



Alison Precourt (L) and Leah Pryor

Note: At Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Vermont we like to celebrate our partners, especially when they do exciting things for our communities that encourage health and wellness. As such, this article details UVM Medical Center's Culinary Medicine programming, which is supported and promoted by UVM Medical Center's employee wellness program as well as by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Vermont's Accountable Blue program.

Culinary Medicine may be a new term for many people but for the health and wellness folks at the University of Vermont Medical Center, Culinary Medicine is a well-respected and necessary approach to diet, nutrition, and understanding our relationship to food.

Leah Pryor, chef educator for the University of Vermont Medical Center and fellow co-worker and food advocate Alison Precourt, a pediatric dietitian and certified Diabetes educator, have been part of an unstoppable team dedicated to fusing the science of nutrition with the joy of cooking for the health of us all.

Following, you will find a question and answer article to help you understand Culinary Medicine and the resources available to local businesses and Vermonters

Culinary Medicine:

bringing
together
the joy of
cooking

&

the science
of nutrition.


What inspired you to create a department at UVM Medical Center focused on the joy of cooking and the science of nutrition?

Leah: My passion started 20 years ago. As a chef, I've always loved to educate and entertain. But in this world of "health" you very rarely see the combo of dietitian and chef. We're constantly flooded with teaching kitchens and food programs and messages to eat well and live healthy and cook and eat, but no one actually helps us do it well with health in mind. So, I started thinking about the importance of providing real-world accountability and that's when the relationship between the chef and the dietitian surfaced. Our classes focus on the symbiotic relationship between a chef and a dietitian and allow us to help people "hit the reset button" when it comes to relationships with food.

Culinary Medicine is how we find our way back to our roots one bite at a time.

Leah Pryor

Vigor



Alison: For me, it's a dance. I've been a registered dietitian for more than 35 years and as a scientist I've always tried to help people make smart nutritional decisions. Culinary Medicine brings the science of nutrition and the joy of cooking together. It is a perfect marriage and it makes nutritional science more human, attainable and likely to stick, while reminding people of the joy of handling unprocessed or minimally processed foods.

What is one of the biggest challenges when it comes to Culinary Medicine?

Leah: A lot of times when people come into our teaching kitchen, we have to disarm them, help them relax. We always have food on the tables that they can see and touch. To start, we also share a bite to eat, maybe bread and oil with bloomed spices. The most important thing to remember is we all have to eat—it is a great equalizer and a great place to start from when sharing knowledge.

Then, we'll talk about nutrition once we've relaxed people. We don't want to scare people with the science and the facts right off. Most of the time after a class people will share, "Oh I didn't realize the importance of building good flavor will also have an impact on my heart health or may even help lower my blood sugar because I'm no longer craving empty foods."

What can a class participant expect?

Leah: Our classes vary. In most situations classes are two-and-a-half hours long. Everything is set up. The food is there and we want it to be, from the first moment, a visual and sensory experience. People get excited! We invite them in and we can immediately see their curiosity spark. Then we start talking nutrition. Throughout it all we taste the food we're making. Just yesterday we were teaching people how to bloom spices!

Alison: We want to excite all of the senses through our teachings—sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. And we also impart knowledge about the nutritional benefits of cooking at home. The biggest thing I notice is people's emotional response to

the smell of cooking. For those who have lost the relationship between cooking and eating, it is amazing to see how the smell alone brings people back to family holidays or memories of growing up. It is truly emotional and then it is also physical.

Where do people find info about the Culinary Medicine classes?


Leah: UVM Medical Center's Healthsource website is excellent (VMHealth.org/MedCenterHealthsource). All of our programs are free and we're currently offering 12 classes per year. In 2019, we'll hold our family and nutrition classes and pain and inflammation classes again. Getting families back in the kitchen is very important to us.

