

[TREND ON TRIAL]

DINING ON THE DARK SIDE

A fine meal provides a total sensory experience. Now imagine taking your sense of sight out of the equation. You'd have "dark dining," a concept that caught hold in Europe in the late 1990s and now is starting to become a trend stateside. Here's how it works: Diners are served in complete darkness. Servers lead them to a table and in some restaurants recite the menu so people can order, while in other restaurants diners choose their meal in advance. "Your eyes dictate what you're supposed to taste, [but in dark dining] you have to rely on the taste, texture and shape of the food," explains Benjamin Uphues, founder of three dark-dining restaurants, called Opaque, in California. (At Uphues's restaurants, the waitstaff is blind or visually impaired.)

Yet at about \$100 per person, it's not an inexpensive night out, which left us wondering, for that price, could dark dining offer more benefits than meet the eye? We asked Jean Harvey-Berino, Ph.D., R.D., obesity expert and author of *The EatingWell Diet*, to weigh in. "We're visually cued to finish what's on our plates; but there is evidence that beyond the first five mouthfuls of a dish you're eating just to finish it," explains Harvey-Berino. "So there is some reason to speculate that you might be more inclined to stop eating if you can't see the food."

BOTTOM LINE: It may not curb your appetite, but dining in the dark truly is a thought-provoking way to savor food.

—Leslie Gilbert Elman



[KUDOS]

IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE KITCHEN?

For John Principe, M.D., entering the kitchen of the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) conjured up memories of his first time in the operating room during medical school. "It was like having a nurse standing over your shoulder...Wash your hands! Use the knife this way," says Principe, an internist. "I was so unnerved and felt completely out of my element." Principe is one of more than 1,000 medical professionals who, to date, have attended a Healthy Kitchens, Healthy Lives conference at the CIA campus in California (healthykitchens.org). During the four-day events held twice a year, participants first listen to nutrition lectures—to learn more about links between diet and diseases—and then hone their culinary skills in hands-on cooking sessions.

The brainchild of David Eisenberg, M.D., director of Osher Research Center at Harvard Medical School, and Mark Erickson, vice president of continuing education at the CIA, the conference aims to address the problem that many doctors receive little training in nutrition or in selecting and cooking healthy foods. The course emphasizes that doctors are more likely to advise their patients on healthy lifestyles if they practice what they preach. "Our goal is to inspire physicians to change their own behaviors and to serve as role models and champions in the healthy-eating, healthy-lifestyle campaign," says Eisenberg.

The conference seems to be working. "It changed the way I practice medicine," says Principe, who has lost 15 pounds since attending last April. With a renewed sense of well-being, he now writes fewer prescriptions and spends more time discussing lifestyle and dietary changes with patients. —*Sylvia Geiger, M.S., R.D.*

[LOCAL HERO]

REVIVING
NATIVE FOODS

For southern Arizona's Tohono O'odham tribe, the desire to return to the past is more than nostalgia: it's a matter of life and death. "Fifty years ago, when we ate native foods rather than white bread and McDonald's, we weren't obese and didn't have diabetes, but now they're rampant," says Terrol Dew Johnson (*right*), a member of the tribe, who was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes 12 years ago. Because many Native Americans are genetically predisposed to developing diabetes, the current American diet, rich in processed food, has created a health crisis among the Tohono O'odham nation.

In 1996, Johnson co-founded Tohono O'odham Community Action (TOCA) in an effort to reacquaint members of the impoverished tribe with disappearing native foods—such as squash and tepary beans. In the heart of the Sonoran Desert, 60 miles west of Tucson, he successfully re-established two working farms to grow and sell traditional native foods in the community and also teach O'odham members how to harvest and prepare them.

Johnson has seen some progress since TOCA started: for example, native foods are more available in the reservation's mom-and-pop stores and information about their nutritional value has helped raise local awareness of healthful choices.

But habits are hard to break and Johnson worries: "We're on a time schedule. The elders are dying. We're working hard to get as much information from them about their traditional culture as we can." For details on all of TOCA's programs, go to tocaonline.org. —*Edie Jarolim*

