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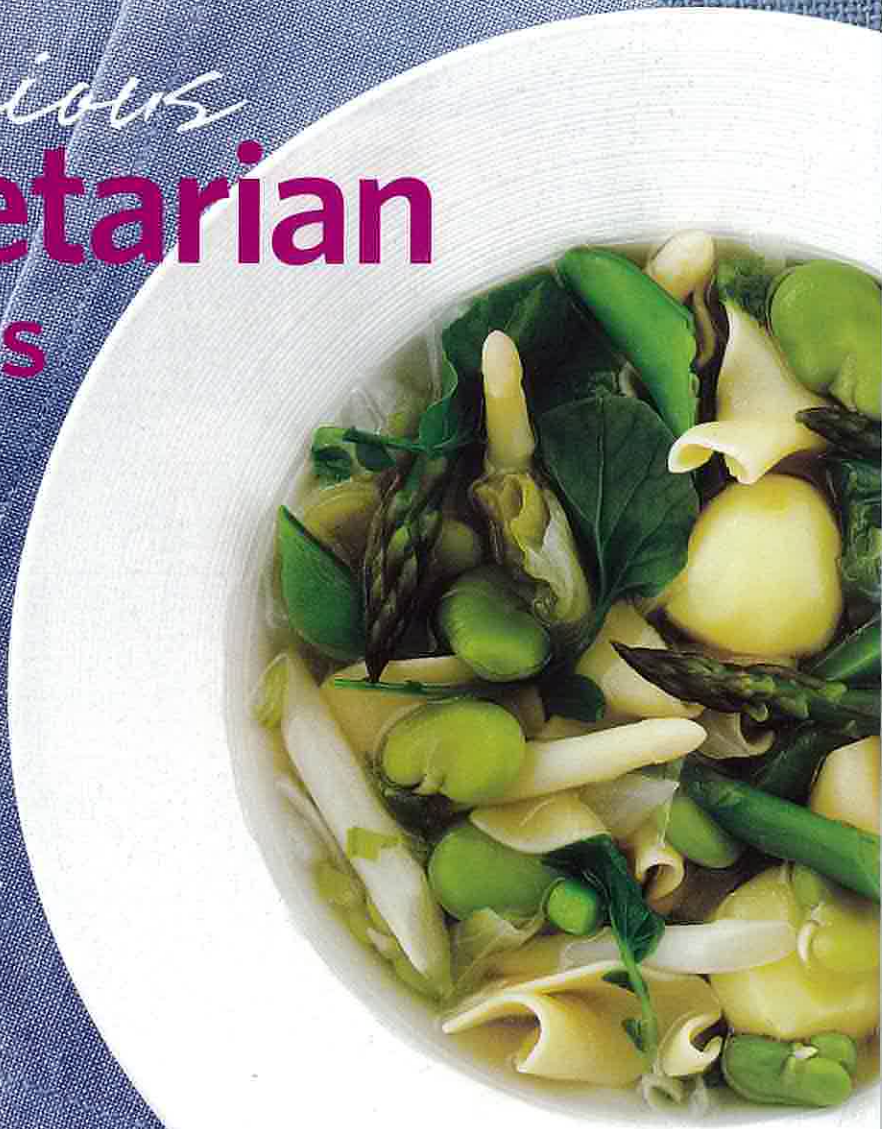
5 summer
fitness
fixes

