

## Let's Eat!

*Fried Chicken, Mashed Potatoes with lots of melted butter, macaroni and cheese, collard greens cooked with fatback, a large square of home-made cornbread and a large slice of frosted carrot cake. Delicious!*

News item after news item has chronicled America's bout with obesity. Research has shown that obesity claims the lives of 300,000 people every year. Fitness experts proclaim the sedentary lifestyle of most Americans as the root cause. Nutrition experts point to the amount of *fast food* consumed by the average person. Diet experts preach specialized diets which focus on a particular food group (such as carbohydrates or protein) as a *banned* food group to eliminate from your daily diet. Culinary experts complain about the loss of rich foods in the wake of fad diets and processed foods. Exercise programs promise a healthy physique through hard work. Consumers are either sold on a deluxe product which drops weight with minimal effort or an intense regimen which chisels the body. Fad diets pledge a healthy body through sacrifice and restriction. Consumers are either sold on a magic pill which melts away pounds or a regimented menu which identifies a food group to avoid and one to increase. Medical procedures are also available to shrink our stomachs to help us eat less. Cooking programs occasionally address healthy eating through limited recipes such as salads, but more often avoid the topic. Tantalizing dishes described, cooked and presented are sometimes discussed with alternative ingredients to make them healthier. But how the cooking may change with those different ingredients is not discussed. Nor is the difference in taste examined. Anyone who may try the recipe as described, with alternative ingredients but without understanding how the preparation has to likewise be changed, may find the completed dish often unappetizing.

Fashion magazines flash with a slender ideal. Physical conditioning magazines boast pumped-up perfection. Larger than life magazines invite us all to accept our individual sizes. Missing from all of these discussions is a complete solution to a complete problem. We are now living longer. Even as we enjoy and respect our individual sizes, the true question becomes quality of life as we age. We want to be healthier as we live longer. Health care costs, in particular maintenance (prescriptions), surgeries and medical equipment are skyrocketing. We can realize massive savings in health costs and increase our enjoyment as we age if we can stay healthy. The answer is a combination of what we eat (when and how often) and how active we are. For those who enjoy eating good foods, there must be a healthy solution which is also satisfying. For those who are not intense athletes, there must be a healthy activity which is also fun. This article discusses the practical approaches to lifestyle changes which can lead to a healthier, longer, happier life. You can eat the foods you love, and still be healthy.

### The Problem

An Obstetrical & Gynecological Survey in July 2005 listed Obesity as second only to tobacco use as a threat to public health. In the New England Journal of Medicine, some authors have predicted that the average life expectancy of Americans could decrease 2 to 5 years in the coming decades as a result of the effects of obesity. September 2007's Scientific American magazine examined obesity throughout the world, contrasting it with famine in some of the same parts of the world. A report released by Trust for America's Health in August 2007 defined factors in obesity rates and detailed the rates rising in different states throughout the country. The top ten most obese states in the country are in southern states, with Mississippi as number one (followed in order by Alabama, West Virginia, Louisiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Indiana, South Carolina, and Texas). 31 states have shown an increase in obesity

rates, most notably linked to poverty rates. Scores of studies, many sponsored by the group offering a solution, have explored the topic from any number of angles.

Obesity is defined as more than 20 pounds over optimum weight. Body Mass Index (BMI) is a popular measurement for determining where you are right now. The BMI is calculated as weight in Kilograms divided by your height in meters squared ( $m^2$ ). For the weight in pounds, it is the weight divided by the height in inches squared ( $in^2$ ), times 703 for the conversion. In other words,  $BMI = ([weight (lbs)] \div [height (in)]) \times 703$ . BMI's less than 18.5 are considered underweight. Followed by 18.5 to 24.9 (Normal), 25.0 to 29.9 (Overweight), 30.0 to 39.9 (Obese), and more than 40.0 (Extremely Obese). This year, modeling guidelines for prominent designers have been offered which require models to have a BMI of greater than 18. The proposal is controversial within the fashion community. It is bewildering to imagine taking issue with such a low recommendation. When using BMI, it is important to remember that it is related to weight. And weight includes muscle as well as fat. Anyone who has lost muscle mass (such as the elderly) could be incorrectly identified as underweight. Anyone who has built up their muscle mass (such as athletes or athletic amateurs) could be identified as overweight using the BMI. A 5' 7" model at 110 lbs has a BMI of 17.2, clearly underweight. On the other hand, someone at 145 lbs and the same height has a BMI of 22.7, which is in the healthy range.

