

**The Growing Importance of Food and Culinary
Knowledge and Skills in Dietetics Practice**

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Abstract

Food and nutrition professionals must convey the message to consumers that healthy food choices can be made while enjoying taste and indulgences for food. In practice, RDs are uniquely positioned to merge the nutrition food pyramid with the flavor pyramid. Dietitians need the competence to profile foods consumers like, assist with meal choices and purchases, and modify food and meal choices to assure clients' satisfaction. Whether in clinical, community, foodservice or more non-traditional settings, the RD that is competent in speaking food and culinary language is more effective in enabling consumers to make the food/ health connection.

Key Words

Registered Dietitian, RD, culinary, food

The Growing Importance of Food and Culinary Knowledge and Skills in Dietetics Practice

Seize the moment!

Dietitians must appreciate and understand their customers' or clients' love of food. These individuals expect us to share their passion for food, taste, flavor, and diversity. If we fail to communicate and share that zeal, we will be left behind. According to Linda Gilbert, author of the 2005 *U.S. HealthFocus Trend Report*, "Consumers today feel they are entitled to the best of all possible worlds - both taste and nutrition" (1). Consumers need our scientific expertise to help them decipher the information maze and find their way to healthy food choices without compromising taste and or their periodic food indulgences. According to Doris Derelian in a presentation delivered to the 2006 Food and Nutrition Conference, the "dietitian / foodie" is disappearing. Our focus has shifted to the science of nutrients and away from the science of food. Dr. Derelian believes there needs to be a better balance" (2). A counseling session with a client recovering from a heart attack may begin with the justification and underlying science for dietary recommendations, but the real dialogue begins when the discussion turns to, "What can I eat?" or "Do I have to give up my favorite foods?" So, the question is posed to dietetics professionals: "Do food and nutrition professionals have adequate competence in the food and culinary sciences to comfortably and confidently translate clinical recommendations into practical applications?" To that end, it is a valuable exercise to visit the past and re-think the future.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Strategic planning is critical to any professional organization and requires a glimpse into the past and an attempt to peer into the future. To that end, the American Dietetic Association (ADA) House of Delegates (HOD) conducts regular environmental scanning (3). ADA members and leaders are often in dialogue regarding future directions for the dietetics profession. The Phase 2 Future Practice and Education Task Force has projected future dietetics roles and practice and suggested an educational plan to make sure dietetics professionals are prepared (4). What will dietetics look like in 2017, a mere 10 years away (5)? The following questions are often posed in a classic SWOT analysis: What are our strengths, what are our weaknesses, where are our opportunities, and who or what will threaten the dietetics profession?

When a dietitian is asked what he/she does in practice, the response typically falls into one of three categories: clinical, community, or foodservice management. At what juncture did we choose to delineate our roles into these distinct groups? An investigation of dietetics history reflects how this came about.

Once Upon a Time...

The founding “mothers” of the dietetics profession were experts in food preparation. Sarah Rorer, considered the first American dietitian, opened her Philadelphia Cooking School in 1878. In those days, doctors were looking for a source of food for their patients who had diseases requiring dietary modification (6). Rorer, a true entrepreneur, met that need by selecting 12 students a year to be put through the paces in chemistry, cooking for the sick, physiology and hygiene. For 33 years, Mrs. Rorer’s cooking school was the source of “superintendents of diet” for America’s leading hospitals (7).

By 1935, a “tug of war” was starting between the food and foodservice side of dietetics and the growing interest in the application of nutrition knowledge in the medical setting (8). Both a “hospital course” and an “administrative course” of study had been approved by the ADA Executive Committee. Later that year, the Executive Committee approved a course of study for students interested in community nutrition. Thus, the three types of dietetics training were established and that trilogy of dietetics practice remains with us to this day (9).

Subsequent years saw the exponential growth of knowledge in nutrition and its application to health and wellbeing. While food was recognized as the conveyor of nutrients, the focus in research and practice seemed to shift away from food and foodservice and toward medical nutrition therapy. According to Halling and Hess, various factors played a role in the gradual disconnect between food and clinical services including the move toward food information viewed in nutrient terms or as statistical data. “As a result, food quality was evaluated more in terms of nutrient presence, absence, or excess and less in terms of taste, appearance, and contribution to quality of life”(10).

