

THE YUM STORY

How Living Deliciously Can Become a Way of Life

Who would have thought that at age 50 I would be a chef writing a cookbook? Certainly not me! I started out as an animal-loving, artsy kid who loved to study math and science, and who grew up to become a psychologist, wife and mother.

In 1995, I married my long-time, beloved friend, Eric Mazzi. Together we were moving along in life with our dog and three cats, just like so many others. Then something unexpected happened that profoundly changed the trajectory of my life: I got pregnant! It wasn't that the pregnancy was unexpected—it had been planned for and hoped for, and was a wonderful blessing. What was unexpected were the consequences of my pregnancy: physical debilitation and a cascade of health problems that lasted for more than a decade after our daughter Alex's birth in 1997.

What the heck! I say this jokingly now, but—believe me—it was no joke. In fact, it was downright terrifying at times. My immune and respiratory systems began to fail, neurological problems and chronic pain reduced my mobility and general functioning, and my life became a battle against perpetual infection, inflammation, fatigue, weight gain and an endless list of food and environmental sensitivities. Medical appointments and visits to the hospital became a major focus of my existence, but all the while, I was still trying to be a good mom and contributing member of society in my professional capacity.

I knew this was not how I wanted to spend the rest of my life, but no matter how hard I tried, my condition only worsened.

My belief in the body's natural tendency and desire to heal itself was activated during this time and was a great blessing. A fire in my gut propelled me to fight against my condition; it felt like a force more powerful than I could have mustered alone, and I embraced it. I chose to fight for a cause. I chose to say "Yes" to life in all its forms and advocate for it, starting with the little world I was in—first my body, then my family, and then beyond.

Somehow I was given the courage and tenacity to search for a way to transform myself and to emerge from this suffering. You name the treatment (even unmentionable ones I would never wish on anyone), I probably tried it! Most treatments, whether conventional or alternative, resulted in minimal or no benefit at best, and not-so-attractive side effects at worst. I'd enthusiastically complied with countless caring and competent professionals' advice, yet my health didn't improve and the chronic conditions and negative effects of some of my medications continued to worsen. I knew that something needed to change, but what? It was just one big mystery. I had met my Baba Yaga in a big way!

At a certain point, I realized that it was *I* who had to be the agent of change. The well-intentioned medical professionals at the time were unable to help, so I had to take responsibility for learning about my body in a whole new way. While I didn't know where to start, my lifelong love of science became my best ally. It was time to pull out

all the stops and become my own case study. I took every conventional and alternative course about health and healing that I could, and became immersed in a journey of discovery that has changed my world forever.

While in the midst of all this research and experimentation, I reconnected with my former colleague and friend from the University of British Columbia, Dr. Hal Gunn. Hal and I had shared a passion for honoring the mind-body-spirit connection and a belief in the body's innate capacity to heal itself. He had followed his dream as a physician by co-founding an innovative holistic and integrative cancer treatment center in Vancouver, Inspire Health, with Dr. Roger Rodgers in 1997. During our visit, Hal gave me Inspire Health's comprehensive, research-based information package that contained resources to empower their patients living with cancer. One of the things that stood out most for me, as I later perused the center's materials, was the section about foods that help to fight cancer. This excited me and launched my curiosity about how food could be used as medicine—and how healthy organic food, from naturally enriched soil, as fresh as possible (ideally grown at or near your own home) can be even better medicine.

Another great discovery I made was the work of Functional Medicine pioneers who spoke about how the wrong food for an individual can result in an inner world of toxicity. I learned more about the role of environmental and food allergies and cross allergens, as well as how food sensitivities contribute to inflammation. Reading and employing Dr. Natasha Turner's book, *The Hormone Diet*, was a pivotal point in my journey. Her book opened my eyes to the barrage of toxins I had been exposed to—in food, air and water—and how hard my body had been working to cope with these assaults. Natasha's book also introduced me to a simple elimination program to identify food sensitivities. Through this process, I discovered that when I completely eliminated gluten from my diet, the migraine headaches (from which I'd suffered all my life) disappeared. And the pain that filled every part of my body also lessened—all in less than a month! Holy cow—was that really possible? After all the treatments I had tried, this was the first clear improvement that I experienced. It did not resolve all of my symptoms by any stretch, but it made a significant dent.

Okay, I was hooked.

Also in 2010, Alex—then 12 years old—saw Alicia Silverstone (actor and author of *The Kind Diet*) on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, talking about how farm animals are treated. After watching that program, Alex became a vegan in less than a week. Boom! How we ate as a family took another dramatic turn overnight.

