

Kitchen Prescription

Food and wellness go together for UVM Medical Center executive chef R. Leah Pryor

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R. Leah Pryor had just graduated from high school when she got her first cooking job: making pasta at a farm-to-table restaurant 45 minutes north of New York City.

It was the early 1990s, and Pryor had recently returned to the U.S. after living in Europe. “I just was this kind of crazy 18-year-old. I had no thought of going to college,” she recalled with a chuckle. “I was like, *Whatever. I was just in Europe forever. I am a classically trained musician. I speak languages. I don’t need anything like that.*”

Her parents said fine, but she needed to get a job. “That’s how it all started,” Pryor said.

After 15 years as a chef in restaurants, Pryor, 44, moved to dining and nutrition services at the University of Vermont Medical Center, where she has spent the past decade. She started as a line chef, and then created a new role for herself: chef-educator.

In July 2020, Pryor was promoted to executive chef, one of the top management positions on a team of about 200 that runs the hospital food service operation. In a normal year without a pandemic or cyber-attack, that group plans, sources, cooks and serves more than 2 million meals for patients, staff and visitors.

Back when she was 18, Pryor had no idea that she was stepping onto her permanent career path or where it would take her.

“Being a chef, you think of cooking on the line or running a restaurant,” she said, “but I’ve done so many things that

I would never have thought, like writing grants, performing research, running our culinary medicine program, working with dietitians.”

Pryor spoke with *Seven Days* about her passion for helping people feel comfortable in their kitchens, using food as medicine, and tips for eating more vegetables.

SEVEN DAYS: This interview will be in the *Seven Days* Wellness issue. What does wellness mean to you?

R. LEAH PRYOR: Wellness means connection to food. There has been a loss of connection to food and how we incorporate it into our lives. People say, “You need to eat well,” but then there’s really nobody saying, “Well, how do we do this? How can you start cooking for [yourself]? How can you access these [healthy] foods that we talk about?”

A lot of people, a lot of educators and a lot of chefs say, “Oh, it’s easy. Just do this.” They forget, actually, how hard that is for people.

When I think about wellness, I think, *How do I help people get to that?* A lot of times I’m not really teaching people how to cook; I’m actually just holding space for them to feel safe to reconnect to their kitchen.

R. LEAH PRYOR

POSITION: Executive chef at the University of Vermont Medical Center

LOCATION: Burlington

AGE: 44

CUISINE TYPE: Farm-to-institution, from-scratch meals for patients, staff and visitors served through room service and several on-site cafés

EDUCATION: Culinary Institute of America

EXPERIENCE: Executive chef, Fog Island Café (now Keepers/Fog Island Restaurant), Nantucket, Mass.; chef, Mary’s Restaurant at Baldwin Creek, Bristol, Vt.; pastry chef, Tourterelle, New Haven, Vt.

WHAT’S ON THE MENU? Maple-roasted tofu wrap with kale slaw; Southwestern chicken bowl with black beans, rice, coleslaw, cilantro-lime dressing and avocado cream; herb pita-crusted white fish



R. Leah Pryor



Two versions of oatmeal in a 2018 culinary medicine class

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