

A Taste for Life

by Biba Caggiano

Somehow I thought that bad news in life would come only during rainy, foggy, or gloomy days. Not so. On a gorgeous summer day, I was working in the garden when a small leaf fell on my breast. As I brushed it off I felt a small lump about the size of a tiny pebble, and instantly I knew this was bad news.

A biopsy confirmed my fears. I had cancer. At first I was in total denial. Then two days later I had a lumpectomy, which was followed by chemotherapy and radiation to try to eradicate any possibility of more cancer.

I've been married to an oncologist for 45 years. I knew chemotherapy was going to be hard, but I was still unprepared for the horrible nausea, vomiting, and other side effects I experienced. The first effect I noticed was on my taste buds. This particular side effect was difficult for me professionally—I am a chef, restaurant owner, and the author of seven cookbooks—and I could no longer enjoy strong and spicy flavors. Everything I tried to eat tasted metallic and unappetizing. I could no longer tolerate assertive flavors and the aromas that came through my restaurant kitchen. My life revolves around food! Being unable to taste the food in the new recipes developed in my restaurant was a big problem, altering my ability to run my restaurant as I had in the past.

Then I began to lose my hair and, as any woman who has gone through chemotherapy knows, losing your hair takes a serious emotional toll.

Last and perhaps worst was the loss of most of my once formidable energy. I didn't even have the energy to prepare the simplest of dishes. I soon discovered that as a result of chemotherapy I, just like many other cancer patients, developed anemia. I spoke to my doctor about my fatigue and he prescribed epoetin alfa, which helped me get back to doing many of my normal activities.

Biba's Recipes

The recipes I've created are designed to help people with cancer benefit from proper nutrition while enjoying delicious food that is easy to prepare. They include:

- Baked Apples with Sweet Ricotta
- Zucchini and Ricotta Frittata
- Parmesan-Coated, Crisp Breast of Chicken
- Shrimp, Beans, and Roasted Pepper Salad
- Spinach, Cheese, and Pear Salad
- Mango, Apple, Banana, and Yogurt Smoothies
- Risotto with Asparagus and Saffron
- Salmon Baked in Parchment
- Pasta with Vegetables and Prosciutto

These recipes are available online at ACCC's website, www.accc-cancer.org. Or you can visit Biba's webpage on www.cancer.com.

During the course of treatment, I met with a breast cancer navigator who spoke to me about the everyday needs I faced as a breast cancer patient. She really helped me manage that stress, which allowed me to focus on getting healthier. Within weeks I was able to get back to what is important to me, cooking and running my restaurant, as well as creating new recipes for an upcoming book.

During that difficult time in my life I received great support from my husband Vincent and our two daughters. Vincent believes that the proper diet is as vital as the right medication in coping with cancer. Speaking with a nutritionist at my cancer center helped me understand the importance of incorporating good nutrition with my treatment. So, despite the metallic taste that prevented me from enjoying food, I began to eat lighter, simpler food. I modified and revised some of my favorite recipes while working on new ones. I began experimenting and cooking differently to find food that was pleasing to my palate. In doing so I relied on my taste buds and my experience to come up with fresh tasting dishes that were also light and easy to

prepare. For example, I made simple substitutions like exchanging onions for shallots, and it made a world of difference, because the flavor is much softer. Also, by simply overcooking my vegetables, ingestion and swallowing was much easier. I know that anything green is good for me, so I tried to incorporate "greens" as much as possible.

Cooking is something I always enjoyed, but I found it very therapeutic when I was sick. For example, the process of preparing risotto became very calming to me; the constant stirring of the rice allowed me great relaxation.

Today, my cancer has been in remission for more than four years, and I realize how lucky I am to be alive and well. Discovering cancer early, finding the right doctor, the right treatment, the right medications, incorporating good nutrition, along with the support and love of family and friends have been instrumental to my wellness. ☺

Biba Caggiano, renowned chef, best-selling author, television personality, restaurateur, and grandmother is a four-year cancer survivor.