Recent studies have shown that 65% of Americans are overweight. In the African-American community for example, 70% of African-American women are overweight, compared to 60% of African-American men. Eight out of ten people over 25 are overweight. More than 75% of Americans do not regularly engage in any basic physical activity (25% are completely sedentary). There are documented increases in various health issues (diabetes, cardiovascular problems, and high blood pressure, among others). Children are absorbing the eating habits of their parents. In this era of *fast foods*, a survey of children has found the perception that franchised fast foods tastes "better". The convenience and low cost create long term eating habits which are difficult to overcome. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, since the early 1970's childhood obesity rates in children 6 through 11 years of age have tripled (rates for children 2 to 5 and 12 to 19 have doubled). Today, more than 16% of young people ages 6 to 19 are overweight. And 80% of overweight children become overweight adults. Besides health issues, overweight children have increased issues of self-esteem. In addition to designing an adult solution, we also need to model solutions for our children.

## The Culture

Food is a foundation for American culture, including most immigrant cultures within the country. People bond over food for family celebrations, private meetings, company events, and community gatherings. It is the one activity you can be assured everyone will participate in. As long as the menu considers different tastes and eating habits, everyone will find something to eat and drink. Having the food slows down the attendees to talk together, spend time and share experiences. Family time is also often around food. Church gatherings, reunions, weddings, births, and graduations all call for a communal meal in which the participants are expected to consume large quantities of the prepared food to show their support. It is always the person who is not eating who is called to question for not participating. In American culture, clearing your plate has always been a symbol of not being wasteful and appreciating the food provided. Generally, no one investigates what or how much is put on the plate to be cleared. In the African-American community, not only is the plate to be cleared, but if the eater is thought to be "too small", they are encouraged to a second helping to fix that "problem". The prevalence and ease of

obtaining food in richer nations has led to an over-consumption. We don't just eat when we're hungry. We eat when we're bored, when someone else we're with is eating, when we're tired, when the food is conveniently available and when the smell of someone else's food suggests to us that we want to eat.

Even exercise is sometimes centered on food. Back lot ball games and tail gate parties at sporting events provide an opportunity for excess eating for anyone who participated in the games. We feel it's ok to eat more food because we have played an hour of basketball, soccer, baseball or football. (Sometimes we think it's ok to overeat even if we just *watched* an hour of sports!) Food and drink available at these events are dense calories, and very difficult to burn. Overall we probably gain more calories at such events than we lose. Many people who've never run a marathon are familiar with the pre-race ritual of eating pasta. This adds to the view that overeating is justified by a related physical activity. The truth is that marathon racers have all been training hard for a long time for an intense physical activity. Loading up on carbohydrates prior to a 26 mile race is not the same as eating heavy servings of meats and breads after an hour of running and jumping.

This is not to say that flavorful, satisfying foods can't be eaten at these events. It's an opportunity to examine what is cooked and look for alternatives.