In ADA’s 1992 strategic planning process, a Food and Foodservice Champion Team was formed who identified commercial foodservice as a key market linkage for dietetic services. This action was a wake-up call to the profession that we needed to renew our passion for food and hone our skills to work with this important market segment.

In his book, *Roots*, Alex Haley shares his philosophy that, “three groups of people live in every village”. First there are those you could see – walking around, eating,

sleeping, and working. Second were the ancestors. And the third people are those waiting to be born (11). Within our ADA “village”, we too have three groups. As in Mr. Haley’s analogy, present-day RDs are creating positions in multiple practice settings and fulfilling unique and diverse roles. Our history and traditions – our “ancestors” - showcased the original three areas of dietetics practice, but were masters of food and foodservice. Our early leaders were relentless in their pursuit of excellence for the profession. They forged the trail providing the leadership that opened many doors. Finally, today’s dietetics educators nurture “those waiting to be born” – the dietitians of the future. And more than ever before, we must remind them of our roots in food and food preparation.

It’s STILL All about Food

The Food and Culinary Practice Group (FCP) of the American Dietetic Association will this year celebrate a decade as a dietetic practice group (DPG). In the March, 1997 issue of *Tastings*, the DPG’s newsletter, the legendary Julia Child shared thoughts in a letter with the DPG’s founding chair, Mary Abbott Hess. Mrs. Child believed that, “it is essential that every dietitian and nutritionist also be a reasonably good cook, and that the culinary arts be a fundamental part of their curriculum” (12). The FCP practice group established a list of core culinary competencies: sensory perception and evaluation, basic cooking skills and techniques, ingredient selection, recipe development and modification, menu planning, food communication, sustainable agriculture, food safety, and trends. Since that time, FCP has provided wonderful continuing education opportunities to spread the message that taste matters and while food can be nutritionally correct, it is of no value if not consumed and enjoyed. (13) The

leaders and visionaries of this organization sparked a movement within the ADA that continues to be valued and embraced.

In the April 30, 2007 report of the Phase 2 Future Practice and Education Task Force, preferred practice roles with the greatest impact on employment for entry-level Registered Dietitians in 2017 were identified. The results included dietetics practice in areas such as community nutrition, wellness, telehealth, nutrition informatics, obesity management, clinical dietetics, corporate nutrition, public policy, and food and health communication. The task force acknowledged that future roles for RDs would require, “expertise in food preparation, product development and research, and foodservice management opportunities” (14).

“The fact is that the knowledge of food and management skills is critical for most areas of dietetic practice.” (10) The Phase 2 Task Force report reiterates this message. Food, culinary, and management skills transcend most areas of practice. Registered dietitians, whether in a clinical or community setting, where they are responsible for consultation, changing behavior, or improving a family’s diet and lifestyle, routinely translate nutrition science into food choices for specific audiences.

Adults recognize that while we eat to fuel our bodies, we also value the sacred experience of sharing fellowship through food. Fundamentally, taste and flavor round out the eating experience. Food gives us pleasure as it nurtures us while evoking memories and experiences. Many consumers share a “luxury phenomenon,” an attitude that reflects an affluent attitude, a desire for adventuresome eating and a feeling of entitlement.” (1)

Interest in food and cooking has soared to the point that some might argue that there is now a separate unique generational demographic group, labeled, “food net workers.” This holds true even for many that do not cook at home. The “Generation Y” group, who may have been raised in homes where cooking was not common, often view cooking shows as a hobby or entertainment. Other age groups including “Baby Boomers” are actively engaged in food talk, watching food-related television shows, dinner clubs, and lifelong learning that often includes cooking classes. Meal preparation or home meal replacement businesses have seen tremendous growth (15). Registered dietitians own and operate some of these franchises, thus offering the added bonus in providing their customer with information about healthy alternatives and meals tailored to special dietary needs. A simple search for cooking classes using Google’s search engine yields more than 2 million hits. Medical spas now not only offer genetic profiling, but match the consultation with nutrition and cooking classes to further education the client and enhance their experience. Spa visits reached an all time high of 131 million in 2005, a 9% increase from 2003. Growth of “medical spas” increased from 3% to 7% from 2004 to 2006 (16).

