

Program title: Podcast: Faster Than Fast Food

Episode transcript:

Intro voiceover:

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Bruce Moody:

Hello, and welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. I don't know about you, but I'm busy. I keep hearing about the lazy days of summer, but I don't think my life got the memo. Despite the demands of the day, we've got to eat, our families, too. Fast food is an ever-present option, but today, we want to make the case that you can create meals at home that are faster than fast food. To help meet that goal, I have two really wonderful people. I want to introduce them to you.

Karen Hawkins is a colleague. She's a registered dietician. She works with us at Military Community and Family Policy.

Also joining us today is Laurie Zerga, who has been with Air Force Child Youth Programs for 12 years, teaching children in youth programs to bring them food and nutrition facts, and teaching them how to cook. She's an author and a culinary health educator for kids, and she and her team, they teach cooking classes.

We're really thrilled to have the both of you with us today. Karen, let's start with you. Tell us a little bit about yourself and what brings you to this conversation about fast food.

Karen Hawkins:

Well, first of all, I just want to say thank you for having me here today, Bruce.

As a registered dietician, I know the long-term health benefits of eating, making healthier food choices and choosing fruits and vegetables, and being able to afford them and work them into your budget is so important, so I'm just really excited to be able to talk with you and Laurie today about it.

Bruce:

Absolutely. And Laurie, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Laurie Zerga:

Well, I'm super passionate about food. I was really blessed to be raised on a little farm in California, and we really prepared a lot of our food. In the summer, nothing on our table was from the store. We did everything, milk, we made butter, eggs, everything, and so I'm just really passionate about that and I want to share with people. Food was a big part of our life, but it wasn't very time-consuming if you learn a lot of tips and tricks. And so that's really why I started teaching cooking, because I just want everybody else to know that they can take control over their food and really pay attention to what they're putting in their body.

Bruce:

Excellent. This is going to be really great information. I'm looking forward to it. Let's begin with seasonal vegetables. What tips do you have for adding seasonal vegetables to meals and snacks, especially during these busy work weeks?

Laurie:

Well, Bruce, I do have a few tips. The first is really to prepare meals, multiple meals at a time. I know some people who plan one day during the week where they prep everything, and that's a really good idea and it might work for some people. It actually didn't work for me. After a while, I felt like, "Ugh, it's that day again." So, what I found is, just as I'm cooking meals during the week, that I just prep multiple and I plan for leftovers. Then that way, I have double what I'm looking for. I have enough for another meal. You can use the vegetables. You can repurpose meat, the grain, the potatoes, everything, and you just need to make a bigger pot and make a tiny bit more preparation while you're at it. I call this planning for leftovers.

Bruce:

So, leftovers don't necessarily mean eating the exact dish that you ate the night before. You can do variations, is what you're trying to talk about, I think.

Laurie:

Yeah, I think a lot of people think of leftovers and they're like, "Ugh, that leftover box of Chinese food or that leftover soggy pizza." This is not what I'm talking about. If you look at recipes, a lot of times, you're supposed to pre-roast vegetables or you're supposed to blanch vegetables or something. And if you prepare extra while you're at it, then you have that part of the recipe already done, is what I'm trying to say. Yeah.

Bruce:

Karen, did you have any insights on the world of leftovers?

Karen:

Well, I agree with Laurie. Trying to find the quickest, easiest ways to prep your vegetables and have extras available during the week will help you to ensure that you are able to eat more vegetables during the week. Really, just a little bit of planning can go a long way and usually, the weekends are a good time to do that.

Bruce:

Yeah. Planning, it sounds like it's really helpful to feed the family all week, so what would be some of the vegetables that you would want to keep on hand to prepare healthier meals?

Laurie:

Well, if I had to pick something, I like to find things that are available all year-round. And I know I've seen these at the commissary around the world while teaching at U.S. military installations, so here's a few of those things. I would keep onions, you might find them in white, yellow or red – or even little green onions called scallions – celery, carrots, broccoli. And then after that, cabbage is a good option. And I love to get red and white, because I like different colors. It makes it interesting. And then garlic. I can't live without garlic. And then after that, I look at what's in season, and I vary that season by season.

