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SEASONS' EATINGS

NAVIGATING HOLIDAY MEALS WITH SENSITIVITY AND GRACE

By Katie McCall, local food columnist

For those familiar with this column, it's no surprise that food plays an important role in my life. From gardening and cultivating to cooking, sharing and celebrating it with others, food brings me a sense of joy and purpose.

But what happens when food *isn't* a safe space?

As we enter the holiday season, we're automatically thrown into a marathon of cooking, baking and eating with back-to-back parties, each one filled with fizzy cocktails, endless appetizers, hearty meals and decadent dessert spreads. These large gatherings often invite — let's be honest — too many opinions when it comes to the way we eat.

More specifically, it's a vulnerable time for anyone experiencing issues related to food, from those starting a new diet for health reasons (vegan, paleo, gluten-free, etc.) to those with a deep-seated, difficult food relationship that stemmed from an eating disorder where recovery can be a lifelong journey.

For me, personally, I experienced the former 10 years ago. Though a dancer and presumably healthy person my entire life, I continuously found myself feeling "off" — bloated, tired, irritable, foggy.

One day, I stumbled into the book aisle at Whole Foods and a title caught my eye: "Crazy Sexy Diet" by Kris Carr. Intrigued by the synopsis, I figured attempting her elimination diet couldn't hurt; for 21 days, I would rid my body of processed sugar, alcohol, caffeine, meat products, fish, eggs, dairy, refined starches and gluten. Holy moly.

A self-proclaimed foodie who loved to cook, entertain and dine out — not to mention with a fresh culinary degree and a year-plus working in one of the city's best restaurants with access to incredible food — I knew I was entering uncharted territory. While it was somewhat manageable at home (truth: The body's natural detox process is anything but fun), the social gatherings became most uncomfortable.

I quickly learned to eat a meal prior to any social event and then armored myself with an array of responses for those wondering why I wasn't eating "normal" food. It was exhausting and, at times, discouraging enough to consider throwing in the towel. Who cared that for dinner I replaced a piece of bread and slice of ham with a huge salad?

Though the cleanse itself only lasted three weeks, the results were powerful and, ultimately, led me to understand my body, how it processed certain foods and what I needed to eliminate moving forward to live a healthy and happy life.

At the end of the day, regardless of your journey, it's important to be sensitive to others, remembering that we all have different relationships with food. What you or another person chooses to eat is a personal choice, or in more serious cases, may be out of one's control.

FROM HOSTING TO BEING A GUEST, HERE ARE 5 KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER THIS HOLIDAY SEASON:

1 **LEAVE YOUR OWN INSECURITIES AT THE DOOR:** It never failed that a certain family member would question my new way of eating because those were the foods she personally enjoyed and seeing me not eat them made her uncomfortable. Remember that someone else's journey isn't your journey.

2 **DON'T TAKE OFFENSE:** If you're hosting this holiday season and notice a guest avoiding a certain dish, having very little on their plate, etc., don't automatically assume they don't like your cooking! Rather, consider they might be trying a new approach or managing any of the above-mentioned situations.

3 **DROP EXPECTATIONS:** As a guest with any restriction or aversion, nothing's worse than showing up to a gathering and expecting there to be dietary-friendly dishes waiting for you. More importantly, remember it's not the host's responsibility to accommodate your diet; eat a meal beforehand and nibble on what you can at the party, or consider asking if you can bring a dish.

4 **HAVE A BLANKET STATEMENT PREPARED:** Ward off nosy friends and family questioning your eating habits with something as simple as, "I'm trying a new way of eating to make my body feel better, and so far I'm pleased with the results." This will shut down most conversation.

5 **ASK FOR HELP:** If your concerns with food are more serious, talk to those who love and care about you. A support system from your closest friends and family will help you navigate these difficult times and be essential for long-term recovery.

If you or someone you know is struggling with an eating disorder, please consider contacting TriCity Family Services at www.tricityfamilyservices.org or 630-232-1070.

Photo by Victoria C Photos

Katie McCall, former owner of Two Wild Seeds Baking Co., is a bona fide Midwestern girl. Raised on four acres of rural property in Yorkville, she was always taught to respect nature and all of its bounty. From foraging morel mushrooms in the woods to picking wild black raspberries for homemade jam, Katie feels most at home when in nature and preparing food for others. When she's not creating new dishes in the kitchen (and writing about them) she can be found nose-deep in cookbooks, exploring the outdoors with her family — and eating ... always eating.