DOCTOR-TURNED-CHEF PRESCRIBES DELICIOUS FOOD

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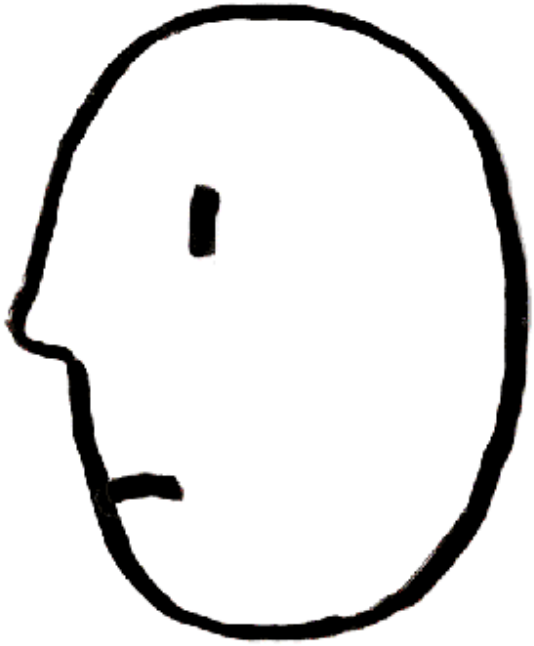


ILLUSTRATION BY CATY BARTHOLOMEW

By Leila Darabi

In April of 2019, Lenox Hill Hospital announced that it had hired a former physician as its new executive chef. Born in France, Georges Masraff served in Doctors Without Borders, treating refugees around the world before leaving to pursue another passion: food. He earned Michelin stars at two separate restaurants in Paris before pivot-

ing careers again by moving to New York and eventually taking over the food program for Lenox Hill.

As Lenox Hill, like all of the city's health facilities, filled during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, patients at the Upper East Side hospital enjoyed an experience that ran counter to stereotypes around hospital food. I know, because my father was one of those patients.

Due to some complications from a surgery to improve his leg circulation and then a life-threatening antibiotic resistant infection, my father ended up eating more meals than not in hospital beds over the past year—in the ICU and then the cardiac ward at Lenox Hill and later in a series of post-op rehab centers.

We were incredibly lucky. My father never contracted COVID-19 and has now returned home, where he can cook and enjoy the fresh—and well-seasoned—foods he loves. His hospital experience served as a wake-up call for our entire family, driving home the privilege of access to fresh, organic produce. At the rehab centers in particular—which in New York State tend to be long-term nursing homes with short-term rehabilitation wings—the selection for a diabetic nearing 80 were not just slim; they were nonexistent.

With COVID-19 restrictions limiting visiting options, and long lines limiting our access to the Coop, healthy food took on new value. It became a precious commodity earned by standing in a long series of lines: the line to get tested, the online lottery to book visiting time, and finally, the line to get into the Coop.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE CAFETERIA TRAY

During his time in the hospital, as we worried about treating his infection and restoring his ability to walk, my siblings and I found ourselves also preoccupied with my father's diet and especially his access to foods that wouldn't send his blood sugar soaring. That's when we first read the story of Chef Masraff, a proud tale printed on the

back of menus at Lenox Hill. During the brief stints when my father was out of the ICU but not yet carted off to a rehab facility, he received a new menu each day—and it made him nearly giddy.

LENOX HILL DESCRIBES CHEF MASRAFF'S MANDATE AS: "TO TRANSFORM TRADITIONAL HOSPITAL FOOD INTO WHOLESOME RESTAURANT-QUALITY FARE."

"I love his soups!" My father told me during a visit, trying to get me to taste a spoonful under my mask.

Lenox Hill describes Chef Masraff's mandate as: "to transform traditional hospital food into wholesome restaurant-quality fare." To be clear, the results are closer to high-quality room service than a high-end restaurant, but compared to traditional hospital food, it's a revolution. Patients order their meals room-service style from a menu coded with symbols like hearts to indicate a heart healthy option. In the cardiac ward, my father was only allowed foods with hearts and if he asked for two carb sides, they asked him to select again—a far cry from the mashed potatoes and fried chicken served daily at another facility.

The foods that arrived—chicken tarragon salad full of fresh herbs and grilled fish with roasted vegetables—were fragrant and well-balanced. They were colorful and fresh, just like the food we typically cook at home with ingredients from the Coop.



THE SCIENCE

While the benefits of fresh and delicious food are anecdotally understood by any member of the Coop, research confirms that eating fresh, healthy and colorful food is good for both body and spirit.

A 2016 study published in the American Journal of Public Health reported that people feel better with each added serving of fruits and vegetables. The authors analyzed food diaries from more than 12,000 Australians and found that each serving increased people's immediate sense of happiness, and that over time a diet that included more fruits and vegetables led to greater happiness and satisfaction.

Similarly, the Cleveland Clinic recommends a diet of complex carbohydrates, lean proteins, and colorful foods to boost happiness and well-being.

And *The New York Times* reported earlier this year on two long-term studies published in the journal *Neurology*. These studies followed nearly 100,000 men and women over more than 20 years and found that eating colorful produce—including brussels sprouts, strawberries, winter squash and raw spinach—were associated with less cog-

nitive decline.

MEMBERS RETURN FOR FAVORITE FOODS

On a recent Sunday, the first truly crisp fall day of the year, a short line of members waited to enter the Coop. People in line expressed pleasure at the short line and excitement about the fresh food they planned to buy.

“Apples are in season right now, and pears. We eat them raw or sliced in salads,” said Tom Protos. “I’m trying to eat more salads because right now there’s an abundance of vegetables. And it’s better than snacking. We’re still working in a hybrid model, and I became too friendly with the refrigerator.”

Selene sat outside the Coop while her father shopped. “I’m excited about organic fruits and vegetables,” she said. “Especially strawberries.”



Ken, who shopped less frequently at the Coop during the peak of its long lines, said

she missed the vegetables and fruit most of all. “And those homemade [Court Street Grocers] sandwiches,” she added.

Nearby, Aga loaded bags onto her bike. “I just rejoined after being away for 15 years,” she said. I really missed the freshness and the quality of all the food that’s here today.” A new kind of berry ice cream topped her list of foods to boost the spirits.

For Emmy, it was organic cheese puffs. “Those definitely boost my spirits.”

“This time has made me especially appreciate a well-stocked pantry,” Emily Stone said. During the pandemic she cooked an entire Thanksgiving dinner for one, sourcing from the Coop and local farms. On this day, her boxes included traditional kettle-style tofu. “It feels very homey and comforting and safe and nutritious,” she said.

Over the past year-and-a-half, health and safety precautions—and daunting lines—have created obstacles for many Coop members to easily access the brain- and spirit-boosting foods we typically get at the Coop. Though our shopping lists vary, members agree that access to healthy, delicious and colorful food is at the top of the list of member benefits.

On my own list that day: cumin seeds, butternut squash, lentils, kale and haloumi cheese for a joy-sparking lunch I planned to enjoy with my father.