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Michael S. Fenster, an interventional cardiologist, professional chef, author, and University of Montana faculty.

BROOKSVILLE – Food can be healing. So, it's no surprise that Dr. Michael S. Fenster, an interventional cardiologist, professional chef, author, and University of Montana faculty member, would be eager to promote the health benefits of culinary medicine, particularly during a global pandemic.

What better time to get the attention of a population than during a health scare, when the focus is on optimal health strategies? As families self-quarantine against this "invisible enemy," known scientifically as COVID-19, many are seeking information about healthier options to nutrition and fitness regimens.

In his research, Fenster ask people who have so much free time to devote to changing questionable habits, or adapting new ones, why not look at food from the purchase, preparation, and consumption in a healthier light – which are the basics behind Culinary Medicine.

Culinary medicine, as defined in an accredited introductory course taught by Fenster at the University of Montana, is a "multidisciplinary application of evidence-based decision making in the selection of ingredients and techniques used in

preparing foodstuffs with a goal of achieving and maintaining health and wellness through an optimized food experience.”

In layman’s terms, it’s the practice of culinary medicine that can heal the body and mind, promote a foundation of healthy habits, and strengthen immune systems to better tackle illnesses.

As more information on COVID-19 unravels, one thing has become clear – a strong immune system is most successful at fighting any virus, COVID-19 included. And building a healthy defense begins with what we consume nutritionally, how foods are sourced and how we prepare for consumption, according to Fenster’s research.

Fenster had a successful private cardiology practice in Brooksville and has authored several books, including “You Are What You Eat” and “The Fallacy of the Calorie,” as well as several articles for Psychology Today. He has appeared on “The Doctors” and hosted his own cooking shows. He currently instructs a college course in Culinary Medicine at the University of Montana. An Introduction to Culinary Medicine is one of the first university-based and accredited courses in Culinary Medicine in the country.

“There are programs and instructions that originate from a culinary/hospitality-based background,” Dr. Fenster writes in an article titled “Culinary Medicine” that appeared in Psychology Today. “Many of these seem to simply add some nutrition to contemporary culinary teachings; endless recipes featuring kale and quinoa come to mind. Some appear to originate at the fringes of naturopathic/holistic ideology and eschew any semblance of medical science whatsoever. Others are principally aimed at weight loss or something that can be marketed directly to consumers. Still, others spring from the hallowed halls of venerable institutions rehashing the same tired guidelines and recommendations that have failed so epically over the last half-century. The image of those kale

and quinoa recipes returns to complete the circle of boredom.”

Crafting and consuming healthy dishes offer more than just a nutritional boost, Fenster teaches. The art of cooking can spill into healthy relationships as well, he said. And what better time than now to bring “aspiring chefs” onboard to a new way of thinking about food preparation?

“I’m a professional chef,” Fenster said. “And as a chef, I appreciate food. I don’t want to eat junk, but I want to eat food that has flavor. I love a good burger as much as the next person. And it turns out that how we raise our food makes a difference. A grass-finished bison burger is a completely different animal from an ultra-processed drive-thru offering.

“Every chef and foodie gets that,” he continued. “But in medicine, we often lump them together as ‘red meat.’ That’s just wrong. And now we have the science to prove it. It is all about sourcing and balance.”

But how is the balance obtained in a rational manner?

“There’s a lot of pseudoscience that goes on out there,” Fenster said. “And there are a lot of unreasonable expectations.”

For instance, it isn’t reasonable to expect people to eat only for nutritional need, he said. “We gave up eating for nutrition probably about 10,000 years ago. Folks have been eating for enjoyment and adding flavor forever.”

Consider, too, that food is inextricably linked to our emotions.

While examining nutrition is smart, it isn’t possible to fully remove the emotion. Food is an existential experience, Fenster added. “There is no salvation in deprivation.”

The goal, then, is to strike a balance.

"We really see an almost schizophrenic nature in our approach to food," he said.

Fenster explained what he meant by calling attention to the irony in modern programming. An episode of some show highlighting extreme eating might feature commercials advertising products focusing on weight programs or products.

"What happens, and what I find when I'm talking to people, is that we bounce," he said.

People get into a routine of gorging for 12 weeks during the holiday season only to fast after Jan 1.

"That's a sprint," he explained. "How long is that going to last?"

"Culinary Medicine is about how to eat sensibly every day over the long haul," he continued. "But culinary medicine is also about more than what is on the plate. Just as how we raise food matters; it turns out how we eat matters, too. Culinary Medicine is all about life. It's all about relationships. And each of us has a relationship with the food we choose to eat."

He explains that choosing healthier foods to prepare for consumption is much like choosing healthy relationships. Culinary medicine is about bringing joy and empowering relationships, he said.

"Food is hardwired currency in the tribe of humanity," he added. "Before you eat, stop and find a moment you're happy about. Rituals prior to eating change neurochemistry."

And he encourages families to practice culinary medicine together during this quieter time, when sheltering in place can inspire new bonding activities. Children can be brought in to learn traditions and specific cooking techniques.

In an article titled "Culinary Medicine: Beyond the Evidence," that appeared in Psychology Today on Feb. 3, Fenster wrote,

“It is the spark that ignites dreams of pleasure for one about a simple sun-kissed tomato fresh out of the garden in the summertime, and the swoon for pasta with red sauce served with local white wine in an ancient stone café overlooking the Mediterranean in another. In both cases; it is about much more than a tomato; and so are the long-term effects.”