

# Sharing a family meal can help those with dementia connect

December 16 2019, by Melissa Rayworth

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This image released by Netflix shows Tim Hollingsworth, chef and owner of Otium in Los Angeles appears in a scene from the cooking competition series "The Final Table." Hollingsworth, who earned the James Beard Foundation's Rising Star Chef of the Year award and served as chef de cuisine at French Laundry, learned to cook at home by his mother's side. His mother, now struggling with memory loss, is not able to participate in the cooking, but being present for the preparation and eating of familiar dishes with her son helps bridge the distance that dementia can create. (Adam Rose/Netflix via AP)

Long before Tim Hollingsworth earned the James Beard Foundation's Rising Star Chef of the Year award and served as chef de cuisine at French Laundry, he was learning to cook by his mother's side at home. As a kid, Hollingsworth would measure ingredients to help his mom make dinner, and he'd talk with her and sample the dishes as they cooked.

Today, Hollingsworth—the winner of Netflix's "The Final Table" and owner of Otium in Los Angeles—returns the favor. His mother, now struggling with [memory loss](#), sits with him as he cooks her favorite recipes, from fragrant pots of chili to comforting platters of chicken and dumplings.

Although she's not really able to participate in the cooking, being present for the preparation and eating of familiar dishes with her son helps bridge the distance that dementia can create.

When we make and share food with others, "we feel a sense of usefulness and belonging," says Sheila Molony, professor of nursing at Quinnipiac University and a gerontology researcher.

If [family members](#) with dementia can be involved in meal prep or table setting even in a small way, that may give them some sense of peace and what Molony calls "at-homeness." It helps them feel like part of the social fabric of a family or community.

"Whether we're sharing a recipe or a memory about food, we're really linking into the meaning of being," Molony says. "This food ritual can help older adults with dementia reconnect with their own personhood."

For Kim Borghoff and her family, keeping a tradition of Sunday meals

helped maintain a sense of normalcy as her husband and his father were simultaneously struggling with Alzheimer's disease.

Family meals have been a priority ever since the three Borgoff children—now in their 20's—were growing up. So when her father-in-law and husband were both diagnosed with Alzheimer's several years ago, Borghoff began making sure that every other Sunday, the whole family had dinner together.

"It was the best time, because everyone would sit around and for whatever reason, we were always laughing," she says. Sharing these meals with relatives helped both men regain a bit of their old personalities, even if just for a short time.

The menu didn't really matter: "I could have ordered pizza," Borghoff says. It was the familiar and comforting experience of lingering around the table together even after the plates were empty.

"When you're with the kids and you start talking about memories," she says, it's "good for the caregivers and the family to be able to get that person back and remember those times."



This undated image released by the Alzheimer's Association shows Kim and Jeff Borghoff, pose at a fundraising event for the Alzheimer's Association. For Kim Borghoff and her family, keeping a tradition of Sunday meals helped maintain a sense of normalcy as her husband and his father were simultaneously struggling with Alzheimer's disease. (Hugh Acheson/Alzheimer's Association via AP)

This fall, the Alzheimer's Association has been spreading the word about the connecting power of mealtime through their Around the Table program. Along with Hollingsworth, they've enlisted other chefs, including Hugh Acheson, chef and owner at the Georgia restaurants 5&10 and The National, to help spread the word.

Acheson's father, a former professor, developed Alzheimer's about five years ago. Sharing meals was always a part of their relationship, but it's taken on new meaning for Hugh Acheson as his father's memory fades.

“As a single father raising four kids and a full-time academic,” Acheson

says, his father didn't have much time to cook gourmet meals. So Acheson doesn't cook the same dishes they had years ago.

"I'm not gonna make him the burnt rice and fish sticks that he made us, which I'm sure was delivered with love," he says. Instead, Acheson might grill a good steak and simply pair it with a fresh, green salad.

"Food is so much about finding a thread of personal history where it means something to you, and I think that's as much for the caregiver as for the person suffering through dementia or Alzheimer's," Acheson says.

A good meal made with love can draw out a person with dementia and bring them real joy, he says, "even if they've completely gotten to the point where they may not have that connection to the [family](#) story."

Ruth Drew, director of information and support services at the Alzheimer's Association, often hears from caregivers about the positive moments that can happen during meals with loved ones.

One caregiver whose husband has Alzheimer's told Drew about a weekly dinner she hosts along with another caregiver whose spouse has dementia: "They've been friends for decades and they love to get together for supper," Drew explains. At these dinners, the caregiver's husband is so comfortable that "he's able to be at his best," she says. "He holds conversations. He can crack jokes."

Drew hopes that during the holiday season, families will embrace the sometimes challenging experience of sharing meals with relatives who are dealing with dementia, and that they won't feel pressure to make everything from scratch.

If caregiving leaves little time for holiday cooking, she says, families can

"do something different that is a little bit no-frills and no fuss, and focus the time and the energy on the people around the table."

Acheson agrees that the people are the priority. But he says caregivers can help themselves by making sure the meals are tasty and memorable.

"We just don't make memories over Pizza Pockets," he says. "We make memories over good food that's been cared for and means something, prepared with attention and thought and love."

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