



COOKING SCHOOL GRAD GOES NATURAL

By Pam Mellskog Longmont Times-Call

LONGMONT — Jane or Joe Home Cook likely knows more about potting seaweed in a fish tank than serving it with dinner.

Enter Beth Leabch.

In May, she graduated from the Natural Foods Chef program at the Nutrition Therapy Institute in Denver that made cooking seaweed and other unprocessed foods as second nature to her as frying bacon is to many others.

Her son's diagnosis with celiac disease — intolerance to the gluten protein found in wheat, barely and rye — prompted her to enroll in the 16-week professional training course that blends nutrition fundamentals with personal chef skills.

There, she specialized in celiac-friendly baking and cooking. For instance, she learned how to use baking powder, cornstarch and other ingredients to keep bread recipes lacking gluten from falling flat.

Leabch, 54, ultimately left her longtime career in retail fine jewelry to bake and cook more exclusively with natural ingredients at home and as a personal chef.

She got down to business well before graduation day.

Leabch purged her pantry of processed foods such as bleached flour and white sugar and restocked it with counterparts she proudly calls "unrefined and unadulterated."

Besides seaweed, she now shops for offbeat flavor enhancers such as ume plum vinegar (a tart and salty liquid derived from pickled ume plums) and brown rice vinegar made from a brown rice wine called sake, which developed in ancient Japan.

Leabch's favorite sugar substitutes include unprocessed organic cane sugars, rapadura sugar (whole sugar unseparated from the molasses), honey and agave nectar (extract of the wild, pineapple-shaped agave plant).

Others may never undergo the training she received, but Leabch said anyone could eat more naturally with some imagination and new habits

She plans to teach a heart-healthy cooking class at the institute later this year that includes a recipe for roasted sweet potato with a pineapple relish.

How's that for imagination?

In terms of new habits, Leabch suggested trolling natural food magazines for new recipes and shopping for regional produce as much as possible. She buys agave nectar and honey in Lyons and visits local farmers' markets during the season.

During traditional grocery store trips, she mostly sticks to the perimeter. "Forget what's up and down the aisle, because a lot of that food is processed and not the best for us," she said.

Most of all, she recommended staying flexible and optimistic while transitioning from eating less processed food and more natural food.

"If your substitutions don't work, don't get upset and say, 'I'm never doing that again,'" she said. "Keep track (of those recipe revamps), adjust it and try again."

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