

The



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Help for the Holidays

By Meredith Cohn | Sun reporter
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The Challenge: Megan Waters had lost more than 100 pounds, and she was looking for healthful inspiration during this season of temptation. A personal chef brought some new ideas to the table.

Megan Waters is a model of balance. Work, family - and food. With the help of Weight Watchers during the past two years, the Glen Burnie kindergarten teacher and mother of two has lost 120 pounds and is just about 20 pounds away from her goal weight.

She's someone who now understands what healthful portions and healthful foods look like. But so many meals later, Waters says she's begun depending too much on the same "safe" things to

feed herself and her family. For a little help, Waters volunteered to participate in The Sun's Make Over My Meal series.

As a vegetarian, she also was beginning to fret about the holidays. The "vegetable" tends to be more cream than green this time of year.

"You think of meat at the holidays, but side dishes can be a struggle," she said.

"In general, I've gotten into a rut. I know the safe things. I'd like to add some variety," she said. "I have a family of nonvegetarians. So it has to be pleasing to everyone."

We knew a lot of people would like to eat a little more healthfully during the holidays and year-round. But they don't always know where to go for some quick and tasty new recipes. We turned to Danielle Turner, the chef behind Great Taste - A Personal Chef Service, which serves the Baltimore-Washington area.

Turner makes a living solving such dilemmas. As a personal chef, she comes up with meals for busy people, for people on special diets and for people hosting private and corporate events. She teaches cooking. And she also feeds her own husband and 4-year-old.

We went to Waters' house one recent evening and watched Waters prepare her pre-holiday specialty - baked ziti. (Weight Watchers doesn't put any food off-limits; it assigns points based on a food's fat, calories and fiber. Waters typically has a small serving along with a salad.)

With the baking dish full in the oven and the smell of comfort food in the air, Turner turned to a bowl of vegetables on Waters' counter.

After reviewing Waters' needs, the chef wanted to create a recipe that would solve both the everyday- and the holiday-meal issues without putting off Waters' nonvegetarian husband and kids. She decided against anything with tofu.

Waters also did not want to serve her family "diet" food.

She didn't want to saddle her 10-year-old daughter with negative ideas about weight. She didn't want to make food "good" or "bad." Dinner should just be healthful, enjoyable and eaten in moderation, she said.

Turner came up with something French, but not too foreign. Something healthful, but not lacking in spice. Something easy and versatile, but not boring: a ratatouille, or a vegetable stew.

"It's a comfort food without all the calories," said Turner. "The colors are just so pleasing."

She kept the tomato theme, though these were the sun-dried kind. And she added interchangeable vegetables for variety, including eggplant, red and green peppers and onion. With a sharp knife, Turner made small, uniform pieces that would cook evenly in one pan.

She suggested serving the ratatouille on rice or couscous, which cooks a bit faster. And if Waters wanted her old standby pasta, she could prepare the meal with fresh tomatoes that are juicier and provide more of a sauce.

A little feta, parmesan or mozzarella cheese on top, or served on the side, could give it more of the baked-ziti vibe.

The ratatouille also could be served cold on some greens as a salad or on pieces of crusty bread as a party appetizer. And it could even serve as a noncreamy vegetable side dish at a holiday dinner.

Waters liked the idea of making a large batch for dinner and having leftovers.

As the ideas flowed between the women, Turner also threw out some other new twists on the old pasta dish. Keep on hand fresh or frozen vegetables, such as peas or spinach, that can go in the boiling pot of water at the end of the pasta cooking time. She suggested tossing with fresh or sun-dried tomatoes, olive oil and garlic.

Instead of chopping raw vegetables for a salad, cube and roast them to put them on lettuce. Serve over rice for a main dish.

Turner also suggested adding new flavors to old standbys. Microwave a sweet potato until it's soft, then scoop, mash and mix with a little orange juice for flavor. Or dice sweet potatoes and toss with olive oil, salt, pepper and herbs or red-pepper flakes and roast until tender. Add wasabi paste or horseradish sauce to mashed white potatoes for zing.

But back to the dinner table. After Turner left, Waters reported that she made some couscous and called her family.

The verdict? "Yum," she said.

And as for the holidays, Waters thought the ratatouille would make a fine recipe for her family, guests and herself - even if she planned to take one day off and also eat some more traditional, and less healthful, fare.

Danielle Turner's Sun-Dried Tomato Ratatouille

Serves 6

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 large onion, cut into 1-inch pieces

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 green bell pepper, cut into 1-inch pieces

1 red bell pepper, cut into 1-inch pieces

1 medium zucchini, cut into 1-inch pieces

1 medium eggplant, cut into 1-inch pieces

1 cup sun-dried tomatoes, diced

3 tablespoons fresh basil, chopped

salt and pepper to taste

Heat oil in large sauté pan or skillet over medium-high heat. Add onions and garlic and sauté until onion begins to soften, about 3 minutes. Add peppers, zucchini and eggplant and sauté until vegetables are tender, approximately 10 minutes.

Add sun-dried tomatoes and basil. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve over wild or brown rice or couscous.

Courtesy of personal chef Danielle Turner

Per serving (without couscous): 102 calories, 3 grams protein, 5 grams fat, 1 gram saturated fat, 14 grams carbohydrate, 5 grams fiber, 0 milligrams cholesterol, 192 milligrams sodium

Potato Sauté With Caramelized Onions and Mushrooms

Serves 6 to 8

6 cups potatoes (about 2 1/2 pounds), peeled and cut into 1-inch pieces

3 tablespoons olive oil (divided use)

2 cups onions, sliced

2 cups shiitake mushrooms, sliced

salt and pepper to taste

1/4 cup fresh parsley, chopped

Place potatoes in medium pot and add just enough heavily salted water to cover. Bring to a boil and boil until potatoes are tender, about 4 minutes. Drain and rinse under cold water until cool. Pat dry and set aside.

Heat 1 tablespoon of olive oil in large skillet over medium-high heat. Add sliced onions and cook until onions soften and start to brown. Add mushrooms and sauté until golden, about 3 minutes. Place onion-mushroom mix in bowl and set aside.

Add remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil to skillet over medium-high heat. Add potatoes and saute until potatoes are golden brown and cooked through, about 10 minutes. Return onions and mushrooms to the pan and season to taste with salt and pepper. Remove potatoes from heat and stir in fresh parsley.

Courtesy of personal chef Danielle Turner

Per serving (based on 8 servings): 196 calories, 3 grams protein, 5 grams fat, 1 gram saturated fat, 36 grams carbohydrate, 4 grams fiber, 0 milligrams cholesterol, 11 milligrams sodium