## The Society

We are all shaped by our habits from childhood regarding food and exercise. We assume the way those foods were prepared when we were younger, is the way they are meant to be prepared. We further assume the foods we ate are the best foods to be eaten. We rarely even investigate other cuisines or styles of preparation outside of our upbringing, except for the exotic opportunities to *eat out*. The communal effect of these assumptions is we reinforce the negative for each other. We rarely come together in healthy consumption. We have actively investigated eating disorders and behaviors as more members of the population have experienced the effects. In a quest towards a smaller society, we have been beset by anorexia, bulimia and disorders affecting eating too little. In a quest towards a more accepting society, we have been overcome by overeating and behaviors affecting not managing what we eat. A busy, fast-paced lifestyle has made it difficult to find time to prepare full meals for ourselves which can be more readily (and sometimes more cheaply) prepared by someone else. Even with the rise of food preparation shows, we are fast becoming a nation of people who don't cook. And of those who do, we are separated even further between those who cook heavy, high caloric meals and those who prepare faster meals using more pre-made processed ingredients which are also high in calories.

Our children have taken a cue from this fast-paced society. We are often too busy to make breakfast at home before school. If they do have breakfast at home, it is a cereal high in sugar and low in nutrients, or a heavy meal of eggs, bacon, and sausages. Some of our children buy store-bought sandwiches of eggs and bacon or even eat snacks such as potato chips and soda on the way to school in the morning. Preferred meals of pizza, hamburgers, hot dogs, and French fries with desserts of honey buns, cup cakes, ice cream and cookies fill out the rest of a day's eating. Our children often go an entire day or days without any vegetables or fruits. But if properly prepared, children can be enticed to eat healthier meals they will enjoy. They can be introduced to healthier snacks they will still find desirable. Introducing our children to new tastes will expand their diets and begin their journey towards a healthier lifestyle.

## The Food

*Marinated Grilled Chicken, Sautéed Potatoes in virgin Olive Oil, Penne pasta with a light blue cheese marinade, collard greens cooked with turkey necks, a medium square of home-made Mediterranean flat bread, and a large bowl of fresh mango, cantaloupe, pineapple and apple chunks, with a light sprinkle of brown sugar. Delicious!*

We do not often try new food styles if we haven't already been introduced to them. If we do try something and do not like the taste, we often never return to that food. In fact, nearly all foods can be delicious. It is all in the preparation. Taking foods we love and preparing them in new, interesting, and flavorful ways is one of the keys to eating well, continuing to enjoy the foods we love and either obtaining or maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Part of the effort is to learn how to cook using alternative ingredients. Adding oils and lards to any foods could add an additional 200 to 500 calories to the food being prepared. It's important to be aware of what types of fat are in the oil you use. Saturated or Trans Fats, which raise the *bad* cholesterol (LDL cholesterol) are Fats to avoid. Mono-unsaturated and Poly-unsaturated (including Omega-3 fatty acids) Fats lower the *bad* cholesterol and raise the *good* cholesterol (HDL cholesterol). These Fats can be used in moderate quantities. Watching the fat content, good choices of oil would include olive, sunflower, safflower, canola, flax seed, and peanut. Oils to avoid would be vegetable shortening, coconut oil, palm oil, solid margarine and butter. In addition, knowing the so-called "smoke" point of the oil (the temperature at which the oil will burn) is important to determine if the oil of choice can be used for the type of cooking you wish to do. For example Olive Oil, while a wonderful cooking oil, has a relatively low smoke point (375°F). It is unsuitable for frying but perfect for sautéing and general cooking. However as the cook, you can't leave the oil on too long in the heating pan before using it. Oils from plants (like Peanut, Walnut, Grapeseed, Sesame and Flaxseed) have unsaturated fat but should be used sparingly because they are also high in calories.

One of the things we want to avoid is not eating at all. Starvation is not a healthy diet plan. Eliminating foods altogether often has the effect of making us overeat later in the day in compensation for not eating earlier. Or, our body becomes accustomed to not eating, we begin to under-eat and we don't get the vitamins and nutrients we need. The fact is that you can maintain and improve your metabolism (the rate by which you burn calories) by eating more frequently. Eating 5 to 7 small meals per day, including healthy snacks, will increase your metabolism. The more smaller meals you eat, the higher your metabolism. The higher your metabolism, the more efficiently and effectively your body burns the calories you take in.

