

Thursday, November 20, 2014

TOWN TOPICS®

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Suppers Program Shares Healthy Recipes As the Holiday Eating Season Begins



THANKSGIVING WITHOUT THE BLOAT: At a lunch held by Dorothy Mullen's Suppers Program this week, health-conscious diners dove into a satisfying meal of turkey meatloaf, salsa flavored with oranges and cilantro, tangy greens with tamari, roasted sweet potatoes and cauliflower, and lentil loaf for the one vegan at the table. Everyone cleaned their plate but no one complained of feeling overstuffed. (Photo by Anne Levin)

Like most Thanksgiving feasts, this one included generous portions, multiple side dishes, and lots of discussion about food. But unlike those traditional holiday repasts, the meal left no one desperate for a nap or moaning about how they over-indulged.

The table around which 11 members of the Suppers Program gathered Monday afternoon was in the Patton Avenue home of Suppers founder Dorothy Mullen. An advocate of avoiding processed foods as a path to well-

being, she came up with the concept of using the communal preparation and consumption of a nutritious meal as a way to manifest healthy change. Ms. Mullen is also known locally for her work with the Princeton School Gardens Cooperative and other health-oriented community initiatives.

She is a proponent not only of eating well, but of the importance of families eating together. “It’s important for children, because so many of a family’s values get transmitted at the table,” she said. “It’s about so much more than good nutrition. The family table is a place where sibling rivalry and tensions are resolved in a safe and warm environment. If a family is not eating together, they are missing a huge opportunity to bond with one another.”

On this rainy afternoon, it was all about chopping, roasting, sauteing, and, finally, eating. Before long, the windows of Ms. Mullen’s homey kitchen were steamed up and some people’s eyes were burning from the strong spices and condiments that were part of the cooking. As members arrived, signed in, paid the \$10 to offset the cost of the food, and washed their hands, Ms. Mullen put them to work.

She paired the two newcomers in the kitchen with experienced members. One first-timer peeled sweet potatoes while the friend who brought her, a two-year veteran, chopped them into small pieces. Soon the potatoes were ready for the roasting pan and a swish of olive oil and spices.

Julie Denny, who co-chairs the One Table Cafe at Trinity Church (temporarily operating at Nassau Presbyterian Church), got busy shaping ground turkey, vegetables, and almond flour into mini-meatloaves. “I met Dor about a year ago when she spoke at One Table Cafe, and I started coming here. Now, I look forward to it,” she said. “It’s fun, and there is a nice sense of community.”

While this luncheon was a general meeting of Suppers participants, other gatherings focus on specific healing themes such as lowering blood sugar, living with diabetes, alcohol dependence, and weight management. “This is not a club,” said Karen Baldino, a trained facilitator for Suppers, during her brief orientation for new members. “It’s a program of people who gather to cook, eat, and meet to talk about diet and lifestyle change.”

Members are asked to respect each others’ anonymity and not judge lifestyles or choices. While new products or foods might be discussed,

nothing is promoted. Meetings are held at about 30 different facilitators' homes, and at locations such as the YMCA, the Whole Earth market or Savory Spice.

Once the table was set and everything was ready to serve, the plating began. The white china plates were the perfect background for the crisp, green bok choy and tat soy, the red-and-orange-flecked salsa, and other vividly colored dishes that made up the meal. Ms. Mullen lowered the lights, asked members to join hands (or elbows if worried about germs), and breathe in and out. "Take a breath, and let it go," she said. "Give your weight to the chair. Let go of tensions."

The lights were turned up and everyone tucked into the meal. "I would serve this for Thanksgiving dinner with a pumpkin pie and no apologies," Ms. Mullen said as members expressed approval for each dish. "And you can make a fabulous holiday meal just out of side dishes if you like."

Ms. Denny said that while she enjoyed the meal, she wasn't sure she could convince her family to forgo Thanksgiving staples such as mashed potatoes with butter, swimming in gravy. Others at the table commented that it takes time to switch over to healthier options, especially when a holiday tradition is involved.

But the group raved about a gravy concocted by Ms. Denny that mixed coconut oil, onion, salt, cilantro, chili powder, vegan broth, and some coconut milk, cooked down for thickening. "When food is this colorful and tastes this good, it's do-able, it's delicious, and it's beautiful," Ms. Mullen said.

Written by: [Anne Levin](#)