



**The Good Clean Nutrition Podcast
Episode 23 Transcript**

Episode 23: Dietitians Discuss: Reframing “Healthy” & Eating From Our Roots with Maya Feller, MS, RD, CDN

Maya Feller:

What I wanted to do when I was thinking about culture and the culture of eating and food, is to reintroduce an idea of how we talk about health and how we can encourage people to actually engage in the act of eating, the act of eating foods that are nourishing and the act of eating foods that are representative of where they came from, how they grew up without shame.

Mary Purdy:

Welcome to the Good Clean Nutrition Podcast. I'm your host, Mary Purdy, integrative dietitian and nutrition educator. Before we get into today's episode, we would love it if you helped us out. We have a healthcare.orgain.com/podcast. Follow that link to share any feedback, guest ideas, topic suggestions, or anything else that you can think of. You name it, we want to hear it. Your feedback is so appreciated, and it will only continue to improve this podcast. We cannot wait to hear from you.

So you may or may not know that March is National Nutrition Month. Yes. So today we're going to be diving into today's nutrition landscape and share some thoughts on national nutrition month's theme of 2023, fueling the future. So when I think of fueling the future, I get a little worried. Currently, a lot of the food that is produced in our industrial food and agricultural system is highly processed.

It is highly refined and it is lacking in so many of the nutrients that are necessary for us to function optimally. Ultimately, our current food system is absolutely driving so many chronic diseases. Additionally, many of these foods that drive those chronic diseases, often disproportionately so in historically marginalized populations, are also having a detrimental impact on the environment and using precious resources and reducing biodiversity and emitting greenhouse gases that are contributing to the climate crisis. So the way that we are currently fueling the future, I believe, needs to be reimagine so that we are producing more healthy food in a way that is accessible and affordable and equitable and culturally relevant and environmentally friendly. So this is just one of the reasons that I am thrilled to welcome today's guest, fellow registered dietitian Maya Feller.

Maya is a nationally recognized nutrition expert who frequently appears on Good Morning America and in local and national publications. From working with patients in her New York City-based practice to addressing national media, Maya believes in providing nutrition education from an anti-bias, patient-centered, culturally sensitive approach. She's also the author of two cookbooks, including her newly released cookbook, which I definitely recommend checking out, *Eating from Our Roots*. Welcome, Maya. It is so great to have you on the show.

Maya Feller:

Mary, thank you so much for having me, and I am thrilled to be talking with you and also to have the opportunity to talk to your listeners.



Mary Purdy:

Excellent. Well, I would love to know, and I'm sure our listeners would love to know as well, a little bit about you and your career path. How did you become one of the top go-to sources for nutrition information in the media?

Maya Feller:

Well, thanks for that. I appreciate you saying that I'm a top go-to source. Thank you. So how did I become a dietitian? It's funny when I actually think back, because my initial start in education was experimental theater and philosophy. So it was nothing near the science of nutrition, and I really thought that I was going to be a philosopher. I was going to spend all of my time thinking about ethics and morality, and I never thought that I would become a dietitian.

I decided to go back to school after I was training for the Boston Marathon, and I was running with my running partner and best friend, and we'd go on these epic long runs and talk and talk and talk, and then I'd get a phone call three hours later and she's like, "I'm back in the hospital." And I was like, "What happened now?" And she said, "Oh, now I have hyponatremia," or "Oh, I have hypernatremia." And we realized that we were not doing a good job of A, fueling our bodies. I lost incredible amounts of weight at the time I was a vegetarian and couldn't keep weight on my body, and she kept ending up in the hospital. And so I went to Google and I googled nutrition for runners, and then I saw that there's an entire area of study.

I ended up going back to school to study nutrition, and I came from this very different background. This absurd avant-garde theater, philosophy background, a mixed race, lesbian household, Afro-Caribbean radical parents. I was not your "average dietitian" going into the program. So my lens, how I was thinking about food, how I thought about community was markedly different than my peers and my cohort. And it was clear once I began to study nutrition, that I was absolutely going to begin my work as a dietitian in a community setting because those were the groups that are experiencing being pushed to the fringes on a consistent basis. And those are the groups that people often don't find value in going back to actually serve. And so I said, "Yeah, this is something I want to do." And that's how I got into community nutrition.

Mary Purdy:

Well, what's amazing is that I think we often think that you would land in a certain kind of career because you have a certain kind of background, but the actual opposite is very true. And I also have a theater background, so I feel you on not being able to make a living in New York with philosophy and butoh, or whatever kind of theater you were doing.

Maya Feller:

Exactly what it was.