James Beard said, “Food is our common ground, a universal language”(17). Food and nutrition professionals must convey the message that healthy food choices using MyPyramid can be made while enjoying great flavors as well as food indulgences. Steven Kaun in an article titled “Building on the Flavor Pyramid,” illustrates the critical importance of flavor and breaks down the complexities of flavor into six components:

- Emotional/Cultural Perceptions
- Visual Appearance

- Aromas
- Textures
- Sensations
- Basic Tastes (18)

In dietetics practice, recall and recognition of the various elements that contribute to dining pleasure places us on a more even playing field with our clients. Most of us eat for taste and flavor. Let's say we are talking about being served a plate of roasted turkey and stuffing, mashed sweet potatoes, cranberry relish, green beans from the family garden, homemade rolls, and pumpkin pie with a dollop of fresh whipped cream for dessert. The description alone evokes a myriad of memories and sensations from holidays past. Individuals form their own biases regarding food from past experiences rooted in memory.

The appearance of food can be just as critical as taste. When a dish lacks visual appeal, the anticipation of flavor is negative. We taste with smell as aromatic gases pass through our olfactory senses and receptors liberate the sensations. We are able to learn new flavors through experience. According to the Monell Chemical Senses Center, "the chemical senses are the gatekeepers of the body." (19) It is estimated that about 90% of our ability to identify flavors and taste food depends upon olfactory function. (20) The resulting aromatics of food are critical to the taste. The various textures, temperature sensations, and basic tastes of food add additional elements to the various feelings about the dining experience.

In practice, RDs are uniquely positioned to merge the nutrition food pyramid with the flavor pyramid (18). Dietitians must understand and appreciate the influences which

have an impact on flavors, ingredients, and the foods consumers cherish. Once we've made that connection with our client, then they are ready to engage in a dialogue about behavior change concerning meal choices, purchases, and modifications that can improve their satisfaction and meet health goals. Whether in clinical, community, foodservice or more non-traditional settings, the RD that is competent in speaking food and culinary language is more effective in enabling consumers to make the food/ health connection.

Food and Culinary Professionals Speak Out

Food and culinary professionals shared information with the authors of this article regarding their beliefs about the importance of food and culinary knowledge for dietitians. They also communicated their perspectives on how food and culinary knowledge strengthens their practice as a dietetic professional. Entrepreneurial RDs shared how they blend culinary knowledge with nutrition education.

Chavanne Hanson, past chair for FCP, describes herself as a RD with a love and appreciation for food. Food and culinary knowledge gained from her personal experiences helped her to understand the deeper meaning of what happens at a meal. "The interactive and emotional nature of a meal experience is lost when one considers food as 'just nutrition'." Her culinary training and experience in the food industry has helped her dialogue with chefs and food developers (21, 22). "Food without taste does not sell. Success depends upon the fundamental understanding that flavor is critical to consumer sales," says Hanson. Registered Dietitians must understand and appreciate that taste, aroma, appearance all make up the very essence of the nutrition message they are promoting.

Beth Kunkel, past Speaker of the ADA House of Delegates and professor at Clemson University, (23) contributes significant volunteer time to her community including offering counseling at a free clinic. According to Dr. Kunkel, “the RD constantly needs to be able to talk with people about the foods available to them and how they might prepare them in a healthy way”. Beth shared the story of a client with several children whose food preparation facilities consisted of only a cook top with no oven and an ice chest to cool a few food items. On many evenings, the family split a \$5.99 pizza. The client had limited cooking skills, not knowing how to prepare even simple foods such as dry beans or rice. Most of the long counseling sessions involved basic food preparation lessons. “We cannot assume that our clients have even the most minimal food preparation knowledge. To be effective,” Beth says, “we have to begin with where the client is, not where we want them to be.”

