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Lettuce Eat a Variety Every Day

My mother fed eight children on a tight budget and succeeded in not only making the food delicious and wholesome, she also made it look good. As we were being served, she would pronounce with satisfaction as she placed the final touches on our plates, “There, the meal should always be colorful.” Being a product of her time, as all of us are, her choices of color in the 1950’s meant an appetizer consisting of a dollop of cream cheese on a ring of canned pineapple, served on a leaf of iceberg lettuce. Today, this might translate into sliced pear with Gorgonzola and candied pecans over bay mixed greens.

Fortunately, I was spared canned vegetables. I can recall the day the chest freezer arrived and how my mother filled it with pride. Frozen peas and canned peas, I discovered, are two different animals. Vegetables, both frozen and fresh were always part of a meal and fruit was sometimes baked or stewed. Food was softer in the fifties, now that I think of it.

I have often wondered about my mother’s mantra of a meal always being colorful. Was she aiming only at presentation? Or, did she know that eating a variety of foods is important for nutrition’s sake and that a colorful meal also resulted in a meal with a variety of foods? She wasn’t one for elaborating on her reasoning. That was my father’s domain. It doesn’t matter in this case, though, because I learned this important lesson from her. Gazing upon an attractive meal and breathing in the delicious fragrance whets our appetite. By the time we taste the food, all our senses have been engaged (That is, if you helped with preparation. Another good reason to let children and visitors help.) The meal becomes a satisfying time for body and soul while fulfilling our nutritional needs.

And we do need variety.

The more colorful foods are not only rich in fiber, vitamins and minerals and phytochemicals, but also rich in antioxidants needed to chase away those bad free radicals. At websites such as Produce for Better Health Foundation and many others promoting “5 A Day”, you can download educational materials for your children, view recipes and learn tips on making healthy choices when dining out. You will even learn that indulging in dark chocolate (in moderation) is a good thing.

The kaleidoscope of gorgeous summer colors is just beginning to showcase outdoors, and yet, local produce is not ready. We face the challenge of keeping our diet healthy with fresh, colorful foods. Let’s teach our children that dandelions are not only for the fun activity of blowing away the seeds while making a wish; they taste great, too. Chives are out and peas are still going strong.

If your children are refusing to taste new foods, ease up and try what I did. I was a master of disguising foods. Wheat germ was simply called “crunchy stuff”. We sprinkled it on sandwiches and salads. If they couldn’t identify it, they couldn’t complain about it. This is where the blender comes in. (I did not have a food processor back in the day.) Onions and spinach and kidney beans were always given the blending treatment. One time I even blended them all and added the mixture to meatballs. “Mmm...!! These are the best meatballs ever!” they exclaimed that night.

Another trick, I mean tip, is what I call the Tom Sawyer approach. You make something for yourself and don't offer it to anyone. As your children become curious about what you are eating, just say nonchalantly, "Oh, it's just some soup." "I really like it, but I didn't think you would." You just wait. They'll get curious and the next thing you know they will be asking you for a taste.

The current health challenge at the town hall is to eat five vegetables and/or fruit each day. Many find it very difficult; others find it easy. It is worth the effort to eat well by eating a variety of colorful foods every day. It is good for you and, after all, Mom knows best.

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