



Rx for life

The doctor is in — to health

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When the Culinary Institute of America and Harvard University recently hosted a gathering of health professionals from around the country in St. Helena, the focus was on how to make healthy living — and eating — a bigger part of the American lifestyle.

Pooling their knowledge, the chefs and health folks were creating and eating foods that were both delicious and healthful, while listening to the latest research from Harvard doctors and sharing ideas that will inspire Americans to aim for a healthier lifestyle — without sacrificing the pleasures of food. These conferences, "Healthy Kitchens, Healthy Lives," will continue to take place twice a year at the CIA, Greystone in St. Helena.

One of the key points emphasized was that physicians can play a key role in transforming the state of American health by serving as role models — as they did in the '70s when doctors began giving up smoking.

But the idea of being a role model is nothing new to one of the presenters at the conference, Dr. Heather Piña. "We've been doing that for years," she said. Piña, a graduate of Harvard Medical School, is the director of the St. Helena Center for Health in Angwin, where she oversees three programs designed to help people create healthier lifestyles. "One" is a one-day intensive assessment where a patient receives a "super physical" with cutting edge screenings, works with the doctor and her team (who even dress in the client's favorite colors that day) and leaves with a personalized blueprint for health; another, "Transformations," is an 11-day residential weight management program; and the third is a seven-day residential program to help clients stop smoking.

Svelte, energetic and clearly brimming with good health and high spirits, Piña is a walking endorsement of her programs, but she said she follows her own advice mostly because "I want to feel good. It's my lifestyle now, to exercise and choose healthy foods."

The mother of two boys, ages 5 and 10, said she realizes healthy eating is "a day-by-day path with kids."

"I like to cook when I have time," she added. "I've learned to cook fast. I rely on the three S's: soup, salad and stir-fry."

Although not a vegetarian, Piña said she follows a "plant-based" diet, incorporating fruits and vegetables. She has devised a list of her 10 "power foods" and starts her day with a smoothie that incorporates five of them — soy protein powder, oats, berries, flax seeds and walnuts.

She also acknowledges the special challenges of navigating a healthy path through the bounty of a food- and wine-loving valley.

"Nobody's perfect," she said. "I don't bake chocolate chip cookies because I know I'd eat them all. I say pick your poisons carefully and enjoy them. I don't have desserts very often, but if I do, it's going to be chocolate."

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