

Metro & Northwest

COMMENTARY

Food as medicine, and a fresh start



Samantha Swindler

Eggs, almond milk, cumin, a plastic baggie of diced tomatoes. These are not the usual items brought into a prison.

But once a week at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, a group of volunteers unloads a large tote of food items for inspection. They aren't allowed to bring in metal cans, so the women with the Food as Medicine Everyday cooking program for inmates pour tomato sauce and beans into sealable plastic bags.

If you are what you eat, the cooking course wants to make the women of Coffee Creek whole.

Specifically, the course shows inmates how to cook with whole-food ingredients that haven't been highly processed and don't contain additives.

"When they're incarcerated, the focus is on rehabilitation," said Julie Briley, a naturopathic doctor who teaches the program at Coffee Creek. "This is a way to get their lives set on the right track."

The cooking course is immensely popular at the prison. At the moment, there are more than 100 women — that's about a sixth of the prison's population — on the wait list. The program is coordinated through the National University of Natural Medicine and paid for through private donations.

Up to 15 inmates at a time can enroll in the eight-week course. Each Wednesday, they spend about 30 minutes preparing a meal and another 30 minutes in a nutrition lesson, followed by time to enjoy the food together.

"I can cook in the microwave, but that's about it," inmate Geri Olson said, as she chopped peppers with a kitchen knife tethered to the table. "Both my parents are diabetic, and I want to be able to cook better food for them when I go home."

Susee Davis signed up because, "I'm nervous to cook for my kids when I get back."

Davis will be released in about 10 months after serving a six-year sentence. Her son and daughter will be 11 and 10 years old when she gets out, and she'll need to relearn what they like to eat. She's been reading



Greens grown in the prison garden are used during a Food as Medicine Everyday course at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility.



Nichole Simmons, left, and Geri Olson cut peppers Oct. 12 during a Food as Medicine Everyday nutrition class at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. Photos by Samantha Swindler / staff

Food Network Magazine in prison to get ideas.

"I just can't wait to cook at home again," she said.

Last week, the women cooked cornbread and vegetarian chili, topped with avocado and cilantro rather than sour cream and cheese.

It was the first time Davis had eaten avocado in nearly six years.

The cooking program offers healthy takes on traditional foods: Their veggie chili also

Food as Medicine Everyday

The Food as Medicine Everyday program also offers 12-week courses to the community at Charlee's Kitchen in Portland. The next series begins Jan. 4, and costs range from \$299 to \$599 for individuals or families. For more info, visit foodasmedicineinstitute.com.

Find the recipe for the program's Bean and Veggie Chili and Easy Cornbread online at oregonlive.com/samantha-swindler.

The classes are also the first time many of the women have gotten answers to their nutrition questions. Briley said some of the inmates are diabetic or pre-diabetic, and "no one has ever explained it to them" in a way that makes sense.

Lest you assume these women signed up just for the hot meals, the inmates were engaged and asked questions during last week's lesson on understanding food labels.

One woman gave a description of partially hydrogenated trans fats as something that "causes heart disease and plaque build-up, and it's bad for your body." Another was able to name the parts of a grain: bran, germ and endosperm.

This is either evidence that they retained far more from middle school science than most of us or — more likely — that women who previously took the course are sharing what they learned about nutrition. Every woman I spoke to had signed up for the course on the recommendation of a fellow inmate.

Years ago, I served on the board of a food bank in rural eastern Kentucky. We noticed the people who came for help — most often women with children — would skip over bags of rice and flour and instead grab frozen pizzas. It wasn't because they were lazy. It was because no one had ever taught them how to cook rice or use the flour.

That was a light bulb moment, and the board worked with the local extension agency to develop cooking classes for the pantry's customers.

Such programs are important as fewer students take home economics (or family and consumer sciences as it's known today) and obesity rates rise.

If you didn't learn cooking and nutrition at home growing up, where will you ever learn it?

The prison course is, potentially, a gift that keeps on giving. When they go home, Olson can share these recipes with her parents and Davis can cook with her children. It sets in motion a wave of awareness that can have a long-term impact on families' health.

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