

Simple stuff

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If you've seen British chef Jamie Oliver at work harassing government and "school lunch ladies" into tossing out the bangers and cardboard pizza in favour of real vegetables, soups and bread made from scratch, then you'll know what I mean when I say Matt Prentice may be the Jamie Oliver of hospital food.

I was intrigued by a 2008 report from Health Care Without Harm, called *Menu of Change: Healthy Food in Health Care*, which detailed measures more than 100 hospitals in the US had undertaken to improve meals for inpatients and staff (i.e., preparing more fresh and/or local and/or organic produce, cutting back on processed foods, buying meat raised without antibiotics, using cage-free eggs and even hosting farmers' markets on hospital grounds). So, I visited Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital just outside of Detroit, Michigan, one of the hospitals that have taken on a new way of thinking about food. Matt Prentice was the chef behind it all.

I asked Prentice what would possess the successful restaurateur behind 10 upscale establishments to take a sabbatical from his businesses to step into a hospital kitchen. Wasn't he worried about tarnishing his reputation by being associated with hospital food?

Prentice said it began when his best friend found himself slated for quadruple by-pass surgery a few years back. "I happened to be there when he was served his first meal," Prentice recalls. "It was chicken base in water, with green Jell-o and applesauce. ... I knew that this sodium water that they were feeding him was going to do nothing to help his recovery. I ... called one of my chefs at Shiraz and asked him to put on a stock with double the chicken bones and double the root vegetables, and then clarify it to make a consommé. ... I took a gallon to the hospital. And the next day, I took in another gallon."

Sometime later, when West Bloom-

field CEO Gerard van Grinsven asked Prentice to get involved in creating better hospital food, Prentice recalled cooking his friend back to health and weighed right in. Van Grinsven and Prentice settled on a price — a \$100 per hour consultant fee, half of what Prentice normally charges — and van Grinsven handed over blueprints to his kitchen.



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"I worked through the night and totally redrafted them. I designed the cafeteria to have seven stations with a group of 20 chefs, and gave them each a piece of the cake. The first task was the deli, and I took that one. Another took pasta and risotto. Another took the Asian station, another the international. We had a pastry chef doing all of our desserts, and a breadsmith. I wrote 1300 recipes."

The idea was that staff and visitors would eat the same food as patients, and not all staff were keen at first. "A lot of staff were bitching at me: 'What do you mean I can't get a cheeseburger and fries?' Well, you can get the cheeseburger, but we made it ourselves from 100% lean meat. And pizza is a big seller, but it's healthy. We don't do pepperoni."

Prentice invested six months in this work, consulting with physicians, dietitians and herbalists and came up with a 55-page publication for his chefs, called *The Healing and Illness Preventing Characteristics of Food*. The first section itemizes macro- and micro-nutrients found in foods; the second provides an alphabetical list of fruits, vegetables, grains, mushrooms, fish, nuts, and legumes with corresponding beneficial properties he uncovered.

Not that Prentice considers himself a

health professional. "I don't want to practice medicine. But I learned that doctors aren't really taught nutrition in medical school. We spend a fortune on training doctors, but then don't follow through on the simplest things, like food."

"Everything in hospitals is kept on the Keep it Simple, Stupid principle, and supply companies ... can't be bothered to learn how to do things differently. I spent a day in the dish room of a hospital and I saw what gets thrown away. It made me sick. It was clear that the patients hated what they were getting. But hospitals have been doing it so bad for so long that bad seems right."

And the kicker in all this, is that according to Prentice, doing things better also costs less. "Almost all the fruits and vegetables we use are organic, so yes, that was an increased cost. But by giving patients what they want, we cut out waste, which saves money. Besides, our retail sales at West Bloomfield were up 400% more than we expected."

"All of this reminds me of the story of the truck that got stuck under the viaduct. The police came, and the fire trucks, and all the lights and sirens. No one could figure out how to get the truck free. Then a little boy rides up on his bike and says, 'Let the air out the tires.' Hospital food is that simple."

You almost start to believe him — and wish he'd pay a visit to Canada. Maybe he could take on the mystery meat lunches at work.

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