## The Preparation

Self-help books, articles and diet programs define extreme lifestyle changes which remove all of your favorite foods and insist on heavy physical activity. If the solution is too complicated, it's often easier to simply not begin at all. So, where to begin? To start, don't set your goals too high (or too low). Using a fad diet for a temporary, short-term event such as a wedding, reunion, or party will only produce temporary results. It may succeed for the specific event, but after the event you will fall back quickly if positive behavior is not incorporated into a lifestyle change. Add healthy foods to your *diet*. We will use the word *diet*, properly, to simply mean the foods you eat. Not necessarily a special, programmed, diet.

Begin to add exercise to your life. Studies have shown that 30 minutes a day of medium-level activity, 3 times a week, is sufficient to improve and maintain your health. This could break down to 15 minutes of activity in the morning, and 15 minutes in the evening. You could do something as simple as getting off your bus or subway one stop earlier (or getting on, one stop later) and walking the difference. You can try different classes in your local gym or YMCA to see if you have any interest in some of the new popular activities such as yoga or pilates, the classic activities such as external martial arts (Karate, Judo, Tae Kwan Do, etc), weight training, biking or running, or more non-standard activities such as internal arts (Tai Chi, Chi Gung), dancing, or *spinning*. It is critical to find something you enjoy which doesn't feel like work. If you enjoy it, you will do it more often. Decide if you like doing something with a group. Besides the classes above there are also amateur sport groups (football, baseball, soccer, basketball, tennis). Or if you prefer activities you can do alone, without the necessity of a gym or expensive equipment, yoga or Tai Chi may be of interest.

## The Plan

The start of anything you want to do in life is to make a plan. It does not have to be a complicated, multi-page business plan with charts and graphs. Writing it down can be very helpful but if you prefer to think through the plan without writing it, as long as you are planning it (and can remember what you decided), that is what counts. Set smaller, incremental goals. These could be 3 month, 6 month, 12 month, and 18 month goals, which you evaluate and revisit as the period passes. Determine where you are right now. What is the state of your health right now? Are there any specific health issues in your family (including extended family) right now? Is there an aspect of your physical state you've noticed and want to change (i.e. weight, flexibility, strength, stamina, balance)? Don't be stopped at this stage. Your first *plan* can simply be the affirmation that you want to explore new dishes to start to create a healthier lifestyle. You can begin by one new dish a week. You can walk around the block where you work or live for a few minutes during the day. Small steps are important steps. Don't feel you can't begin because you can't figure out a complicated or loftier plan. Or because your plan isn't like your neighbor's plan. Your body is also not like your neighbor's. Ideas from others can be useful if they encourage you to proceed, but useless if they cause you to avoid the problem.

## The Steps

Make your first plan to start. You'll make others. Set incremental goals you can be successful with and move on to the next goal. Build on those successes to the next level. Research the foods you like and what calories and nutrients they provide. The internet provides an easy way to perform this research. If you do not have internet access at home, go to your local library and use their internet services, or check out your local newsstand for some of the many articles on the subject. There are books in the bookstore or library you can read which gives you calorie counts for various foods and activities. Keep notes on that information in your kitchen for your review as you prepare your meals and snacks.

Follow your plan. Find people in your life who are excited about supporting you in what you're doing. Everyone may not be supportive. Look for those who are and connect only with those. Your plan does not have to be advertised to be effective. It may in fact be more effective if only you and your support network know what it is. It is helpful to have people you can talk to about ideas, setbacks, issues and successes.

Adjust your plan. Coming off the plan is ok as long as you return to the plan. Assess how far you came off and how much more needs to be done. Do not be discouraged. As any good baseball fan can tell you, successful ball players fail 70% of the time. Thomas Edison famously said he knew he didn't fail, he just found 10,000 ways that didn't work! Once you fall off your plan, try again armed with your new information.

Repeat! As you reach your incremental goal, return to the beginning step. Make a (New) Plan. Follow the Plan. Adjust the Plan. Repeat.