Bruce:

For me personally, I love all the different colors of vegetables. Obviously, they're all good for you, but if I'm choosing too many of one color, then I force myself to find other vegetables of other colors and shapes and sizes. So, really, how did you come about to choose these vegetables? What's your recommendations with them?

Laurie:

Well, I like these vegetables because you can eat them raw or cooked, and they're really less perishable than, say, butter lettuce or spinach leaves or some of the spring greens that can spoil. And don't get me wrong, I eat all the vegetables. It's just that certain ones, I know when I'm going to purchase them, I want to eat them within the next couple of days. As opposed to a head of cabbage can sit in the refrigerator for a while, and then I can come and find it and be super happy to have it for a meal.

Bruce:

Karen, do you have any favorite vegetables, any favorite preparations?

Karen:

Well, yeah. Laurie has mentioned quite a few of them, actually. Broccoli is one of my favorites. Cabbage is another as well. And that's because these are cruciferous vegetables, which means basically, they're good for you because they're high in phytonutrients and just fiber. They've got fiber and lots of vitamins and minerals. Again, I agree that you can eat them raw or cooked. They're very quick and easy to prepare. Raw cabbage actually is one of my favorites, but it's a personal preference. That's kind of my favorites.

Laurie:

You know what I like is, if you take that cabbage and you just shred it super, super fine and you drizzle olive oil, either a little vinegar, you could use lemon juice or I love using lime, and then using cilantro and salt and pepper. And you can put that in the refrigerator and it naturally softens it, because the acid from the lime juice will break it down a little, and then it just has this amazing taste. It's my favorite thing, actually.

Bruce:

I love it. It's like a reduction on coleslaw.

Laurie:

Exactly. It almost pickles it a little, if you will, but it's fresh. It's just you maybe left it in there while you were prepping other things or maybe overnight even.

Bruce:

That's cool. To get back to the faster than fast food, which is what we promised people that we would be talking about, this is exactly what we're talking about. A little preparation and then you have this amazing, flavorful dish just waiting for you.

Laurie:

Exactly.

Bruce:

And you had mentioned butter lettuce and spinach leaves and some others – asparagus, green beans. How would you use these?

Laurie:

Well, the butter lettuce, I love as ... it's actually really fun to make lettuce cups with butter lettuce, and I use ground turkey and then I just chop up a bunch of different vegetables, might be some of that cabbage, some carrots, some celery, and then I add a little soy sauce and rice vinegar. If you like to, you could pick up a hoisin sauce or something at the market and put that in your sauteed vegetables and ground turkey, and then you can make lettuce cups with that and it's so fun. The thing I like about lettuce is they are like little cups, so you can do composed salads of all kinds. You could add tuna. I think I did a video earlier with you and showed a salad Niçoise, and that was with butter lettuce and some leftover green beans and a hard-boiled egg and a little bit of tuna, and you've got a complete meal and really flavorful and very interesting to look at.

Bruce:

Yeah, absolutely. And for those of you who didn't see it, we did a video with Laurie, and she has a full professional kitchen, everything all ready to go. It's really quite the production. We did mention that we're in the days of summer, but we're at the tail end of it where honestly, we're starting to get those days that remind us that winter is coming. Fall's right around the corner. Any recipes, any preparations that would be autumn-appropriate that you'd recommend?

Laurie:

Well, since you're talking about transition, you're getting the last of the zucchini, the last of the peppers and, of course, you always have onions. If you're grilling, those are great leftover on sandwiches, the leftover grilled vegetables. They make such a yummy sandwich on a little

French roll. Then as you get into the fall, you're looking at cabbage, you're looking at the different squashes, acorn, spaghetti squash, even pumpkins.

They're amazing to start. You can eat a roasted acorn squash or a butternut squash, and then the leftover of it can be pureed and add a little broth to it, and it's a beautiful soup. It's just really, it's amazing every time of year. I love to start adding in the Brussels sprouts, and you can start to roast. When it's cold out, you want roasted things. It warms your house up; rutabagas, parsnips, potatoes, a lot of different root vegetables that you can combine, and they're just absolutely delicious.

