

You are what you eat.

Welcome to SBH Bronx Health Talk produced by SBH Health System and broadcast from the beautiful studios at St Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx. I'm Steven Clark.

The food of Arthur Avenue notwithstanding, which is more a destination to tourists than a mainstay for those who live in the community, the Bronx can be called a food desert, with limited access to food that is both affordable and nutritious. Many fast food restaurants, stores and bodegas in the community push sugar-laden drinks and fattening, unhealthy fare, which is why it's not surprising that the Bronx leads the city and the state in rates of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and other chronic illnesses that are directly related to diet. In its mission to transform the health of the Bronx, the SBH Health and Wellness Center opens this fall. Included with a medical fitness center, a rooftop farm, an urgent care center and women's and children's centers, will be the Center for Culinary Medicine and Teaching Kitchen. With us today to discuss the mission of the teaching kitchen is its director Chef Emily Schlag who is also a registered dietitian. Welcome, Emily.

So I'm guessing the mission of the teaching kitchen simply put is to educate people in the community on eating healthier, right?

Yes, that's correct. So in the teaching kitchen people will learn about nutrition but they're going to learn that through hands-on classes in the kitchen. So we're not just going to tell them what to eat, we're actually going to show them how to make that food themselves so that people are more empowered to make those better choices when they go home.

Is it necessarily expensive to eat healthy?

I think it depends. It definitely can be expensive to eat healthy but you really can eat healthy on any budget. The issue is that you need to know what you're doing so if you're not sure how to eat healthy sometimes making those more affordable choices can be hard to do.

Will people be encouraged to avoid those foods they may have grown up with?

I never want to tell someone to avoid a food completely unless they have something like a food allergy in which case they definitely should avoid that food. But I do want to encourage people to choose more of the healthy foods and to see some of those foods that may be very high in saturated fat or salt or sugar as more of a treat that they don't need to avoid completely but that they should try to limit in their diet.

Give me an example of how you take for example you know a family favorite or a traditional meal and turn it into a more healthy meal.

So one thing that I try to do is first take a look at how much sodium is in this dish because that's one thing that I really see commonly is that we're using salty ingredient after salty ingredient and making our food well-seasoned and really delicious but the sodium content can be really high and that's why we see really high rates of hypertension. So my first thing is okay how can we still season this food and make it delicious but reduce the salt and that comes down to a lot of different techniques to build up the flavors of our food such as utilizing salt-free spice blends, utilizing foods with umami in them, making them delicious while lowering the salt at the same time so we don't have to completely give up that food. We just need to make a few modifications to it.

I guess a lot of people are happy when they hear that that it doesn't mean not eating you know a beans and rice favorite that they've been eating since they were a child.

Yeah for me honestly beans and rice is one of my favorite foods. I love beans. They're a legume, they're a great source of fiber. They're a vegetarian source of protein. They have complex carbohydrates to them and they're cheap so beans are a great food. It just comes down to how we're preparing them and that's something that can easily be changed.

So who exactly are you teaching and what kinds of classes will there be?

So we are teaching classes to a wide variety of audiences. Our main audience

being the Bronx community. So we will be offering community classes and this is really going to be open to anyone. It could be a patient at SBH that's referred to the teaching kitchen by their medical provider or it could be someone from the community that hears about the classes and just wants to learn how to eat healthier.

Now I understand a certain amount of classes, if you're eligible, will be offered at no cost, correct?

Yes, so we received a grant from the Mother Cabrini Foundation to be able to offer free cooking classes to 125 participants and those participants just need to be a resident of the Bronx in order to participate.

Okay that's a great opportunity and we can talk more later as far as you know how you can get information and how you can apply. But as of right now I understand this is not the first time that you've been involved in a program like this. You've done a similar program elsewhere. Why don't you tell us about that?

Yeah so I actually just moved to New York in January. I came from New Orleans, Louisiana where I was working for the Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine at Tulane University and that was another teaching kitchen, the first of its kind. It was the first teaching kitchen to be affiliated with a medical school. So that teaching kitchen was started as a way to provide better nutrition education to medical students because medical students in this country are not required at all to receive any kind of nutrition education which is kind of shocking and so their goal was to provide that hands-on nutrition education by getting med students into the kitchen and that expanded to the community as well so we provided a community curriculum again to anyone in the community to come and learn how to make healthy meals and New Orleans while not totally similar to the Bronx does face a lot of similar health disparities. So there are very high rates of diabetes and obesity and hypertension in New Orleans so we were kind of combating some of the same things that we're combating here in the Bronx and trying to get people to take those dishes that they love and just make them a little bit healthier.

Did you find you were able to make a difference in health outcomes?

Oh yeah people that came to our classes really loved them. We offered a six-week curriculum and so class one everyone's a little skeptical at first they're like "I don't know about these whole grains and low sodium," but if you can actually get someone in the kitchen and make this recipe themselves and then taste what they made we found that they really liked it and they wanted to keep coming back. They would come back each week and tell us how they made these recipes for their family and their families loved it and we had a lot of people that would come back months later and say that their A1C is down or their cholesterol levels are better or that they've lost weight. They really saw a great improvement in their overall health after coming to those classes.

If you're a listener and you're interested in this give us an example what would a beginner's course include, what would it be like?