## The Budget

Avoid Fad Diets. Avoid restrictive commercial diets such as low carb, no carb, high fat, low fat, no salt, no protein, all vegetables/fruits, etc. Avoid labeling any food group as good or bad. Learn the nutritional value and caloric count of your favorite foods. All food can be *good* food when prepared in a healthy way and eaten in proper proportions.

Control your Portions. Learn the serving sizes of the foods you eat. You may consider yourself eating small portions but your portions may still be larger than the serving size for that food. Serving sizes as listed on nutrition labels of commercially bought foods are often different than serving sizes in the original FDA food pyramid. For example, a serving of bread is about one slice, one ounce of cereal, or ½ cup of rice, or pasta. A dairy serving is about 1 cup of milk or 1 and ½ ounces of cheese. A fruit serving is one piece of fresh fruit or ½ cup chopped fruit or ¾ cup fruit juice. A serving of meat is about two or three ounces. Equivalent proteins could be two eggs, or 1/3 cup of dry beans. Understanding these portions, you can fill your own plate accordingly and determine the portions of a commercially prepared plate to adjust how much you eat.

Create a Food Budget. Make different choices throughout your day to account for an extravagance (i.e. special treat) later in the day. Making different choices means different portion sizes and healthier foods, not the elimination of foods. You want to mentally budget for any eating of unhealthy or dense foods. Eat such foods sparingly and only on occasion. It's important to avoid using foods as a reward. If you eat healthier throughout the day, reward yourself by affirming you will do so tomorrow. If you are able to sustain your plan, reward yourself by buying a new outfit! Occasionally eating foods that you enjoy but are not the healthiest choices will not derail your plan as long as you "budget" for it and keep from making it a regular practice.

Plan your meals. Create a food shopping list based on intended meals and snacks. Buy only what you put on your list. Go food shopping for large items once a month (perishable and fresh food items once a week). Prepare meals once a week. Prepare daily portions from the weekly preparations. Plan your lunches. Find healthier desserts you also find satisfying. Keep healthy snacks in the house. If it's not in your home, you won't as easily eat it. Sometimes these choices are a little more expensive. Limiting money spent dining out will support the healthier choices in groceries.

## The Cycle

It's time to break the cycle. Infrequent physical activity lowers metabolism. Combined with a high caloric unbalanced diet, this increases health issues and weight gain. The extra weight increases strain on knees, hips and ankles, reduces mobility (because of pain), which reduces physical activity, which further lowers metabolism. The lower metabolism along with an increased high caloric/unbalanced diet (due to the more sedentary lifestyle) makes health issues chronic and adds to weight gain. A healthy body is not always a small body. The goal is health, not necessarily size reduction. You will find as you live healthier, your body will respond in kind.

Find ways to maintain a regular physical regimen. Find exercise partners who will encourage you as you encourage them. Find two or three different activities that you enjoy to participate in so that you don't feel bored in the process. Check organizations in which you are active (clubs, churches, etc.) to see if there is any interest in creating a shared group activity. Some creative examples include churches that have started "Praise dancing" groups which learn dance routines to spiritual songs that can be performed for the congregation at church functions, as well as yoga gatherings, and intramural sport groups such as over-30 or over-40 softball clubs or basketball teams. Or maybe you just go on a "walk-about" in your neighborhood with a few friends and a bottle of water. With the camaraderie you are having fun while you are staying active.

## The Keys

Plan ahead. We need to become a *slow food* nation. Planning meals ensures you eat the healthiest meals. Even if you're going to purchase pre-made meals, learn the areas you work, live and shop in and where the healthiest meals can be found so you are not forced to eat processed fast food because you don't have time to look for alternatives. Most fast foods are focused on a sandwich or hamburger, with chips or fries, and a soda. Even with meal-oriented fast food (with meat, rice, vegetables) such as Chinese food, many people order fried dishes – fried rice, fried chicken, French fries, instead of steamed/sautéed lean meat, brown rice and sautéed mixed vegetables. Buy enjoyable snacks in advance and take them with you to work so you don't have to eat from the vending machines. Your personal commitment to change is key in your success. You don't have to compete with anyone else. Decide what you want for yourself and make those choices. Remember this is not an indictment of your lifestyle or your family's. It is a commitment to a longer, healthier life for yourself and by extension for your family. You will be around longer to be a positive influence. Your success will influence others to join you.