Mary Purdy:

But I would imagine food as a philosophy and being able to be creative helps to bring messages to people around nutrition that very often are necessary to be in a creative way and a fun or avant-garde way of presenting information because people will often hear it, especially those who, as you mentioned, may not be as well served as some of the mainstream population. So wonderful. Thank you



for sharing those insights because I think it's helpful for people to see that not everyone's path to whether it's dietetics or being a doctor or other healthcare physician or a healthcare practitioner is always going to be a road. So you are somebody who is this go-to on nutrition trends, what's hot in the media, what's trending out there? So what do you feel like are some of the biggest nutrition trends that we're hearing about or that we should be hearing about?

Maya Feller:

First, that's a fantastic question. I feel like we should absolutely be talking about personalized individual nutrition. There has been a major step away from the one size fits all in nutrition communities. However, it hasn't trickled out into the "diet community" or the wellness industrial complex. And there's still a lot of super prescriptive, what works for one can be replicated and works for all. And Mary you know this, it's not like when we look at the chronic disease numbers that they are declining. We're not in a good place in this country. We are inherently unhealthy. And it is incredibly worrisome that not only are older adults unhealthy, adults are unhealthy, but so is the pediatric population unhealthy. And when I say unhealthy, I'm talking about diabetes, I'm talking about cardiovascular disease, and those are the things that really shorten people's life and also diminish their quality of life.

So I feel like we've got to do this reframe on the, well, what's the prescription for "health"? And there needs to be a discussion around, look what works for one person doesn't work for all, and we've got to take social determinants of health into consideration. Because if you have access, then you have much more autonomy and choice than when you don't. So I think that that's one trend that I believe should be at the absolute forefront. I also think eating for planetary health is at the forefront of many people's minds. And I do see, interestingly enough, a lot of larger companies kind of leading the charge in terms of prioritizing sustainable growing practices, aquaculture, animal husbandry, thinking about the soil health. We're starting to see things like regenerative pop up on eggs. And so it's becoming more a part of dominant conversation in food space. So that's definitely a trend.

And then another trend that I see is actually eating with your culture in mind. So I believe last year it was A World of Flavors, that was our National Nutrition Month theme, and I think that that's carrying through. And so you see that also too in foods that are showing up on the market, there are many more food brands from Black, Latinx and indigenous people. So you're starting to see different flavors showing up on shelves. So not just in the specialty places like Whole Foods, but you're starting to see it trickle down into larger big box stores. So you're seeing beans that are spiced with a taste of a Puerto Rican flair, and that's available nationwide. And so I think people are really thinking about how do we infuse culture, flavor, heritage history into a dish that is inherently nourishing, and then share it with people in an affordable and accessible way. So those are three trends that come to mind for me.

Mary Purdy:

Excellent. And so I'm hearing making nutrition advice more personalized, more applicable to individuals, the planetary health component, and then eating with culture and heritage in mind. Let's break those down a little bit because I know you are an expert in every single one of them there. Let's start off with this personalized nutrition. And I know you talk a lot about what it means to eat "healthy" and how that might be perceived differently by different groups. What is your take on healthy eating and how do you talk about it with the patients that you work with and the communities that you serve?



Maya Feller:

I love that question, Mary. And so I'll say this, I think the definition that I give today will be absolutely different in 12 months from now. And I recognize that as I learn more and as I'm exposed to more patients and as I read more and as I educate myself consistently, all of the definitions that I use, morph and grow. So when I think of healthy, it's really interesting because I don't actually have a definition, and that's mainly because when I'm thinking of, "Well, what's healthy?" I'm thinking about what's the consistent pattern of eating for an individual that allows them to express their best health possible? And when I work with people, it's interesting. I have some patients that have mobility challenges. I have some patients that have learning differences. I have some patients that have different levels of cognition. And so if I say I want them to increase their vegetable intake and I have a patient that has a mobility challenge or a fine motor skill issue, I most likely am not going to hand them a knife and ask them to chiffonade kale.

It's just not realistic for that person. But if I want them to be able to eat kale, I might say, "Okay, well, we're going to look into a bag of frozen kale," for example. If I know that the person is living in a place where they don't have access to a kitchen that works on a regular basis, which was the case when I began my work as a dietitian, I might actually say, "You know what? A can of a vegetable." And that might not sound healthy to some people because there may be added salt in there. There may be some other things that are in that can, but I'm taking into consideration that this patient of mine is living in a place where they don't have a stove and maybe they're just microwaving or maybe they're just eating from the can. And so I think of all of those levels, when I say healthy, and because I work mostly with people who have a diagnosis of a condition, I'm always looking at their labs.

