

9 Years of Good Food, Friendship, and Learning

Cruise to Health and Happiness

By Cynthia Vann

My husband and I have traveled with the Holistic Holiday at Sea since the beginning. The first Caribbean cruise set sail off the coast of Florida in 2004 and attracted 400+ attendees and included about 40 to 50% macrobiotic friends. This year, it was 18%. That doesn't reflect fewer macrobiotic people, just more vegans and vegetarians, with 1250 total people in attendance.



Cynthia sets sail.

The Cruise is now widely advertised in vegetarian magazines and on the web. Also there are many who bring relatives and friends year after year. Organizer and co-host John Bellame says many new people are exposed to the principles and cooking techniques of macrobiotics, yet everyone who attends is interested in a healthier way of eating. Powerfully reaching many is Dr. T. Colin Campbell, former director of *The China Health Study*, with his lectures, documentary and book, *Forks Over Knives*.

You see this acceptance in the animated conversations aboard ship as each day of classes unfolds. I enjoy the table conversations with new people each meal. A gentleman I met at lunch over a delicious bowl of pinto bean chili said, "I enjoy the diversity and wisdom of all the speakers. I don't rigidly believe one teaching. I go home each year on a high."

It is fascinating to see others encountering macrobiotics for the first time. Many asked me, "What is the difference between vegan eating and macrobiotics?" "How long have you eaten this way?" is another common question. Also many ask about the ingredients of the food being served. Those at the table who know can explain, and also an ingredients list is always posted. I liked hearing stories of how people change. One young man told me he knew in his heart he wanted to be vegan but always had to fight for his ideas within his family. Now he is free to eat a more responsible way, as he put it.

I still see many familiar faces and friends each voyage. Sandy Pukel, the other co-host, and his staff masterfully handled the increase in numbers this year both in the restaurants and the classrooms. So did head chef Mark Hanna and his staff with high quality food. Dr. Esselstyn brought 300 vegan passengers with him. He is best known as the doctor who inspired President Bill Clinton to become vegan. Many of his followers ate a "no oil" diet which was offered as a special menu along with "gluten free" and "healing macrobiotic" diets. Esselstyn's method is to recommend to patients oil in foods like seeds and nuts. He tells them no added oil in cooking or at the table.

Learning at Sea

Christina Pirello, star of the PBS TV show *Christine Cooks!*, is very polished and knowledgeable. She offered cooking classes and moderated question-and-answer sessions with "co-anchors" Jessica Porter and Neal Barnard, M.D. I learned that in 1973 the average time spent on cooking was 2 1/2 hours. In 2010 we spent an average of 27 minutes on meal preparation. In a shared presentation with Neal, Christina answered a question from the audience on whether to take vitamins. She stated, "I prefer whole food. I find vitamins bloating. I'm not sure we chew enough on vitamins to prevent bloat. Michio Kushi used to say, 'teeth here (pointing to the mouth), no teeth here,' (pointing to the intestines)."

Dr. Bernard impresses as a tireless champion of preventative medicine. He is president of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. His interests are to fight for our food rights in truth-in-advertising, labeling foods properly, and in defending healthy eating for children. He campaigns in the arena of political power in Washington, DC. I was interested to learn from Dr. Barnard that GEICO, the big insurance company, is bleeding financially from covering diabetes in its own employees. The company is implementing a vegan lunch service and cooking classes to improve the health of their employees and improve the bottom line. Dr. Barnard said, "I want to follow this as a medical study."

Jessica Porter is a star. Author of *The Hip Chick's Guide to Macrobiotics*, she talks as if it was just the two of you in the room. Asked about steel cut oats as a grain, she stated, "I eat rolled oats sometimes, but there is no magic there. The whole grain is what gives the magic, the energy." Carl and Julia Ferre, editors of *Macrobiotics Today* from California, appeared for the first time on the cruise. In Carl's talk on acid and alkaline, he carried on quite a conversation with a man who had an alkaline water making machine. The man insisted that he was making the best alkaline water at 9.4 Ph. Carl simply reasoned that putting a



Interspecies communication.

pinch of salt in the water would do the same thing. Julia Ferre gave an interesting talk on the seven levels of judgment, tying it to how we develop better intuition.

The Recovery Panel, I think, is life changing for many. I was pleased to see both the panel on Monday night and a follow up for additional questions the next day. Dr. Maggie Cottrell moderated both sessions. In



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the Q & A that followed, the question arose why so little scientific literature substantiated recovery narratives. When someone said his doctor didn't believe any of this, Dr. Cottrell replied, "What about Colin Campbell and *The China Study*? He researched world literature and found tons of substantiation. There are political forces (corporate) behind what is considered authoritative. Dr. Esselstyn presents a number of peer-reviewed studies. There is a book called *Doctors Look at Macrobiotics*. I wrote a book on AIDs with Michio Kushi with lots of research cited of diet-related remission. Neil Barnard has done a lot."

Christina does a lecture called "I'm as Mad as Hell, and I'm Not Going to Eat it Anymore. It's a way to be current about what's going on in food and nutrition, and I love to attend it each year. This year someone asked her what happened to *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution* television series where he highlighted more healthy eating options in Virginia, then examined the school lunch programs in Los Angeles. Christina said, "The first season Jamie did with ABC, he met with network producers who asked him to soften on pizza criticism because Papa John's bought some ads. By the time he went to L.A., he lost all his advertisers." Christina says further, "Every one of us is bad for advertising, and we should continue to try to change the system. Jamie was pretty proud of that show."