Be aware. Monitor your choices and the results. Don't feel the need to lie to yourself about yourself. Stare in that mirror and honestly evaluate without recrimination or insult. Needing a change does not mean you are wrong or unfit. It just means you are always looking to be the best person you can be in every way you can. Monitor your feelings, thoughts and moods. These too are connected to your weight and eating. High stress situations can lead to bingeing and unhealthy eating.

Be motivated. Seek out positive role models. People who enjoy eating and have found interesting ways to prepare foods they love. People who manage to stay reasonably fit and what activities they prefer. Older people who are healthy and active are a wonderful resource for new ideas and a good motivation to continue your efforts. Keep in contact with supportive people who can help with your motivation. But remember, your ultimate motivation is yourself.

Be positive. You are not in competition with anyone else, or with yourself. There are no deadlines you are trying to meet and no punishments for any delays. No matter what you are able to achieve, use it as motivation to achieve more. No matter what you don't accomplish, use it as motivation to reset and begin again.

## The Beginning

This is not the end. It's a new beginning. Of a new you. And a new lifestyle. Try the attached recipe. Look for more ideas in future writings. You've already done the hardest part. You've considered making a change.

Let's Eat!

### **Seven Pepper Grilled Chicken Wings & Drummettes**

*(Recipe courtesy of Tyrone Irby and UIS Catering)*

#### Ingredients

10-12 chicken drummettes or wingettes (approximately 1 lb)

1 cup apple cider vinegar

Seven Pepper Seasoning (recipe follows)

Kosher Salt

Cracked Black Pepper

#### Recipe for Seven Pepper Seasoning

One tablespoon each: Black Pepper, White Pepper, Red Pepper Flakes, Mexican Chile Powder, Lemon Pepper, Garlic Pepper, Cayenne Pepper, ½ tablespoon Kosher Salt (or sea salt)

Soak 1 cup of mesquite chips in cold water for 1 hour

Fire up grill on medium heat (for charcoal cooking)

Combine apple cider vinegar with 1 tbsp Kosher salt and 1 tablespoon Seven Pepper seasoning and stir briskly in a non reactive bowl

Rinse wings well in cold water and pat dry.

Sprinkle liberally with cracked black pepper and Kosher Salt

Using a basting brush, brush the apple cider mix on top of the wings.

Place wings in the center of the hot grill.

Grill wings 30-40 minutes turning at halfway point

After wings are done, brush again with apple cider mix

Place wings in a mixing bowl and sprinkle 3-5 tablespoons of seven pepper seasoning on wings and toss. Serve warm with a side of ranch or blue cheese

To amp up the flavor and heat, add 1 tablespoon of chipotle pepper.

This recipe can be adjusted for the oven also. Set oven to broil and place wings on an aluminum pan. Broil for 30 minutes turning at the halfway point.

Calorie content for 1 serving (10 wings) 250

Note: Calorie content for 1 serving basic fried Buffalo wings- 1,000

## **BIOS**

Tyrone Irby has over 15 years in the beer and food service industries. He founded Up In Smoke Catering in 2005 as a healthy catering alternative. He is regularly active in weight training, swimming and basketball. He resides in Durham, North Carolina with his dog Bernie.

Kathy Fall has over 20 years in the technology and engineering industries. She is a lifelong writer who writes poetry, prose, technical documents, and business plans. She is regularly active in power walking, Yoga, and Chen style Tai Chi. She resides in Bronx, New York with her son Cheikh.

Tyrone and Kathy are also brother and sister, originally from Brooklyn, New York.