So in our beginners course we focus on just basic cooking techniques because we want to make sure that everyone starts at the same level and we're always going to get some people that know what they're doing and some people that have never touched a knife before in their lives. So we want to make sure that people just have the basic cooking techniques down. So that's going to be your knife skills, how to cut an onion, how to mince garlic, up to how to saute something or how to roast something and then we focus a lot on flavor development and how we can get great flavor in our food, again without relying on too much salt and sugar, and we also try to show people how easy it can be to incorporate more vegetables, more whole grains, more legumes into their diet without spending too much money. So we focus a lot on cheap ingredients, easy recipes, things that can be made in under 45 minutes.

I heard the term "Health meets Food" and I guess that's the name of the curriculum. Tell us a little bit about that if you could.

"Health meets Food" is the name of the curriculum that we will be using with our medical residents and also staff members and medical professionals in the area. So that is a 33-module curriculum and those modules are condition- and disease- specific, meaning each module focuses on a different topic whether that be hypertension or diabetes or approaches to obesity. Each module has a

set menu that relates to the topic at hand and we're showing medical professionals how they can combat these diseases through food and nutrition.

I understand you actually held a resident cooking demo, what a week ago? How did that go?

It went really well. So we did a completely virtual cooking class. We were all together just on our screens and I essentially helped coach the residents through the recipes that they were cooking and everybody they picked the recipes ahead of time from a set menu, bought their ingredients, prepped everything ahead of time and then we all cooked together at the same time on our screens which can be kind of hectic sometimes but it went really well. That topic was sodium so we were talking about sodium reduction and flavor building which I think is so important to understand because they were honestly shocked by how good their food could taste at under 500 milligrams of sodium per meal. We all cooked together. We discussed our recipes and the cooking techniques that they used and then at the end of class we had a case study that we discussed and so our case was a person who had a really salty diet and after cooking the residents got some ideas on recommendations that we could make to this patient to make some lifestyle modifications and have a healthier diet overall.

Now I know you wear two hats. You're a chef. You're also a registered dietitian and you've been in the Bronx now for six or seven months. What is the reason from your perspective that the diet in the Bronx perhaps is not a healthy one?

I think there's a lot of different reasons that go into it. Lack of access is definitely a big one. When you don't have access to one of those bigger grocery stores that's able to offer a wide variety of foods at an affordable price it can make it difficult to make those choices. Education can be another one. If you don't know what food is healthy or if you don't know what you're supposed to pick it can make that trip to the store kind of stressful and if you don't have the funds, if you don't have the money to be able to afford some of the foods because you don't know how to shop for those cheaper ingredients that are still healthy that can be another reason why people aren't eating healthy as well because it's much easier to go for that two dollar or three dollar combo meal and

just make a really quick and easy choice even if that choice might not be as healthy.

I know you're also involved with Project EATS and with the rooftop farm that's also going to be part of the SBH Health and Wellness Center. Why don't you tell us about the role you're playing in that?

Like you mentioned Project EATS is operating the rooftop farm at the new Health and Wellness Center building and we right now are running a farm stand at SBH every Friday from noon to 5 pm. Right now we're offering a farm share program to SBH staff so the farm share is like a, it's a CSA which stands for community supported agriculture and it's a weekly bag full of produce whatever is fresh and available that week that the staff members that have signed up for the program are able to pick up every Friday and then we're also offering what we're calling a farmacy program, so this is essentially a prescription that SBH patients can receive for fresh produce from Project EATS so right now anyone that's referred to us from SBH for the farmacy program right now if they come to the farm stand on Fridays they receive a free bag full of produce.

Now I understand this is produce that is produced in Project Eats other urban farms throughout the area now that the food that's going to be available from the rooftop farm at the SBH Health and Wellness center should also be ready in the not too distant future, right?

Yes it should be available this fall. Unfortunately, Project EATS had an issue earlier in the growing season where their water to the roof was shut off and not working so they weren't able to get enough water to their crops to have a sustainable crop harvest this summer but that issue has been resolved and this fall we should get a pretty decent harvest. It's going to be mainly root vegetables so we're going to be looking at things like beets and also alliums such as onions and green onions.

You know another thing as I'm sure you know we have about a quarter of a million honeybees on the rooftop farm producing honey. I would assume that you probably have some good recipes with honey, right?

Yes, I really enjoy cooking with honey. I'm not afraid of sugar and I don't want people to be afraid of sugar, but we want to make sure that we're not using too much in our food so cooking with things like honey can be a great option because that honey has that extra flavor to it. It's not just pure sweet like your regular granulated sugar is going to be so when we can use honey and replace white sugar with that we get that added extra boost of flavor from that honey.

So the SBH Health and Wellness Center will be opened in October. If somebody wants to sign up for a class or get more information how would they get that?

So if anyone wanted to get some more information about the teaching kitchen or anything that the wellness center is offering they could go to our website which is sbhwellnesscenter.org. If they want specific information about the teaching kitchen they can always email me at chefamily@sbhny.org. Right now we are not signing anybody up for classes just with everything that's going on with Covid we want to make sure that we have good guidelines in place and are ready to offer safe, socially distant classes before we start signing people up for those

So they can call you to find out if they're eligible for free classes with the Cabrini grant are also to sign up for classes as well which I guess are not that expensive either, right?

No we're trying to keep the classes very affordable. Like I mentioned a lot of people in our neighborhood especially may struggle with having extra funds to be able to afford a cooking class and we don't want to exclude those people so we do want to make sure that everything is affordable for the community that we're trying to serve.

Okay, well Emily, thank you very much for joining us today on SBH Bronx Health Talk. For more information on services available at SBH Health System visit www.sbhny.org and thank you for listening today. Until next time.