Ginnie Collins, RD, is a Certified Culinary Professional (CCP) who also holds a CDR Certificate of Training in Adult Weight Management. Ginnie and Mary Etta Moorachian, PhD, RD, CCP, Professor at Johnson & Wales University, assisted with the development and implementation of the EatWell Carolinas Program in Charlotte, North Carolina. (24, 25, 26) Participating restaurants and chefs agreed to develop and offer featured entrees and side dishes that met specific health criteria. Ginnie and Mary Etta worked with interested chefs to explain the criteria and assist with recipe development or modifications. Having two dietitians who could communicate with chefs on their turf and in their own lingo was critical to the success of the program. In her role as a certified adult weight management counselor, Ginnie enjoys the benefit of discussing recipes and cooking with clients. Culinary training gives her a better

understanding for how food is prepared in restaurant kitchens and enables her to accurately interpret menu descriptions for her clients, enabling them to make wise choices when dining out.

Roberta Duyff is a media spokesperson and author of *The American Dietetic Association's Complete Food and Nutrition Guide* (27). Roberta is recognized both as a nutrition expert and for her extensive knowledge of food and all things culinary. She is a frequent author of food and health articles featured in the foods section of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. Combining nutrition expertise with a passion for food, she recently presented a program entitled, "Paint your Plate for Flavors of Health." Partnering with a chef, Roberta transformed a formal meal into a scheme of fun and colorful meal courses featuring a total of 31 fruits and vegetables. She also co-led a weeklong "Cruisin' toward Wellness" shipboard program, blending the cuisines of various ports of call into her culinary and healthy eating presentations.

Suzanne Vieira, program director for the Culinary Nutrition Program at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island, partners with government and industry. She works to provide opportunities for future RDs to move beyond traditional roles and go for the endless possibilities to marry nutrition and food expertise (28). Graduates of the program include Chef Michelle Powers, RD (29), who designed her practice to combine private nutrition consulting with cooking classes. More than ever before, celebrities and athletes are seeking the assistance of RDs to improve health, fitness and to gain a competitive edge. Adam Korzun, RD, another graduate of the culinary nutrition program, is employed by the U.S. Olympic Committee, overseeing the food production for their three training sites, planning special menu needs for the unique

dietary requirements for marathon runners vs. wrestlers, and managing food production (30). Dietitians are themselves becoming personal chefs, showing clients that meals can be prepared to meet individual nutrition prescriptions while appeasing personal indulgences.

According to Kyle Shadix, being a chef and RD has opened many doors, allowing him to work in a variety of professional roles including menu consultant, cooking school instructor for healthy cuisine, private chef, restaurant manager, and author. There are many professional opportunities for the RD who is a “foodie”. Whether in menu and food development, product development and research, the possibilities are endless (31)!

Looking to the Future – Preparing Tomorrow’s Dietitians

Dietetic educators were asked to share some of the challenges in teaching food science and culinary skills. Responses were communicated electronically. Dietetic educators who attempt to teach food and culinary classes communicated much frustration. They are often faced with curriculum restrictions, lack of commitment or financial funding for updated labs and equipment, lack of prerequisite knowledge on the part of students about foods and cooking, and frustration with finding qualified teachers with culinary training who understand food science and healthy modifications.

Respondents were also asked to share their perception of the growing importance for food science and culinary knowledge and to share anecdotal stories illustrating how they see their graduates using culinary skills.

Lucy McProud with the Department of Nutrition and Food Science at San Jose State University (32) indicated that today’s students have little food knowledge or culinary skills due to the lack of food preparation experience at home while growing up.

Therefore, many students enter the field of dietetics ill-equipped to handle career opportunities where extensive food knowledge is important. This sentiment was echoed by several dietetics educators.

The challenge facing dietetics and foodservice management programs is multifaceted. Given the typical 120-credit hour curriculum, meeting the academic requirements for dietetics as well as the university's general education requirements can be challenging. Existing food science courses may have several prerequisites which are required before students can enroll. Hands-on foods preparation classes are expensive to operate and Alice Jo Rainville from Eastern Michigan University (33) noted that lab space often limits the number of students who can be accommodated.

