

THE IMPORTANCE OF EATING TOGETHER AS A FAMILY

Can you recall the last time your family sat down for a meal, without any distractions from the TV, phones, computers or iPods? Sadly, this important bonding activity is becoming a thing of the past.

By Loretta Mostofi

“I am convinced that a family that eats together stays together.”

Juggling life these days can be challenging. I have three kids who participate in band rehearsals, piano, soccer, tennis and art lessons - all on different days, at different times and in different places. However, my family is the most significant and precious thing in my life. For this very reason, I consciously make the extra effort to ensure we all eat a family meal at least 4-5 nights a week.

My childhood memories always included sitting together around the table to a nutritious, home-cooked meal. This family value is a priority I have now adopted in my own little family. I am convinced that a family that eats together stays together. The relationship I have with my parents, brother and sisters is rock solid. I put this down to the happy and frequent communication we shared around the dinner table.

BENEFITS OF EATING AS A FAMILY



COMMUNICATION

Communication is a vital key to establishing healthy friendships within the family. Giving each member a voice to express their feelings, mood and daily experiences promotes a positive socio-emotional well-being. Conversation around the table enables us to learn from and respect each other.



CREATING SECURITY AND LOVE

Members of a family are often busy during the day, interacting with different people and surroundings outside the home. Returning home together as a unit at the end of the day can be quite comforting, as it provides a secure and loving environment, giving each member a sense of belonging.



TABLE ETIQUETTE AND MANNERS

As parents, we are the principal role models for our children, as they do not know any different. Modelling the proper table manners and food etiquette gives our children the tools needed to flourish into respectable, well-mannered, young adults.



INTRODUCING NEW FOOD

Introducing new foods and cuisines can give the family an appreciation of different cultures. This can be done in a fun way by having theme nights, for example Italian, Japanese, or Mexican. Being culturally diverse will socially open the doors for our children.



HEALTHIER FOOD

Preparing your own meals allows you to ensure your family is eating more fruit and vegetables, and gives you control of how healthy you want your family to be. It will instill good eating habits for the future of your kids.



INDEPENDENCE

Getting the children involved in planning and preparing meals sets them up for independence. Basic cooking is a vital skill we can give our children for when they venture out into the real world. Giving them ownership of their own meals will also improve their food choices in the future.



FAMILY VALUES

Something as simple as eating a meal with the family has many positive effects that we can pass on to the next generation. Regular family meals give our youth confidence, individuality, family values and elements to become well-rounded adults.



EAT SLOWER

By engaging in conversation at the dinner table we are more likely to eat slowly, rather than mindlessly shoving our meal down our throats. Taking a mouthful and placing our cutlery down to join in the conversation enables us to fully taste the food and we are more likely to eat less.

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It is our role as parents to provide support and guidance in developing well balanced individuals, both physically and mentally. Eating as a family is an integral step in that direction, and the moments we share at the dinner table are priceless; our children will remember them forever. Such family values will provide them the solid foundation needed to carry them into adulthood.

HEALTHY CHOCOLATE COCONUT BROWNIE

Now who doesn't love a brownie? Although this isn't your typical gooey, rich, chocolate version (which I do still make on occasion), this healthier brownie still gives you a chocolate pleasure that can be enjoyed as an afternoon snack. I feel better for my kids eating a square of this every day, rather than a chocolate biscuit.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 25 squares

Base

- 2 cups unsalted mixed nuts
- 2 cups fresh dates, chopped
- 1/4 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2 teaspoons vanilla paste or essence

Icing

- 1/2 cup coconut butter*
- 1/4 cup rice syrup**
- 2 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1/4 cup unsweetened flaked coconut, toasted***

METHOD

Base

1. Spray a 20cm square cake tin with oil and line with baking paper.
2. In a food processor, add the nuts and process for 1-2 minutes until quite fine, similar to bread crumbs.
3. Add the dates, cocoa and vanilla and further process until the mixture comes together. The mixture should hold its shape when pressed together with your fingers. ****
4. Pour the mixture into your cake tin and press the mixture in firmly. Be sure to press down hard so the brownie holds its shape when sliced.

Icing

1. In a bowl add the coconut butter, rice syrup and cocoa powder.
2. With an electric mixer, beat the icing until smooth.
3. Spread the icing over the base.
4. Sprinkle the top of the brownie with the toasted coconut.
5. Refrigerate the brownie for 2 hours.
6. Cut up into small squares.
7. The slices must be refrigerated or frozen.

NUTRIENTS PER SERVE

Calories: 153
Fat: 12g
Protein: 3g
Carbs: 12g

* This can be purchased from all good health food stores. Store your coconut butter in the fridge in hotter climates; otherwise it will turn to oil.

** This can be purchased from all good health food stores. You can also use agave nectar, maple syrup or honey as substitute.

*** To toast the coconut flakes, dry fry them in a pan over low heat. Continuously toss them otherwise they will burn rather quickly. Once cooled, crush them with your fingers.

**** You may need to add 1 tablespoon of water to soften them if the mixture doesn't come together.

SPINACH, RICOTTA AND MUSHROOM PIE



HEALTHY CHOCOLATE COCONUT BROWNIE



SPINACH, RICOTTA AND MUSHROOM PIE

As I was growing up, a quick mid-week meal was often a quiche. The traditional way of making quiche requires many eggs and a fair amount of cream, giving it a heavy texture. In this recipe, I have created a healthier version by adding my own flair. The secret ingredient is self-raising flour. This aerates the mixture, thereby reducing the required amount of eggs and cream.

INGREDIENTS

Serves 6

- 1 1/2 sheets reduced fat, shortcrust pastry
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 leek, white part only and finely sliced
- 150g lean shortcut bacon, finely chopped (optional - omit to keep the pie vegetarian)
- 350g button mushrooms, thinly sliced
- 350g English spinach, finely chopped *
- 1 egg
- 1/4 cup reduced fat cream
- 1/2 cup wholemeal self-raising flour **
- 500g reduced-fat ricotta cheese
- Salt and pepper to taste

NUTRIENTS PER SERVE

Calories: 357

Fat: 15g

Protein: 20g

Carbs: 28g

*I whizz them in a food processor to speed up the process. You could also substitute frozen spinach.

** You could use any type of flour here. If it doesn't have a raising agent, add 1/2 teaspoon of baking powder.

METHOD

1. Pre-heat the oven to 180°C.
2. Spray a 28cm round or square quiche dish with oil and line with the shortcrust pastry. Blind bake for 25 minutes.
3. In a frypan over low heat, add the leek and olive oil and sauté for 6-8 minutes until soft.
4. Increase the heat to medium and add the bacon; fry for 4 minutes.
5. Add the mushrooms and cook for a further 2 minutes.
6. Add the spinach and cook for another 4 minutes.
7. Season with salt and pepper and set aside to cool.
8. In a large bowl, add the egg, cream and flour. Stir until well combined.
9. Add the ricotta cheese and mix well.
10. Mix the cooled spinach mixture through the ricotta mixture.
11. Pour into the pastry shell and bake for 50 minutes.
12. Slice the pie into 6 pieces and serve with a mixed salad.

"Eat Healthy, Keep Moving and Believe in Yourself"

Loretta Mostofi

Australian and World Figure Champion

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