



Meals That Heal: My Journey from Cancer Patient to Plant-Based Chef and Teacher

By Caryn Dugan
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My early childhood memories include vivid memories of food: the smell and sizzle of bologna on a hot skillet, the oozy cheesiness of Velveeta, and the fluffy softness of white bread.

I won't tell you the other horrific things we ate (fried SPAM, anyone?), but I'm sure you can guess. On other days, we ate canned soup with steamed vegetables (doused with cheese sauce), or my mom's chicken tetrazzini. We ate like most American families I knew, but we did laugh a lot more. Food brought our tight-knit family together and we enjoyed talking and bonding over meals.

In college, I slowly started to make the connection between food and health and paid more attention to how food was labeled. However, that meant I chose frozen diet meals with "All Natural" or "Low Carb" labels. Although I was trying to eat better, I still suffered the yearly debilitating flu and frequent seasonal colds.

A year after I graduated college, my Dad, my buddy, was diagnosed with cancer. He lost the fight in 2008. My mom, brother, and I felt lost without him. Exactly ten weeks after his passing, I received some news that shocked me out of mourning ... I had cancer.

I had surgery to excise the invading tumor and started the healing process. It was during this time that a fire began to burn deep within me. I was sad, I was mad—furious, actually—and confused. The only thing I was sure of, however, was that my immune system was

not strong enough to fight off cancer. I knew I needed to do something different.

I channeled my energy into the mission of learning how to never, ever, go down this road again. Can one really prevent cancer and other chronic diseases? After much research, I came across studies that showed vegetarians and vegans had much, much lower rates of cancer. Research also showed that a healthy vegan diet (I didn't know what "plant-based" was in 2008) could open clogged arteries, reverse type 2 diabetes and so on. I was shocked to find so much evidence that adding more plants to your plate could prevent, treat, and possibly reverse many chronic conditions from cancer all the way down to the common cold. Say what?!

I dove in overnight. I transformed our omnivorous kitchen to a [plant-based](#) one. With copious notes in hand, I went grocery shopping and filled my cart with intimidating foods like broccoli, kale, and whole grain bread. At first, I relied on the internet to learn how to cook plant-based meals. Then my husband enrolled us in a vegan cooking class at our local Whole Foods, and we were off to new cooking and eating adventures. Frustration subsided and I began to totally embrace this new way of eating and really enjoy what I was eating. I'm also cancer-free, have never felt better, and am not plagued any more by recurrent colds and the flu.

From Cancer Patient to Cooking Instructor

In 2011, I was offered a position to teach plant-based cooking and [STLVegGirl](#) was born. To be a more well-rounded instructor, I applied to and was accepted into the [Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine Food-For-Life](#) program. I learned how to help those with cancer and diabetes transition to a plant-based diet to aid in recovery and reversal. I was also invited to teach at my local Cancer Support Community. As people filed into the room wearing scarves to cover their hair loss due to chemotherapy, I recognized their deer-in-headlights expressions. Just as I was in 2008, they were scared and confused. But they had shown up to learn more about plant-based eating. My life had come full circle.

When *Forks Over Knives* came out in 2011, I bought

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tickets and went to a screening with my mom. The film fanned my ever-burning desire to learn more and increase awareness in my community. Since then, I have continued to teach and cook and help others make the transition to plant-based eating. I have monthly television segments on my local FOX, CBS, and NBC morning shows, teach cooking classes, create plant-based menus for events, and also have private clients.

I am most proud of creating the very first [Forks Over Knives Community Program](#) (based on *The Forks Over Knives Plan*), which I just piloted in St. Louis. *Forks Over Knives* inspires so many people to adopt a whole-food, plant-based diet, and many of them seek out books and classes to help them transition to a plant-based lifestyle. This program helps to educate, but also provides the kind of community support that many people need to succeed with this major lifestyle change.

When people are able to change, it is so rewarding to see the profound, almost miraculous, effects that a whole-food, plant-based diet has on their health. My two brushes with cancer have deeply and meaningfully changed my life, and I am grateful to be able to help others change theirs for the better.

Ready to get started? Check out [Forks Meal Planner](#), FOK's easy weekly meal-planning tool to keep you on a healthy plant-based path. To learn more about a whole-food, plant-based diet, visit our [Plant-Based Primer](#).