A major challenge facing many university programs is outdated and poorly equipped facilities for teaching foods classes. Many foods labs are taught in old-style, home kitchens with dated and poorly functioning equipment. The expense to renovate such facilities is often considerable and beyond the reach of many institutions.

Partnering with other academic programs, such as food science or foodservice/restaurant management programs, may be one answer to this crisis as these kinds of programs may have more up-to-date equipment and facilities. Some institutions, such as Kansas State University, partner with the university's dining services to provide high quality, hands-on food preparation and culinary experience for students in an on-going foodservice environment, thus minimizing costs for the academic program.

Another issue shared by Audrey McCool (34) and Christine Bergman (35), faculty members at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, concerns the education and training of

faculty who teach food science or culinary classes. Faculty members who teach these classes may have minimal nutrition education and training. Thus, they may find teaching food preparation in a “healthy” context a challenge and may omit classroom discussions on how to apply healthy modifications.

Deb Canter at Kansas State University (36) relates that, despite best efforts to provide students with a solid background in food science and culinary applications, they often do not appreciate the opportunities provided to them during their educational experience. Appreciation of food preparation, sensory evaluation, and culinary skills often comes years later when these graduates are in practice and finally realize the importance of this knowledge. An example of this comes from Arlene Grant-Holcomb, RD, and a healthcare foodservice manager, who says that she trains her kitchen staff on the fundamentals of food preparation almost on a daily basis (37).

RDs as Culinary Innovators

Despite the challenges of teaching food and culinary concepts in today’s dietetics programs, numerous educators related exciting stories of culinary successes of their graduates. Monica Theis of the University of Wisconsin (38) shared the story of UW graduate, Megan Smith, who now teaches culinary classes to high school students, helping them gain an appreciation of healthful food preparation and a healthy lifestyle. Robin Fellers, faculty member at Auburn University, told of RD graduates from the Auburn program who have taken food-related positions. One graduate completed chef training and has become a food writer. Another was employed as a food writer by Oxmoor House, the publisher of *Cooking Light*, while a third worked in the company’s test kitchen. A multitude of other examples could be shared of RDs who are

successfully making their way in the culinary world, using their food and culinary expertise to breathe new life and excitement into their dietetics practice.

The “Take Home” Message

The world of dietetics continues to expand and grow. There will be opportunities for dietitians of the future of which we’ve yet to dream. As we pack our “tool kit” for that future, we must enhance our knowledge of food and food preparation in all its dimensions, from production agriculture to food manufacturing, biotechnology, food safety/security, product development, packaging, storage, preparation, holding, and service.

With the advent of the “Food Network’s” celebrity chefs, there appears to be a growing consumer interest in food and culinary skills. On-going food safety crises may prompt consumers to consider preparing more of their own food at home. The epidemic of childhood obesity may likewise prompt parents to consider less fast-food, drive-thru dining and more food preparation at home with their children. Dietitians must position themselves as viable and knowledgeable members of the food and culinary community. RDs should be major players on this scene, showcasing their ability to teach others how to prepare and serve delicious, beautiful, and healthy meals. If we allow other food professionals without a nutrition background to fill the void, we will have abdicated our place as the true food and nutrition experts.

Step Up to the Plate – Build Your Culinary Skills

Whether a Registered Dietitian or a Dietetic Technician, Registered, the CDR Professional Portfolio allows the flexibility to enhance one’s food and culinary

knowledge and skills. Make enhancing your culinary expertise one of your professional goals and try some of the following ideas.

Join the Food and Culinary Professionals DPG. Review culinary competencies considered most important by the FCP practice group, from the Research Chefs Association, or by browsing online the curriculum and basic skills from culinary programs around the country (13, 39). Search for culinary classes through professionally-sponsored programs such as FCP “cook shops”. Community culinary programs may offer non-credit culinary skills classes. Institute recipes exchanges or form a “fine dining club” with your colleagues.

