

The Flavor Savior

Oncologist and trained chef Dr. Luis Pineda develops delicious and nutritional dishes especially for cancer patients.



DR. LUIS PINEDA IS A POLYMATH. A native of Guatemala, Pineda has a medical degree from his home country, as well as U.S. training and certification in internal medicine, psychiatry, hematology/oncology, hospital administration and...cooking. As he explains, after almost 35 years of treating cancer patients at UAB, he realized that many side effects of traditional therapies were becoming a barrier to healing. "Chemotherapy and radiation are good treatments, but they are not benign treatments," Pineda explains. "They have gotten better, but they still cause a lot of problems."

Those problems include difficulty eating because of mouth inflammation, mouth sores, and even difficulty chewing and swallowing. Pineda's patients, like countless other cancer sufferers, also complain of digestive problems and a lack of interest in eating, since their senses of taste and smell are so affected by the drugs and radiation. "Through the years I have seen so many of them suffering," Pineda says. "Food is one of the great pleasures in life. I thought to myself, 'How [unfair] is it that my patients have lost this fundamental pleasure. How can I improve that for them?'"

In the years since he first asked that question, Pineda has found a new calling. "I have spent a lot of time studying the science of smelling, of tasting, the neurobiology of eating and the absorption and utilization of nutrients. My goal is to enhance taste, experience and nutrition for chemo patients."

Pineda's recipes feature fruits with a lower glycemic index (more fructose than glucose), as malignant cells are fueled in a particular

way by glucose. He cooks with vegetables such as spinach to replace lost iron and other nutrients. He develops dishes that are easy-to-chew or even frozen that can simply melt and soothe a sore, dry mouth. And everything is designed to be simple to digest and highly flavorful. For example, the heavy use of chili peppers, which at first would seem unpleasant for people with tender mouths and sensitive digestive tracts, actually serve an important purpose. "The chili pepper is activating receptors inside the nose and mouth," Pineda explains. "It introduces energy and helps wake up the sense of smell and taste."

Pineda works a full day, rounding at the hospital early, then seeing patients in his clinic until the evening. Once he gets home, he starts experimenting with recipes in his home kitchen. "Seventy percent of what I do is wasted," he says. "Only about 30 percent of the recipes are useable."

When he's satisfied with his new dishes, Pineda tries them out on his hospital and

clinical patients. They help him tweak the foods and perfect them for publication and distribution, either through the Cooking with Cancer website (cookingwithcancer.org) or through the "Prescription to Taste" cookbook. "We've sold more than 5,000 copies of the cookbook and both the American Cancer Society and the Susan G. Komen Foundation endorse it," Pineda says.

For this busy doctor and chef, there is always more to do. Future plans include exploring the connections between food and health before people receive a chronic diagnosis. He's also looking for ways to better educate Alabamians who may not understand the relationship between obesity, diabetes and cancer, for example. "We know that obese people have worse outcomes in cancer therapy," he says. "We have to continue to build an awareness in people so they avoid these problems."

There's also more for him to know. "The day I stop learning is the day I die," he says.

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Dr. Luis Pineda

Strawberry Granita with Basil

1 pound organic strawberries, cleaned and stemmed
10 leaves of sweet basil, cut into long strips
1 teaspoon xanthan gum
Stevia to taste
pinch of salt

■ Blend all ingredients except for basil to a smoothie consistency. Strain to remove seeds. Adjust sweetener to taste; add basil. Spread evenly on a cookie sheet and place in freezer. Check regularly and stir with a fork to remove ice crystals. Serve when frozen.

Benefits: Soothes sore and inflamed mouths, low in glucose, refreshing and hydrating.



Savory Pumpkin Ice Cream

1 pumpkin, peeled, seeded and cut into 1-inch pieces
1 sweet onion, chopped
1 quart vegetable broth or water
4 tablespoons butter
1 tablespoons xanthan gum
Salt and pepper to taste

■ In a two-quart heavy saucepan, sauté the onion in the butter until the onion becomes a deep golden brown. Add broth or water to deglaze the pot; bring to a boil. Once boiling, add pumpkin, salt and pepper and cook until tender, about 10 minutes. Let stand and cool. Pour mixture into blender with xanthan gum and puree. Strain and refrigerate overnight. The next day, pour mixture into ice cream maker and process until frozen. Garnish and serve.

Benefits: Soothes sore and dry mouths, low in glucose, refreshing and hydrating.



Vegetable Terrine

Group 1:

1 bunch asparagus
2 cups okra
1 tomato, peeled and sliced
1 carrot, peeled and sliced
turmeric, peeled and sliced

Group 2:

2 cups shitake mushroom, sliced
1 small eggplant, julienned
1 sweet bell pepper in color of your choice
1 teaspoon butter
2 envelopes unflavored gelatin
Gelatin, unflavored
Pinch of chili pepper flakes or cayenne pepper
6 ounces, vegetable broth
Salt to taste

Special equipment:
2 x 4" terrine mold

Note: Each of the vegetables must be cooked SEPARATELY.

■ In boiling water, cook all of group one until tender and easy to cut. Sauté each vegetable of group two until tender. Allow all to cool.



■ For the aspic, bring vegetable broth to a boil, add chili pepper. Gently dissolve gelatin in broth.
■ To assemble, line mold with plastic wrap cut to fit with excess on all sides. Lay vegetables randomly inside lengthwise. Pour aspic into mold, leaving air pockets.
■ Refrigerate for 24 hours. To serve, slice into half-inch slices and garnish with fresh herbs. ■

Benefits: Provides a number of intense flavors in a single bite, tender vegetables are easy to chew, spicy vegetable aspic stimulates taste and smell, high in antioxidants.

Savory Spinach Sorbet

1 sweet onion, chopped
1 quart vegetable broth
1 large bag of spinach leaves, washed
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
Salt and pepper to taste

■ In a two-quart heavy saucepan, sauté the onion in the butter until the onion becomes a deep golden brown. Add broth or water to deglaze the pot; bring to a boil. Once boiling, add spinach and cook for 5 minutes. Let stand and cool. Pour mixture into blender with and puree. Refrigerate overnight. The next day, pour mixture into ice cream maker and process until frozen. Garnish and serve.

Benefits: Soothes sore and inflamed mouths, provides iron and powerful antioxidants.

BY JULIE KEITH

Details

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