Blogger and *Vegetarian Times* writer Jana Adickman followed the cruise from day to day. Her commentary can be found at vegetariantimes.com. She commented about the Q & A with Dr. Esselstyn and Campbell, "One gentleman asked if genetics determine health. Esselstyn responded by using an apt analogy: 'Genes load the gun, but lifestyle pulls the trigger.' Campbell added, 'A plant-based diet keeps genes under control.'" Ron Peters, M.D., a physician from Arizona, gave a stimulating presentation about gene regulation (Epigenetics) or how you can control your DNA. He stated, "Your tools for epigenetic engineering of your DNA are healthy nutrition, detoxification, healthy behaviors, stress reduction, consciousness and spirituality."

Some issues kept coming up in lectures and in question and answer sessions repeatedly. I am a fan of the Q & A sessions which each speaker tries to allot time for. Some lectures are almost entirely for that purpose. The issues most discussed were nutritional controversies such as oil use and B12 sources.

The Oil Controversy

Dr. Esselstyn's stand on oil set up an interesting debate among teachers and cruisers. As Jessica Porter was asked in a class called Macrobiotics 101:

Q: What is the macrobiotic view of oil use in diet?

A: Macrobiotics helps people recover from serious conditions; in macrobiotic healing, no oil is often used as a recommendation. Oil maintains the integrity of cells; no oil helps cells release toxins when opening. We use it sparingly in everyday cooking. Women do well with oil.

Christina Pirello's experience with a brain aneurism stirred up interest in the oil debate.

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The Cruise

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Christina Pirello and Neal Barnard give a cooking class.

Q: What about your brain aneurism?

A: They told me because I was low in fat being vegan, and that I had a congenital aneurism, my homocysteine was high, causing blood vessels in my brain to burst. They said eat olive oil.

Dr. Campbell clarifies his opinion in light of Dr. Esselstyn's position.

Q: What do you think about

oil use in diet?

A: In a whole food plant-based diet, the amount of fat is 10-12% and is far lower than the 35% I am saying will turn on disease. The question is 0%? That's where the confusion is. When studied in people, olive oil looks like it has the benefits. We don't need added fat. If Dr. Esselstyn would say no added oil, it might clarify. I agree with him we get addicted to oil. Olive oil causes problems, maybe not so bad, unless you take as much as 35%.

In the Longevity Talk by Diane Haworth and Michael Varback, a question was asked about whether any vegan or oil-free people were in their study of people in "hot spots" of longevity around the world. Their answer was "No."

In the Q & A period with Campbell and Esselstyn, the following question was asked.

Q: What about the oil? Yes or no?

A: Dr. Esselstyn: Still no oil, it doesn't build bones.

Sandy Pukel: Eliminate oil but not for the rest of your life.

Dr. Esselstyn: I'll say it again, no oil.

Clearly, there a difference of opinion about oil use. While on board, I saw a woman in a sweatshirt with a hoodie, she had it over her head. Another woman asked her, "Why the sweatshirt?" She answered, "I'm on Dr. Esselstyn's no oil recommendation. I'm always cold. It's the added oil that warms you."

B12 in Food?

This year, I discovered that the debate whether we get B12 from food continues unabated. I also learned that Christina Pirello and Jessica Porter both take B12 supplementation after having had symptoms of deficiency. Dr. Barnard commented that B12 is made in nature from bacteria, and we don't live in nature. Christina added, my body doesn't store it, so I get two shots a week.

Colin Campbell answered the question from a cruiser, "This is the first time I've heard that meat eaters have higher deficiency of B12." Campbell stated, "We need intrinsic protein factor to absorb B12. Those who can't produce the intrinsic factor are deficient. I agree about B12 supplements as a precaution, but

don't know of a study to cite. B12 is not produced by animal or plant, but by microorganisms. Vegetables don't have B12, but we can store a lot of B12, and if intrinsic factor is in order, we can absorb it. We can't say vegans suffer B12 deficiency."

A person asked Neal Barnard about nutritional yeast. Barnard answered, "You need a lot of yeast to get B12." Christina added, "Be careful with the volume of nutritional yeast." Christina was asked if we get it from unwashed vegetables. She replied, "No, don't count on it. Hygiene is too good for B12, but hygiene is good." Diane Haworth who presented the Longevity Talk was asked what foods to eat for B12, and she replied, "You find it in fermented foods." No other speaker said there was a way to get it from food.

I find that people are asking questions and not blindly accepting what they hear, creating a very healthy environment. I look forward to more of these open forum discussions. Other benefits of cruising are the food and exotic tours available.

Taste of Health passengers enjoy three delicious gourmet vegan meals a day. The menu is surprisingly similar from year to year, yet just different enough to enjoy new foods. Sea vegetables are laced throughout the week in salads and main dishes. Key lime pie was a dessert favorite, and so was the vegan pad thai with peanut flavoring. Everyone has their favorites; if you want to eat all the choices, you get two desserts a day plus the party food at evening socials. The cooking class samples are an



Tropical scene at St. Thomas with ship in background.

additional treasure, and the choices of demonstration foods were excellent. Those who were gluten free, healing macrobiotic, or oil free had their choice to take those menus daily. Cruisers could also order from the ship's menu, which could include meat and dairy for those family members not choosing vegan.

For information on next year's Cruise, visit www.atasteofhealth.org. Also posted are some of the recipes of the food on this year's outing. ❖

After retiring from the Air Force in the early 1990s, Cynthia discovered macrobiotics, studied at the Kushi Institute, and started on a lifelong journey of learning about macrobiotics and its principles. She is a macrobiotic counselor and a personality consultant, using the study of both iridology and sclerology. She enjoys the outdoors, particularly in the Southwest where she lives, and reading science fiction. She is also a board member of Planetary Health/Amberwaves.