A group of FCP members led by Deanna Segrave-Daly developed a manual titled, “Culinary Skills Resource Manual,” available at the FCP website. (40) FCP members discuss how they are using their culinary knowledge but also offer thoughts and resources for improving culinary skills through blogs, online resources, instructional DVDs, or cooking classes at local community healthcare systems. Find a RD “foodie” in your area that is a trained culinarian. Gather other RDs who are interested in learning more and contract the RD “foodie” or a personal chef to provide in-home skills building classes. Create your own food and wine pairing dinner. It is a flavorful and entertaining way to gain knowledge or skills while cooking and dining together. Form a journal club with “foodie” friends and make the focus food, wine, food history, ethnicity, and culture. Remember that chefs are also faced with the dilemma of disease. Create opportunities to collaborate with chefs in your community. For example, volunteer to assist with charity fundraising events with organizations such as the Juvenile Diabetes Association. You may find that the chef coordinating the dinner has a family member with diabetes

and is an advocate for diabetes care. This may become your opportunity to make an alliance. Partner with that chef to plan and present a “cooking for diabetics” workshop for your local dietetic and/or diabetes association. Join a local health/disease related support group. Dining with a local health-focused support group is an excellent avenue to gain insight into the challenges for clients with diet constraints.

Investigate or search online for a local cooking school or check out short courses and workshops at professional culinary schools/programs. Join other food-related professional organizations that will allow for collaborations as well as enhance knowledge, such as the American Institute of Food and Wine, International Association of Food and Culinary, School Nutrition Association, Slow Food Convivium, food safety councils, farm stewardship programs, or a local chapter for the American Culinary Federation.

If you are a “foodie,” consider devoting volunteer time to a nearby dietetic education program. Be a role model for students and create and nurture an interest in beautiful, healthy food. Show them how to do a food demonstration or work with them to learn how to modify recipes that will yield healthier and tastier results.

Dietetic educators, faced with financial and time constraints, are becoming innovative and creative with methods for increasing the culinary knowledge of their graduates. Increasingly, food educators are integrating essential core culinary competencies into the basic food preparation and food science classes such as sensory awareness, ingredients and flavor profiles, knife skills, classical preparation of stocks and sauces, healthy cooking methods, preparation of vegan and spa cuisine, and exploration of ethnic foods. The international students associations on university

campuses often host special evenings of “tastings” from other lands. This becomes an opportune learning experience for dietetic students to increase awareness of ethnic diversity and of foods from other cultures as well as ethnic flavor profiles.

In some programs, trained culinarians are recruited as instructors for food preparation labs and/or chefs are contracted as adjunct faculty to team-teach. The student dietetic club can plan meetings around food and related culinary topics, inviting relevant professional speakers such as a RD in public relations or food marketing or a food writer. Other activities might focus on sustainable agriculture, food safety, or hosting a culinary workshop. Field trips are often difficult to manage, but many professionals may allow students to interview them or shadow them for short periods of time.

Students should be encouraged to demonstrate leadership in the community. Partner them with a mentor from a professional organization. Think “out of the box” when planning food-related learning activities. Traditional quantity foods experiences can be expanded beyond institutional settings to other food outlets, thus allowing for additional awareness and exposure. This might include activities with the campus continuing education center, local restaurants, farmers markets, local health-related support groups, visiting the a local “slow food” convivium, local American Culinary Federation meeting, or community charitable events. Educators can establish an optional food experience such as an online course designed for summer exploration.

Students may gain employment in the food service industry, a “real world” classroom, and earn summer income while completing assigned activities designed to meet specific curriculum competencies. Technology is now available to utilize virtual

classrooms. A faculty member could construct a virtual institutional or commercial food outlet for an online foodservice experience. This could be an excellent enhancement tool for food safety instruction. Search online often as technology continues to provide increased avenues for “edutainment.” Many websites now offer culinary-related video clips. University programs could sponsor “alternative spring break” opportunities. A for-credit culinary adventure could be planned for students to increase their knowledge and skills utilizing resources within the state or region. This could be a perfect “win-win” solution for the instructor seeking to enhance his/her own culinary competence while providing wonderful learning opportunities for students.

With increasing consumer interest in food, nutrition, and health, the opportunity is now to carve out our niche as the true food and nutrition experts. The ways and means for increasing food and culinary knowledge are boundless. Who knows, you may become, or you may help create, “the next Food Network star”!

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