21 hot-weather
recipes

9 tunics
that go with
everything



Best Wines for Summer p85
Salon-Perfect Manis + Pedis p35
Barbecued Roasts p66

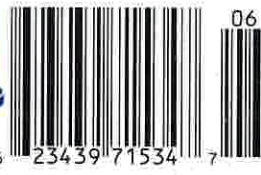


Early Summer
Minestrone

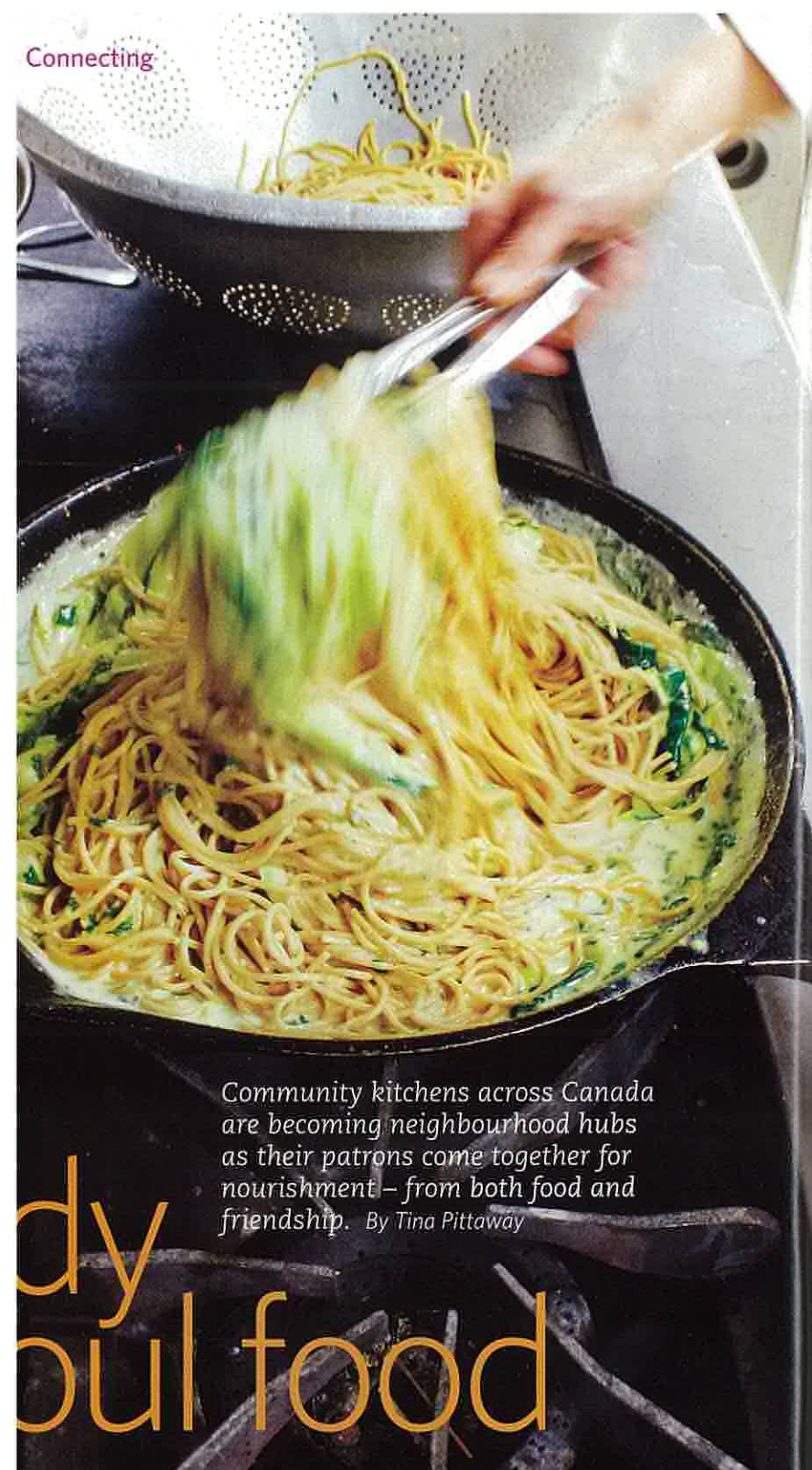
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Connecting



Community kitchens across Canada are becoming neighbourhood hubs as their patrons come together for nourishment – from both food and friendship. By Tina Pittaway

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While collaborating on meals at Kate's Kitchen in downtown Toronto, women can also share their stories of dealing with breast cancer diagnoses, treatments and their recovery experiences.

“There’s something comforting about being in the kitchen, where the women can open up around a cutting board and share what’s on their minds.” - Chandra Deen

The scent of sweet, sizzling onions fills the bustling kitchen as a flurry of hands chop vegetables, readying them for the sauté pan that sits atop the industrial-size stove. The dozen or so women who gather here on the last Monday of every month are catching up on one another's latest news, covering the usual topics of work and family. But, most important, they talk about the one thing that unites them all: breast cancer.

This is Kate's Kitchen in downtown Toronto, a community kitchen devoted to women at all stages of treatment for and recovery from the disease. “There’s something comforting about being in the kitchen, where the women can open up around a cutting board and share with one another some of their feelings about

explains the kitchen's facilitator, Chandra Deen. She originally came here as a participant in 2004, following her breast cancer diagnosis in 2001. “We can share our experiences with this drug or that treatment, and talk about the side-effects. We're able to share what we learn about ourselves throughout treatment, and that benefits us all,” explains Chandra.