Bruce:

I have a list of vegetables that I absolutely swear I would never eat as a young person, and one by one, I have ticked off that list, and I've gone through each one of them and I have found a way to enjoy them. And Brussels sprouts is one of them, because I don't know who was preparing them when I was young, but they ended up making the kitchen smell like gym socks. I realized you could just slice them open, drizzle them with a little bit of oil, and put them in the oven. Honestly, they end up being almost a substitute for popcorn if you want to just enjoy a movie with Brussels sprouts. Not entirely out of the question.

Laurie:

Yeah, it's amazing. I once brought a stock of Brussels sprouts fresh that I had gotten to the children. I was teaching cooking and we took them off, cut them in half, threw them in the oven, just like you said, a little olive oil, and then we finished it with a little balsamic. And oh, my goodness, those are yummy.

Bruce:

Karen, are there any foods that you had a turning point with, that you had a change of heart, or any preparations that you would say that did it for you?

Karen:

Well, you know what? I have to say that air frying is really, it's a cool technique, because it allows you to take vegetables and make them crunchy within a relatively short period of time by using an air fryer. My toaster oven has an air fryer built into it, and so I will use that to air fry Brussels sprouts, broccoli, cabbage, beets. Yeah, it's trend now and I'm really enjoying doing it.

Laurie:

I love the idea also of the little toaster oven with the air fryer in it. It's smaller, so if you're only one or two people, you don't feel like, "Oh, I have to turn the whole oven on," and it's just more manageable, too. That's the other thing that would be a super tip for anybody with a smaller group in their household.

Bruce:

It's a trend. I definitely want to try it out. I think that I probably use significantly more oil than I should or need to when I'm frying, when I'm sauteing something, and the air frying is a neat

option to try. Laurie, any other quick ideas, faster than fast food ideas for leftovers that you want to bring to us?

Laurie:

Yeah, I just have a few really quickies, like I mentioned leftovers. Zucchini, eggplant, peppers, if you roasted them, they're excellent leftover on sandwiches, as I mentioned. Or you can cut them up and throw them on a pizza crust, something we're all familiar with, the kids are familiar with. You're adding more vegetables into your life than a traditional cheese pizza. And then also, I just love broccoli and zucchini, asparagus, any of these, Swiss chard with mushrooms. Any combination that you have left over, they're great over that spaghetti squash or spaghetti, or you could make an omelet or scramble it in eggs. If you have leftover green beans, I think I already mentioned that, hard-boiled egg, a can of tuna and a little lettuce, you've got a salad Niçoise, very, very chic, but super easy. And a lot of these vegetables I'm mentioning, you can put in broth, too, and make a super quick soup.

Bruce:

I could talk about this for quite some time. I can go on and on, but I know we need to wrap up. But Karen, I really want to get your thoughts on really, what we're trying to talk about here today.

Karen:

Well, I think we're trying to share some tips with families and people without kids as well, on how to plan and prepare foods that are faster than fast food while doing it within a budget. That's really that the key, and as Laurie has shared with her expertise as a chef, she has a lot of good ideas that she has tried and used over the years, so I've learned a few things myself, too.

Bruce:

I have, too. I have to say, I'm inspired. I really am. I love cooking. I'm a bit of a foodie, but I do feel inspired by this. And I would tell people, when we talk about this being truly fast food, it really is, and some of it is just managing the processes. In the time that it takes you to cook a pot of rice, after 20 minutes, it's totally done. And in that time, you're chopping some vegetables, whatever you like, and you've got vegetables and rice. It's amazing.

But again, I don't want to keep going on and on, so let me just leave it at there and just thank the both of you very much for being on today and talking about meal preparation in this very, very busy time when you need to make meals quickly, but you need to make meals that are not just good for you, health-wise, but make you feel good and just make you feel more alive. Thank you very much to the both of you.

Karen:

Thank you.

Laurie:

Thank you for having me.

Bruce:

Thank you to the both of you. Want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We're a website, we're a call center, we're all over social media, and now we're a podcast, covering all sorts of topics to help military families navigate military lives, so please subscribe. I'm Bruce Moody. Thanks for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.