internet for dishes from the Mediterranean diet. They settled on making pan-seared salmon with tzatziki sauce and mashed cauliflower with garlic and herbs.

The salmon, high in Omega-3 fatty acids, uses healthy fats to add flavor and make the patient feel full, she explained. And the mashed cauliflower is a healthful alternative to mashed potatoes.

FILLING STOMACHS AND A TRAINING GAP

Campbell-Potter said she took the class after hearing rave reviews from previous students. She also hoped it would fill a void.

"Our medical education really lacks nutrition education," she said. "We don't learn what a patient should eat. This class helps to set the framework for that."

At a nearby station in the kitchen, Wang was busy slicing carrots into matchsticks.

His team chose to make Bibimbap, a Korean dish that looks like a rice bowl with kimchi (containing fermented vegetables), carrots, shiitake mushrooms, spinach, hot sauce and a fried egg on top. For a side dish, they prepared a salad with Greek yogurt dressing.

Wang, who is studying counseling psychology, said he hoped the yogurt and kimchi would help his team's patient, "Julia," a 37-year-old woman with anxiety and depression who also wants to lose weight. The case study also noted that she loves to eat at Chipotle.

He and his teammates chose their recipe because they learned that fermented foods can improve gut health, which can also help with anxiety and depression. "There are a lot of neurotransmitters in your gut," Wang explained. He and his teammates also reasoned that if their patient likes Chipotle, then she would probably enjoy the pungent, spicy flavor profile of Bibimbap.

Near the end of class, Campbell-Potter stirred the Greek yogurt, cucumber and fresh garlic in a large mixing bowl. Ashley Spindler, a teaching assistant, swooped in with a spoon.

"The moment of truth," she said, before trying it.

Campbell-Potter watched hopefully.

Spindler smacked her lips and nodded.

"It's really good!" she said.

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