Savoring the Senior Years

Enjoying good taste and better health as you age.

WRITTEN BY **SUSAN WINTERS** • PHOTOS BY **DONNA VICTOR**

From left, Randy Caudle and Joe Leberski, his son-in-law and director of dining services at Mountain Lakes Estates senior living facility in Reno, prepare quinoa kale salad

The statistics appear daunting. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, American adults 65 years and older have the highest rate of prediabetes (48 percent) among all age groups. Adults 60 and up have a 75 percent rate of hypertension and a 41 percent rate of obesity.

Tonya Wolfe, solar services program specialist at the Nevada Department of Agriculture, notes, "[I]t is a combination of cost and access, but also health conditions and social isolation make cooking and grocery shopping difficult for seniors."

The gradual loss of taste and smell during the aging process further compounds the difficulty of maintaining a healthy diet.

"If you can't enjoy what you're eating with all of your senses, as dining is a total sensory experience on a plate, then you can fall into a routine of eating the same foods every day as they're familiar, and you can mentally associate their flavor," explains Joseph Leberski, director of dining services at Mountain Lakes Estates, an independent senior living facility in Reno.

ADD COLOR TO CUISINE

Leberski advises, "Be sure to eat the rainbow!" The broad color spectrum of fruits and vegetables comes with a variety of flavors and nutrients. Packed with antioxidants, vitamins, and fiber, bell peppers, carrots, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes boost immune function and support eye health. Blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries can reduce inflammation and improve digestion. Rich in vitamin K, leafy greens, including kale, spinach, and collard greens, support bone health.

Fare from the neutral color palette also may contain abundant nutrients. Quinoa, brown rice, and other whole grains supply sustained energy and promote digestive health. Proteins, such as chicken, turkey, or tofu, that can be added to a soup or salad,

assist with muscle maintenance and repair. Beans, peas, and lentils supply both protein and dietary fiber. By varying the protein they eat, seniors may gain the most nutritional benefits.

"By including these key ingredients in their diets, seniors can ensure they are getting the necessary nutrients to support their health, energy levels, and overall quality of life," explains Alyssa Starr, co-owner of Mother of Macros Meal Prep in Sparks, which offers meal prep services.

HONING COOKING PROWESS

While home cooks have the advantage of controlling ingredients and portion sizes, seniors who struggle with dexterity and mobility issues may find the kitchen intimidating. For increased safety, Starr recommends seniors opt for lightweight kitchen tools, use ergonomic knives and utensils with larger grips, place non-slip mats near stove and sink areas, and make sure the kitchen is well-lit and clutter free. By establishing the proper habits, seniors can delight in the benefits of cooking while remaining safe in the kitchen.

For seniors interested in expanding their culinary abilities, nonprofit Reno Food Systems has partnered with the City of Reno to offer Cooking Matters, a series of cooking workshops. Taught by a registered dietitian, the free, two-hour classes provide instruction on knife skills, and strategies for portion control, and cooking healthy meals on a budget.

"Each participant will go home not only with more skills in the kitchen, but also a locally grown food bag," explains Jolene Cook, director/marketing manager of RFS.

Cook always looks forward to the warmer months, anticipating an increase in the frequency of cooking classes as well as the bounty of produce available in summer. She is excited about RFS's current discussions to partner with community gardens to add a gardening component to future classes.

RESOURCES

Cooking Matters
Classes provided by City of Reno
775-351-4771 • Reno.gov/community/seniors

Reno Food Systems
Renofoodsystems.org

Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program
Seasonal program providing low-income seniors with coupons for locally grown fruits, vegetables, herbs, and honey at participating Nevada farmers' markets. Seniors must meet income criteria established by the federal government. For details, visit Agri.nv.gov/food/senior_farmers_market_nutrition_program/sfmnp-senior_farmers_market_nutrition_program

Senior Nutrition and Wellness Program
Provided by Food Bank of Northern Nevada, this program supplies seniors with monthly food boxes filled with nutrient-rich foods, such as protein, dairy, grains, fruits, and vegetables. For details on this and other offerings for seniors, visit Fbnn.org/gethelp/seniors. Seniors must meet income criteria established by the federal government.

Quinoa Kale Salad

(courtesy of Joseph Leberski, director of dining services, Mountain Lakes Estates in Reno. Serves 4)

- 1 head garlic
- ¼ cup olive oil, divided
- 1 sweet potato, peeled and medium diced
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 4 ounces quinoa
- 6 ounces kale, finely chopped
- Optional: 1 pound cooked white turkey meat, diced

Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. Cut ¼ inch off top of garlic head, drizzle with 1 tablespoon olive oil, wrap in foil, and roast in oven for 30 to 35 minutes, until cloves feel soft when pressed. Remove from oven and let cool.

Squeeze roasted garlic cloves into a bowl and mash into a purée. Whisk in remaining olive oil, and season with kosher salt and black pepper to taste.

Toss sweet potatoes with 2 teaspoons olive oil, 1 teaspoon kosher salt, and ¼ teaspoon black pepper. Roast in oven until golden brown and tender, about 15 to 20 minutes. Remove from oven and cool.

Cook quinoa according to package directions, drain, and cool.

Blanch kale for 1 minute in boiling, salted water until tender; drain and cool.

Mix quinoa with blanched kale and roasted sweet potatoes. Pour dressing over quinoa mixture and stir to combine. Adjust seasoning if necessary. May be served at room temperature or chilled. If using turkey, add about 4 ounces to each salad.

Honey Balsamic Glazed Chicken Skewers

(courtesy of Alyssa Starr, co-owner, Mother of Macros in Sparks. Serves 2)

- 1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breast, cut into cubes
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- ¼ cup balsamic vinegar
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves
- Wooden skewers, soaked in water

Season chicken cubes with salt and pepper, then thread them onto soaked wooden skewers.

In small bowl, whisk together balsamic vinegar, honey, soy sauce, garlic, and thyme for glaze. Heat grill or grill pan over medium-high heat. Place chicken skewers on the grill and cook for about 4 to 5 minutes on each side, basting with glaze every few minutes.

Continue to cook until chicken is cooked through and has a nice, caramelized color. Remove skewers from grill and let rest for a few minutes before serving.