Kate's Kitchen is just one of thousands of community kitchens from coast to coast – many of which, like this one, are organized around a shared experience. Often that common interest is a desire to learn more about how nutrition can benefit a particular health challenge, such as diabetes or pregnancy; it might also be a shared cultural or ethnic heritage. Such kitchens bring people

PHOTOGRAPHY: EDWARD POND

great food, highlight the nutritional values of fresh fruits and vegetables, and learn how to put balanced, affordable meals on the table. In a culture that has traded home-cooked meals for the convenience of processed food, community kitchens are helping many of us reclaim lost food preparation and preservation skills. And during a time of lean economic realities, they open a world of more affordable food choices. However, "Community kitchens are as much about sharing lived experiences as they are about the food," explains Debbie Field, executive director at FoodShare Toronto, the nonprofit agency where Kate's Kitchen is based. As its name suggests, the agency builds a genuine sense of community that revolves around the shared experience of breaking bread together: They foster friendships while filling bellies.

As Chandra says, "While we are here to cook and learn about food, the focus is to support each other, as well." Kate's Kitchen was named in memory of Kate Sigurdson, who worked

as FoodShare's special projects coordinator and died in 2007 after a six-year battle with breast cancer. When she was diagnosed, she realized that, while our health-care system provides a lot on the treatment front, there really aren't many opportunities for women to learn about simple meal planning and healthful approaches to eating. So she organized this kitchen, devoted to meeting the nutritional and emotional needs of women in the active stages of chemotherapy and radiation.

Today Kate's Kitchen has about 20 members, including many who have been coming for years.

When cancer strikes, many women begin to explore the notion of healthy eating – often for the first time in their lives. Kate's helps reduce the confusion and stress about food by focusing on simple-to-prepare recipes that contain plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, and all the good nutrients that those foods provide. "There's a lot of learning around basic nutrition and what foods can help boost your energy or help you deal with some of the side-effects of chemotherapy, like nausea," says Chandra. Kitchen sessions, which are free to attend, are funded by Ace Bakery, a local business.

The women who come are from a cross-section of cultures, and Chandra makes an effort to invite older women from these varied cultures to demonstrate their traditional cooking skills using recipes that fit with the program. One month, for example, the kitchen featured an Iranian guest cook whose recipes included pomegranates – a common ingredient in Iranian cooking and a rich source of antioxidants. "That's the good stuff that rids your body of harmful molecules that damage cells. This helps keep your body healthy and energized by fighting off infection and protecting your immune system," explains Chandra. Whenever possible, they use locally grown, organic foods, which reduces exposure to pesticides and waxes, and also supports local jobs. But community and encouragement are key. The women, at various stages of dealing with the disease, are a huge support to one another. Their common bond allows them to give comfort and to share their experiences honestly



At Mary Jane's Cooking School in Winnipeg (above, left), instructor Mary Jane Eason (second from right) watches as participants prepare dishes. At the Kids in the Community Kitchen (KICK) Program (above, right) in Alliston, Ont., children learn cooking skills along with healthy living skills.

"While there was a huge amount of advice out there about the importance of eating healthfully, many people lacked the basic skills in terms of preparing nutritious meals." – Lianne Picot

Low-cost comforts

Brought up on a farm that had no electricity until she was 10, Mary Jane Eason and her three siblings were raised on food grown almost exclusively on the farm. "Even though we were very poor and had a lot of hardship, we were strong and healthy," says Mary Jane. "I learned from an early age that once food is processed at the factory level, it loses much of its vitality and many of the good nutrients are diminished." As a nutritionist, Mary Jane is keen to highlight the health benefits of home-cooked meals made from unprocessed ingredients, and focus on the fact that cooking from scratch can be a lot easier on the pocketbook than eating packaged or fast food.

Mary Jane's Cooking School is a registered charity housed in a homey duplex in west central Winnipeg. Her classes are tailored to meet the needs of people of all ages and backgrounds, ranging from adolescent par-

try to emphasize the economic benefits of home cooking, highlighting the idea that it's much cheaper to cook using raw ingredients," explains Mary Jane. "Through the meals we put together, we drive the point home that avoiding packaged foods helps you get a lot more value out of your food budget as opposed to filling your cart with highly processed goods."

Whenever possible, Mary Jane tries to use organic ingredients, although admittedly, cost can sometimes be a barrier. But even for those on a budget, such as a group of African and Afghan women who recently attended classes at Mary Jane's, the pleasure of working with ingredients such as organic flour can outweigh the cost concerns. This particular class focused on introducing newcomers to the different kinds of foods available in Canada. "These women, who were all excellent cooks, were excited to work with organic flour for the first time since arriving in Canada," explains Mary