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The Kitchen Goddess rules

Jill Welch cooks up beautiful, balanced diets

BY KATI SCHARDL • DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER • AUGUST 27, 2008

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Something heavenly happens when there's a goddess in the kitchen.

If the deity donning the apron is Jill Welch, the manna from culinary heaven is going to be beautiful, delicious and — above all — healthy.

In her guise as The Kitchen Goddess, Welch specializes in "sensual, intuitive cooking" as "educator, chef, alchemist." Her divine duties include catering, private cooking, teaching classes on healthy eating and providing nutritional counseling for just about every dietary permutation, from vegetarian to vegan to raw to traditional.

"I've always been interested in health and nutrition, and I love food," said Welch, 39, who is also a licensed midwife. "Really good-tasting food that's good for you is the ultimate (pleasure)."

The Kitchen Goddess grew out of Welch's interest in macrobiotics, which she studied 13 years ago before going to midwifery school. In evolving her own philosophy of food, Welch has adapted and expanded the macrobiotic principles of avoiding processed or highly refined foods, choosing locally grown, seasonable whole foods and creating meals that balance the yin and yang content of foods.

"I'm self-taught and experiment on myself," Welch said. "I see a need to shift lifestyle (into balance), and diet is such a good way to start to do that. You feel the results immediately.

"Our bodies are constantly trying to come into balance. The more your diet is centered, with whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables, the fewer seesaw cravings you'll have, and your (overall) behavior will also become more balanced."

Welch's clients include folks who want to change their lifestyle and eating habits in general, as well as those dealing with illness. Tallahasseean Gary Perkins, who was diagnosed with colon cancer two years ago, is one of the latter.

"When I was diagnosed, I wanted to make some changes," said Perkins, 59, who serves as executive director of the Florida Sheriffs Association.

Perkins and partner Lesley Allen began thinking about incorporating raw foods into their diet. At New Leaf Market, they saw a flier for one of Welch's cooking classes.

"We went to one of her programs and got more interested in what she was doing," Perkins said. "It was along the same lines of what we wanted to apply to our own lives."

Perkins and Allen started a home-study course in raw foods and learned how to create healthy meals. But they struggled to make the food tasty. That's where Welch stepped in.

"We learned that Jill would personalize a program for individual clients," Perkins said. "Having her work with us accelerated our learning process. She really got us on our feet in coming up with an assortment of meals that are good for you and tasty as well.

"For six to eight weeks, she would come over two to three times a week. It was great from a learning standpoint, but it was also great to come home from work and have a meal waiting for us."

"Part of what I do when I'm cooking for somebody, especially someone who's ill, is intuit how to cook for them by getting their history and learning their personality," Welch said. "I find out who they are and what they're about, and then



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Jill Welch, who specializes in healthy eating as The Kitchen Goddess, cuts up a cucumber before placing it in a jar to ferment at the Green Living Center. (PHIL SEARS/Democrat)



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Welch displays a jar of kimchee, a pickled cabbage popular in Korea. (PHIL SEARS/Democrat)

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What: The Kitchen Goddess — Jill Welch.
Contact: Call 443-2953 or visit www.thekitchengoddess.org.

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I can make food that will help balance them."

Perkins, who said he wasn't much of a cook before being diagnosed with cancer, said that he believes his change in diet and lifestyle has helped him deal with the chemotherapy treatments and also has put him in a better physical position to fight the cancer.

"I don't necessarily see natural foods as a cure for cancer, but I do believe (the change in diet) has boosted my immune system and has also helped my body address the cancer and fight against the disease," he said. "I wanted to maximize my metabolism to withstand the chemo treatments and ward off the disease. I feel better about being more in control and not just a passive participant in my treatment."

The Goddess showers blessings on groups as well as individuals through classes, many of which are sponsored by New Leaf Market, which supplies ingredients and advertises the workshops. Welch recently taught a luncheon workshop on how seaweed, uncommonly used grains, healthy oils and other ingredients can enhance the flavor, nutritional value and beauty of natural foods for a women's ministry group from Holy Cross Anglican Church.

"It was extremely educational," said Pat Benedict, who hosted the luncheon. "Most of the women there didn't know much about healthful eating or health foods.

"(Jill) gave us a lot of tips, and she's very good at presenting her information. The food was very good, and my husband even said he enjoyed it."

"Jill talks about savoring your food and making it more than just an eating experience," Perkins said. "She teaches you that (cooking) doesn't have to be labor — it can be an act of love."

Welch was happy to share the love with readers by giving us her lasagna recipe — Perkin's favorite dish.

Jill's Vegan Pesto Lasagna

3 to 4 zucchini, washed and cut in half length-wise and then sliced

1 bunch chard, washed and chopped

Olive oil

Italian herbs

1 box lasagna noodles (rice, artichoke or sprouted-grain variety)

Sauce:

Olive oil

1 large onion, chopped

4 cloves garlic, sliced thin

1 to 2 cups sliced mushrooms of choice

1/2 cup kalamata or green olives, cut in half long ways (optional)

1/4 to 1/2 cup sun-dried tomatoes, chopped (optional)

Red chili flakes or chopped fresh jalapeno pepper to taste

2 bay leaves

1 strip of kelp or kombu (seaweed)

2 cans organic crushed tomatoes or 10 to 12 fresh tomatoes, pureed

Basil

Oregano

Sea salt

Pesto:

1 bunch fresh spinach

1 handful of raw walnuts

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3 cloves garlic

Extra virgin olive oil

Celtic sea salt to taste

Saute zucchini in small amount of oil or water until tender. Add chard at the end to wilt. Add herbs and salt or soy sauce to taste. Set aside.

Make sauce by sauteing onion, garlic and mushrooms in olive oil until soft. Add olives, sun-dried tomatoes, red chili flakes or jalapeno and cook for just a minute or two. Add bay leaf, kelp or kombu and canned or fresh tomatoes. Bring to a boil then turn to very low to simmer. (Use a cast iron pan for the sauce to add iron to your meal.) Add basil, oregano and salt to taste.

Cook pasta according to directions.

Make the pesto by putting all pesto ingredients in food processor and process until smooth. Adjust salt, garlic and olive oil to taste. Set aside.

To put it all together: Spoon some sauce into bottom of a 9x11 casserole dish. Put a layer of noodles next, then spread the pesto liberally along the length of each noodle. Layer the zucchini-chard mixture on top of that, then spread another layer of sauce. Repeat one or two more times, ending with sauce. Bake at 350 for 30 minutes or until bubbly. Remove from oven and let sit before serving. Tastes even better the next day!

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