



Birmingham News (AL)
Birmingham News (AL)
Volume 118,

July 4, 2005

Helping cancer patients eat well

Birmingham doctor creates dishes palatable during chemotherapy

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Section: LIFESTYLE
Page: 1-E
Estimated printed pages: 5
Article Text:
HEALTH

Marilyn Rushing wondered if she'd lost her taste buds.

Since starting chemotherapy in April to treat early stage breast cancer, the Sylacauga woman has experienced fatigue, weakness, nausea and weight loss. "I

Feel like I have the flu and can't get over it," she says. On top of all that, nothing she ate seemed to taste good, if she could detect any flavor at all. One day recently, while undergoing chemotherapy at Dr. Luis Pineda's Vestavia Hills clinic, she decided to sample a couple of food items her doctor had prepared for his patients.

"I tried the goat cheese with peppers, and it was great," Rushing, 36, says. "My favorite was this other cheese thing with a dried tomato on top. I've got to get the recipe for that."

That's just the reaction Pineda, a hematologist/oncologist, had hoped for when he began designing and preparing recipes for his cancer patients, specifically those undergoing chemotherapy. His goal was to boost appetite by activating taste buds, and also to offer dishes with ingredients to help with such chemotherapy side effects as constipation, diarrhea and inflammation of the mouth and throat. He also uses ingredients heavy in cancer-fighting antioxidants.

At Pineda's Web site, www.luisfpinedamdpc.com, cancer patients and caregivers can print out more than a dozen of his recipes, and the doctor continues to add to the list every month. He hopes one day to produce a recipe booklet that will be available free to any cancer patient.

Pineda's cinnamon ice cream with guava granite recipe includes whole milk, egg yolk, sugar and a cinnamon stick, guava fruit, water and arbol pepper, which, together, may stimulate appetite and reduce gastrointestinal problems, he says. His melon soup with lime sorbet contains sliced melon, orange juice, lemon juice, sparkling water, orange zest, lemon zest, cornstarch and habanera pepper powder. It can soothe mouths inflamed by mucositis, an ulceration of the mouth and/or throat common to chemotherapy patients, he says.

Common sense

Pineda points out there is no science or research behind his chemotherapy dishes. He says he uses a common-sense approach, based on his observations over 25 years of treating cancer patients, and also his recent training as a chef at Culinard, the Culinary Institute of Virginia College, in Birmingham.

"Any oncologist will tell you that people with cancer, especially those having chemotherapy, don't eat like normal people," Pineda says, sitting in his office, surrounded by art work evoking his native Guatemala.

"Through the years, I've heard all their stories. I had one patient tell me he can eat off a paper plate, but not one that's porcelain. When you think about it, that makes sense, because porcelain will reflect the smell, where paper will not. I had another patient who said, 'I feel like a pregnant woman. All I want is fried sausage with mustard on a plain piece of bread.' Everybody seemed to crave something unusual."

Pineda, who loves to cook, began experimenting in his kitchen at home a couple of years ago and then decided he needed some help. At Culinard, where he spent nearly every Saturday for two years in chef school, Pineda learned not only how to create recipes, but how to prepare dishes and present them in a pleasing, eye-

catching manner. (Since graduating Culinary, he's even had a few job offers as a chef, Pineda says.)

"Luis is really passionate about what he's doing," Culinary chef instructor Mike Buttles says. "He's got that kind of drive. He told me he wanted to pair his knowledge in oncology with my knowledge of taste and food physiology. He told me right off that he was doing this for his patients." At Culinary and through his own research, Pineda says, he gained an understanding of how ingredients stimulate certain taste buds, and how others soothe inflamed membranes.

To stimulate appetite, he uses various peppers, including habanero, julienne and papaya. "Different peppers stimulate different sides of your mouth," Pineda says. "They stimulate taste buds, and also blood circulation in the areas, which improves taste and helps sores in your mouth to heal."

His guava cupcakes recipe, he says, can help with diarrhea (guava has long been a home remedy for the ailment). He also uses cheeses, whole milk, melons and other fruits to provide nourishment and to guard against dehydration. Every dish is served cold.

The strong taste of the peppers, coupled with ice cream, fruits and cheeses, won't necessarily appeal to the normal consumer, Pineda says. "I work on this at home every weekend, and I've tried these dishes on my children. They say, 'Ugh, Dad, what are you doing?'"

"You know, I'm not sure yet that what I'm doing really appeals to my patients," Pineda says. "They tell me, 'Oh, yes, this is great, that's great,' but maybe they're just trying to be nice. I think it will take more time to tell."

But Rushing, who will undergo chemotherapy for another three months (after a monthlong break), says the dishes she's tried taste good and filled her up (Pineda instructs patients to eat small servings many times a day.)

"I can't wait to see what he'll come up with next," she says.

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Record Number: MERLIN_2602088