

Healthier foods for our traditional festivities

We are just about to start planning to prepare the typical dishes that have been handed to us from our Spanish ancestors. What can be done to make our foods healthier?

This is a genuine concern and it could be as a result of many nutrition education campaigns we have heard over the years. Many of us are very conscious that the rise in obesity and chronic diseases like diabetes among others, are related to our way of eating.

But, do we have to abandon the foods that identify us with our culture? Read on. Let us examine this. The time has come to plan that special activity where everyone expects typical foods like roasted pork, rice with pigeon peas, pasteles and rice pudding. What to do? See, aunt Juanita has diabetes, high blood pressure and also is overweight. Here are some suggestions: flavor it with herbs, spices, garlic, and very little salt. Maybe a salt substitute could be used. Do not use the skin of the pork. The fat it yields is saturated fat that makes the cholesterol in your body and clogs your arteries. Cover the roast with aluminum paper to avoid drying the meat while cooking. A good idea is to place raw carrots, onions and celery in the cooking pan where the roast is cooking to keep it moist besides giving very good flavor. Another good idea is to cook a turkey instead, but spice it as you would a pork roast (using less salt). Some people call it “pavochon”. For your rice with pigeon peas, use less oil. Canola or olive oil are healthy choices. Use less salt, but use more of the fresh sofrito and pigeon peas to give it good flavor. Experiment with brown rice, cook according to instructions (more water, more cooking time). Place a banana or plantain leaf on top of the rice as it cooks. It will give it a special touch.

For the pasteles, use lean meat (without fat). Some people like to use chicken meat with excellent results. Start asking for pasteles stuffed with vegetables and less meat. What to do with the “arroz con dulce”? Well, the recipe developed by Chef Lolita Gomez de Borquez is the one to use. Without fat, no cholesterol, and lower in calories than the traditional one where coconut and sugar is used. The recipe contains fat free milk a source of calcium for your bones. Excellent!

And what else can we do with this menu? A good combination of crunchy vegetables of bright colors, will give it a festive touch, plus fiber and substances your body needs for well being. A light dressing is the ideal to go with the salad. Do not forget to add a little

olive oil for its healthy qualities. Seasonal fruits may replace the need for desserts, adding more nutrients to the plate.

Oh, and what about the beverage? The healthiest of them all, without a calorie...is cold water on ice with a lime wedge. The rest should be music and good conversation. What else can be desired?

Finally, remember moderation in the servings. Of those things that can throw off the meal plan recommended by your doctor or nutritionist, eat less of or with less frequency. If you get out of a healthy meal routine once in a while it is not a problem. It becomes a problem when most of our meals are high in saturated fat, cholesterol, calories, and other nutrients that need to be limited. And of course, one last recommendation is to balance your calories with a good walk around the neighborhood as the doctor said.

For nutrition classes on diabetes, weight management, high blood pressure and cholesterol, exercise sessions, fruit and vegetable gardening call Closing the Gap Program (407) 343-2082 or (407) 343-2076. These activities are free and open to the public. If you desire the modified rice pudding recipe call Closing the Gap.

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