

Vestavia oncologist brings tastebuds to life

By Bob Carlton
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As he made his hospital rounds, Vestavia Hills oncologist Luis Pineda kept seeing the same thing from one patient's room to the next.

Trays filled with food that had hardly been touched.

Containers of nutritional drinks that had not been opened.

Cancer patients who, for various reasons, had lost the desire to eat.

"The next step is they put in a tube, and then start feeding them through the tube, which I think is inhumane," Pineda says. "You end up giving them intravenous nutrition."

It didn't have to be that way, he thought.

So Pineda, who loves to cook, began testing recipes in his kitchen — recipes that he hoped would stimulate his patients' taste buds, arouse their appetites and make food enjoyable again.

Pineda took it a step further and enrolled at Culinary, the Culinary Institute of Virginia College in Birmingham, where, after attending cooking classes almost every Saturday for two years, he earned his stripes as a chef.

Six years ago, he combined a quarter-century of experience treating cancer patients with his newfound culinary skills to start his nonprofit Cooking With Cancer, a program whose

mission, he says, is to help those suffering from cancer enjoy a better quality of life through good food.

He has published a cookbook, "Prescription Guide to Taste: A Cooking Guide for Cancer Patients," and put together a companion DVD, "Cooking With Cancer," both of which he gives to his patients. The recipes also are available at www.cookingwithcancer.org.

"As I become older, I really and truly begin to realize that, in the practice of medicine, it's more important the quality of your life rather than what I can do in terms of prolonging your life," Pineda says.

"We have made a lot of good progress in terms of medical expertise and the way we treat people, but still, people die," he adds. "So my thought process was that I wanted to do something that would enhance the pleasure that people will have in eating."

Pineda's recipes include some peculiar-sounding creations — such as jalapeno ice cream with pickled ice, melon soup with lime sorbet, and green tea flan with queso fresco and roasted pepper.

The ingredients, however, often work together to help cancer patients, especially those undergoing chemotherapy, deal with such side effects as nausea, diarrhea and inflammation of the mouth and throat.

Many of his recipes call for peppers because they act to enhance the senses of taste and smell and, eventually, make eating pleasurable again.

For patients whose mouths or throats are inflamed as a result of their chemotherapy, Pineda has created several ice cream dishes because the ice cream is soothing, melts in their mouths and is easy to swallow.

One of his patients is Audrey Burchfield of Grayville, who is undergoing chemotherapy treatment for lung cancer.

Burchfield loved to eat home-cooked vegetables but had lost her taste for them because of her treatment, she says.

"That's one of the things I was having a lot of trouble with," she says. "They just didn't taste like vegetables should."

In April, Pineda gave her a copy of his cookbook, and after she tried out some of the recipes, her sense of taste started to return to normal "almost immediately," she says.

The combination that he had in his recipes would, like, cleanse the palate of your mouth or open your taste buds to where you could taste," she says.

Burchfield has tried the jalapeno ice cream, as well as the tri-color vegetable terrine (with spinach, cauliflower, carrots, unflavored

gelatin and chicken stock) and the olive chowder (with Vidalia onion, green olives, cubed potato and chicken stock).

For Burchfield, the magic ingredients in all of the dishes are the peppers — jalapenos in the ice cream, cayenne pepper in the vegetable terrine and habanero pepper in the chowder.

Now, she says, her appetite is back to normal, and she eats pretty much whatever she wants.

But she does kick it up a notch.

Fresh peppers

"If I go out to eat, I use whatever pepper they have on the table," she says. "But I've learned that it's not as good as using the fresh (peppers)."

To raise awareness about the Cooking With Cancer program, Pineda and Antony Osborne, the dean at Culinary, have put on cooking demos at Pepper Place Saturday Market, and, through the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center, will host a series of demos at Culinary over the next four months.

Their goal, Pineda says, is to gradually get cancer patients to enjoy eating again, one bite at a time.

"This is something that is (for) today," he says. "The whole idea is that at the moment of suffering, there will be a way of trying to make it right for you."



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