Then there was the 2011 release of Dr. William Davis's *Wheat Belly*, a book that rocked the world. In it, Davis blew the whistle on wheat and demonstrated the connection between wheat and heart disease, diabetes, celiac disease, weight gain, the aging process and a host of neurological problems. Both Dr. David Perlmutter's in his book *Grain Brain* and Dr. Alessio Fasano in his book *Gluten Freedom* have subsequently brought more research findings about gluten and its potential health implications to light. For the first time since Drs. Colin and Thomas Campbell's 2005 book, *The China Study*, which linked diet with chronic illness and mortality, the public was whacked in the gut in

a way that could no longer be ignored.

In an effort to care for the needs of all our family members, Alex and I started trying a huge range of plant-based, gluten-free and sugar-free foods in 2010. But we had a problem: most of them tasted terrible to us. So we started to read every recipe book we could get our hands on, as well as countless recipes from the internet, with only a few successes. We were able to find some products and recipes that were either vegan or gluten-free that we liked, but rarely any that were both. Those we did try were often filled with refined sugar, margarine and other ingredients that we prefer to avoid. After a year of major frustration, we realized that we had to create our own recipes if we wanted to enjoy food that met our standards for health and taste. Ever so slowly, we were able to come up with delicious meals that reflected the high quality flavor, texture and appearance that we sought—and were also easy and quick to make, given our busy lives.

It was amazing. When Alex and I decided to sink our teeth (so to speak) into taking on this challenge, it was impossible to stop us. Despite many culinary failures along the way, we were super excited when we had finally developed enough recipes to be able to once again invite friends over for meals—unapologetically. Yeah!

Then in 2013, Alex and I decided to go to the Living Light International Culinary Institute in California to learn even more. That year we became Associate Raw Food Chefs and Instructors. I went back in 2014 to complete the Gourmet Raw Food Chef program, and then later that same year, Alex and I returned for the Advanced Raw Food Nutrition Educator Certification program.

We've now become a resource for others, sharing our recipes with friends who have similar dietary challenges. We are not alone; it was mind-blowing to learn how many folks live with food limitations!

Most people are tired of hearing about what they “need to,” “ought to,” “have to,” or “should” be eating— or what they should be feeding their kids—because of health problems. I have found that such pressure not only results in very little sustainable behaviour change, but all too often also results in undue stress and guilt that serves no one. I want you to be able to shed any despair, frustration or self-blame, so that you are less likely to give up if you don't feel able to resist eating food that you know may be harmful to your body. When grace and love are invited in, shame and hopelessness fade. When this happens, like a seed inspired to sprout and thrive, you'll find yourself better able to make life-enhancing choices, almost effortlessly.

As a psychologist, I have absolutely no interest or desire in colluding with potentially harmful ways of thinking. My passion runs deep, both personally and as a professional who has practiced psychotherapy for almost 30 years. So, while writing a cookbook is the last thing I ever imagined I might be doing, it is clearly what I have been called to do. And while an unlikely vehicle for my life path, this philosophically grounded project indisputably resonates with my heartfelt commitment to do what I can to help others suffer less.

This is a world I know extremely well: it was the inspirational guiding force that gave me the tenacity to develop this extensive collection of recipes. For years, I saw my beloved dad struggling with diabetes, heart disease, kidney

failure and the associated circulation issues and neuropathy. Witnessing his struggles around food, which only worsened in his last years of life, was heart-wrenching. I'll never forget how he couldn't stop himself from eating the delicious cake at his granddaughter's birthday party, just days before the first of four amputation surgeries on both his legs. He died one year later, after living with unbearable pain every moment of that year.

I want to help prevent you and countless others from having to live through such agony, and at the same time make it possible for everyone to enjoy the pleasure of sharing celebrations with loved ones— including being able to savor every bite of delectable cake at your granddaughter's birthday, or graduation, or wedding. With the alarming increase in the rates of obesity and diabetes (especially for our youth), my longing to help turn the boat around couldn't be stronger. The great news is that delicious food doesn't have to wreak havoc on our bodies—it's time to shed that outmoded belief.

Go ahead, call me crazy, because I am—crazy about life, crazy about love and now, more than ever, crazy about delicious and non-toxic food that nourishes instead of harms my body and the planet. It hasn't been easy, but it fills my heart with indescribable joy to be able to transform my struggle and frustration into an opportunity to create something worthwhile for others, something that might help bring to your life, and the lives of others, a little

Excerpt from *YUM: plant-based recipes for a gluten-free diet* by Theresa Nicassio, PhD. Available online at www.yumfoodforliving.com.