We'll also be offering our corporate wellness Culinary Medicine classes for local employers here in Vermont. We'll come to you! We really want to bring food education and the joy of cooking to the entire community—including places of work. If we can make our Vermont business worksites healthier through Culinary Medicine, then we can continue to meet people where they are in their wellness journey, and continue to increase the well-being and health of all Vermonters. The take-away: we have the nutritionists and we have the chef, this is a unique offering to improve our communal wellbeing through healthy foods and cooking! .

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Food is and always has been sustenance and fuel for the day. It has provided us all a connection to our communities, the seasons and to one another. Cooking and finding the joy of cooking is also a way to show self-care and care for others.

Leah Pryor

A close-up, warm-toned photograph of a person's hands chopping walnuts on a wooden cutting board. The person is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt. In the background, there is a yellow bowl and a stainless steel bowl, both containing green leafy vegetables. A small white cup is also visible on the wooden surface. The scene is set in a kitchen with a wooden countertop.

What I love most about this work is it helps reset the family dynamic and encourages people make healthy choices that then bring people back to the table, slow down and connect with the planet and with one another.

Alison Precourt



Through cooking together we find things we've collectively lost—time, mindfulness, a slower pace, looking at our food, touching our food, recognizing our food and in essence recognizing one another. It is very important.

Leah Pryor

Are there other programs you think people should know about when it comes to the food landscape here in Vermont?

Alison: We not only support our patients and their families and the local community, we're also teaching UVM medical students how to help manage food intake and eating for patients who have dietary limitations. Culinary Medicine has a lot of tendrils. And we recognize that most providers only have 15-minutes with their patients—we're sensitive to this as we teach nutrition to doctors in training. It's important knowledge, but it's also important that we make it easy to share and easily understood.

Food insecurity is a reality here in Vermont. And we believe strongly that fresh, healthy farm food should be available to all. So, we support and engage with the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps to help provide families with fresh food and nutrition education at their provider's office through Health Care Shares.

Leah: And there's also The Learning Garden, which is a teaching and community garden located on the Fanny Allen campus. We offer a 20-week course right at Fanny Allen. We teach people how to mold and shape the earth, how to plant and how to harvest. One of the most successful harvests I remember was when we harvested honey. The jars were beautiful, golden and glowing.

What is important for Vermonters to understand about this work?

Leah: The Vermont connection to food is different than in most places. There's a certain honor or reverence for our food—even the growing and harvesting of our food is special here in Vermont. But even so, we can still help people connect the dots between cooking and nutrition and while there's a deep connection to food here, some people experience food insecurity and can't connect as easily to healthy Vermont foods. Sometimes we miss this ability to create synergy.

But food as medicine helps to create the reset so people can connect to food like we once did. Food is and always has been sustenance and fuel for the day. It has provided us all a connection to our communities, the seasons and

to one another. Cooking and finding the joy of cooking is also a way to show self-care and care for others.

Alison: I've worked with all sorts of people and many families over the past 35 years here at UVM Medical Center. I see people who hold a deep respect for food, and I also see the other end of the spectrum—people who only eat fast foods and quick meals. What I love most about this work is it helps reset the family dynamic and encourages people make healthy choices that then bring people back to the table, slow down and connect with the planet and with one another.

Leah: Absolutely. Getting people back to the table together is the most important aspect of the work we're doing now.

Alison: Yes, and there are good statistics on the importance of family dinners, what eating together can do for people, for families.

Leah: If we can hold a safe space for people to learn about cooking and nutrition and how these two sciences are not at odds, then we can create a lot of momentum for change. Through cooking together we find things we've collectively lost—time, mindfulness, a slower pace, looking at our food, touching our food, recognizing our food and in essence recognizing one another. It is very important. Collectively, we've lost our way when it comes to food and cooking, but Culinary Medicine is how we find our way back to our roots one bite at a time.

For additional information, please visit UVMHealth.org/MedCenterHealthsource or call (802) 847-7222.

