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## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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URBAN GARDNER | JUNE 3, 2010

# Healthy Eating Need Not be Sour

By RALPH GARDNER JR.



Here's some counter-intuitive advice for Michelle Obama, Michael Pollan and all those other do-gooders who want to end childhood obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and our dependence on corn, oil and Coca-Cola, which I freely admit I can't go without for long: add a little sugar.



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Mustafah Abdulaziz for The Wall Street Journal

Parents and guardians of 50 children who attend P.S. 171 at 19 East 103rd Street in Manhattan preparing farm-fresh food.

The suggestion arises from something my daughter Gracie told me about working last summer at the Sylvia Center, a nonprofit that educates children about proper nutrition through visits to its farm in upstate New York and cooking classes at its kitchens in SoHo. She was making strawberries and cream for the kids who attend the program to prove that fresh fruit can be just as delicious and infinitely better for you than Twinkies or Yodels.

I could argue about that (the only thing better than a perfectly fresh Yodel is its British cousin, the Cadbury chocolate mini-roll), but I'm more than willing to get with the program, within limits. The outrage, apropos the strawberries and cream, is that my well-intentioned

daughter—she isn't volunteering with the Sylvia Center because she thinks it will burnish her college brag sheet, but because she's a dyed-in-the-wool foodie and a genuinely good person, cross my heart—is that she wasn't allowed to add sugar to the whipped cream.

How do you expect to convert kids to healthy eating when their dessert topping tastes like sawdust? Go ahead and wean them (and me) of our addiction to crappy snacks. But do it gracefully.

I tried to raise the issue with Nina Bernstein Simmons, the Sylvia Center's education director, but my pleas fell on deaf ears. Ms. Simmons confessed that she doesn't even like dessert, much less need it.



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So when I showed up at P.S. 171 in East Harlem, where the Sylvia Center was holding graduation ceremonies for 50 students who'd been taking cooking classes and getting lessons in good nutrition since last September, I was filled with skepticism and a little dread.

The purpose of the event wasn't only to honor the kids but to get their parents to show up. "We wanted to do a culminating activity with some of the parent community," explained Bryan Powell, a teacher at the school who runs the program. "If you teach the kids about healthy eating but not the parents, there's going

to be a disconnect when they go home."

I sidled up to a table of kids drinking smoothies they'd made from bananas, strawberries and yogurt. "Is it sweet enough?" I asked Vanessa Rojas, a first-grader. "No," she stated flatly. My point exactly.

Robert Santiago, a construction worker and P.S. 171 parent, was attending with his three children. "Everybody thinks when you try something healthy it's going to taste nasty," he said. But he added that he did try to serve his kids good food, things like grilled chicken and salad. "You'll be surprised what these kids will eat if they don't know what's in it," he said.

Contrary to popular conception, Mr. Santiago said it isn't hard to find healthy food in East Harlem. "It's just that people choose not to," he said.



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His daughter Ariel, a seventh-grader, said her favorite junk food was Laffy Taffy. "It's colored sugar," she laughed. I made a mental note to try some.

The graduation festivities included spanikopita, hummus wraps, summer rolls—all made by the kids with the assistance of Sylvia Center chefs—and a brief lecture by Dr. Joy Friedman, an adolescent-medicine specialist, about proper nutrition and the evils of whole milk. There was also a raffle where autographed cookbooks and kitchen utensils were given away, and the all-important presentation of diplomas.

If there was any disappointment surrounding the event, it wasn't over the lack of processed sugars, but that more parents didn't attend. Gracie told me she asked one girl she knew why her mother hadn't come. "She said because she had to take care of the babies at home," Gracie said.

It makes one realize that despite everyone's best intentions, getting kids to eat right is more complicated than it seems. Nonetheless, after seeing how enthusiastic these children were, how open to new foods and tastes (they produced a cookbook and took the microphone, many of them fearlessly, to pronounce their favorite dishes) and how proud to receive their diplomas, it's hard to imagine that some of what they've learned here won't remain.

As the event wound down, the children gathered around Ellen Emerson, the program's head chef, for a final hug. "The past two or three months their focus and concentration has been amazing," said Ms. Emerson, a recently retired Navy commander who is taking a year off to do volunteer work while attending cooking school. "I think they're at the right age, the younger ones especially. The younger you get to them, the longer it stays."

The spanikopita was long gone by the time I got to the buffet table but the hummus wraps weren't at all bad—especially dunked in Thai sauce. I'd almost be willing to take back what I said about everything tasting better with sugar, except I noticed the recipe for the Thai sauce includes some. Here it is:

- 3 tablespoons finely chopped onion
- 1 small garlic clove, minced
- 3/4 teaspoon dried hot red pepper flakes
- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 3 tablespoons water
- 1 tablespoon creamy soy or peanut butter
- 1 tablespoon hoisin sauce
- 1 teaspoon tomato paste
- 3/4 teaspoon sugar

#### Preparation

Cook onion, garlic, and red pepper flakes in oil in a small heavy saucepan over moderate heat, stirring, until pale golden, about 4 minutes. Whisk in remaining sauce ingredients. Simmer, whisking, 1 minute, then cool.

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