And my desire is to get their lab work as close or within the expected range as possible. And that doesn't mean that they're not taking medication, because health can exist on the spectrum. But it means that I'm helping them to make choices that A, don't add a comorbidity, and B, manage whatever diagnoses they currently have.

Mary Purdy:

So it really, I'm hearing, is about meeting that patient where they are at, whatever accessibility issues they have or personal issues they may have, finding what works for them. And I love what you said, which is get them eating a consistent pattern that helps them be the best and healthiest version of themselves, whatever that may be. And boy does that open up the world of what it means to provide nutrition counseling and recommendations. And for individuals out there to feel like, "Gosh, I can find my version of healthy." Doesn't have to be the kale chips that are \$7.99 for six chips in a bag. There's so much more to it. And you also talk a lot about getting back to basics when it comes to food and how people don't have to feel this way of purchasing foods that are super expensive in order to have a healthy pattern of eating. Talk a little bit about that and how you personalize that as well.

Maya Feller:

Absolutely. So I know that everybody loves a 30-minute meal, and I know that people now love a 15-minute meal and people love for sure a three-minute meal. So I get all of that. My book has recipes in there that kind of are across that spectrum. And when I'm working with people, there is a discussion, as controversial as it may be, around how much time can you spend in your kitchen and how can I get you interacting with items in your kitchen? I know that's not possible for everyone. And so I say that that's



where the individualization comes into play. But I do encourage people that I work with to return to their kitchens, and it doesn't have to be them, in some cases it may be a family member or someone else. But to think about those base ingredients that they're using and to utilize a combination of what I refer to as chef's helpers, and then foods in their whole and minimally processed form.

So for my patients that eat animal proteins, I'm often thinking, what are the animal proteins that you want to show up on your plate? And then what are we rounding it out with? And usually I have to say this, the animal protein is not the center. Traditionally, we tend to think of, "I'm going to have the protein, and then what do I have with it?" I work with my patients to say, "Okay, I know you're protein focused, animal protein focused, but what does the rest look like and how do we make that just as delicious and flavorful?" So if we're doing a rice, let's season the rice. If we're doing a grain, let's season whatever that grain is. If you're going to do a vegetable, give your veggie as much phytonutrient love as you're going to give to that animal protein.

So I'm always thinking of how do you up the flavor, play with the colors, play with the textures and the temperatures on your plate because ultimately I want you to return to that plate and say like, "Oh, I made that dish, it was delicious. Or I made that dish with the combinations of partially prepared or whatever things. I want to do that again." Cause if you're not actually eating the food, it's not serving yourselves.

Mary Purdy:

No, it's got to taste great. It's got to look good. And as you mentioned in one of your other trends that perhaps it connects you to something, yourself, your culture, your traditions, your family. So talk a little bit about the importance of connecting to culture. Your book is called *Eating From Your Roots*. So what does that mean for you when somebody gets to eat from their roots?

Maya Feller:

So when I talk about culture, I always like to remind everyone that we all have culture, right? Culture is whatever social group you fit into, whatever those social norms are that you all agree upon. There's a culture around wellness in the US. There is a culture around being white in the US. There's a culture around being Black. And then within those large groups, there's tons of variations and it's not monolithic. So I always say this, "Black food in New York" is totally different than the food that someone's eating in Missouri, and we want to take that into consideration. So when I was thinking about this book and encouraging people to include heritage ways of cooking, it was really from the lens that what dietitians are taught to recommend as the gold standard and benchmark really fits into that one size fits all and is a grilled or steamed animal protein, a grilled or steamed vegetable and brown rice. While that macronutrient balance is absolutely fine, it's not representative of the world at large.

And so as you move around the globe, some people may wake up and have soup for breakfast and they don't want a breakfast cereal. That doesn't mean that one is better than the other. Some people may say like, "Oh, I want to have a bagel and lox for breakfast." Doesn't mean that it's any better or worse than the breakfast cereal or the soup. It's just that the representation and the images that we see when we're thinking about wellness are granola, yogurt as being the healthy gold standard. And what happens when you come from a ethnicity or culture that doesn't see that as the gold standard or it's not familiar, then there is some shame around how you interact with food. "I'm not doing the right thing. I didn't



follow the quote 'Mediterranean diet.' Oh, I didn't do the heart healthy pattern of eating. That's why I'm sick."

There's a lot of shame and blame just as people roll through the grocery store. "Oh, you chose to buy cereal. You are not good because cereal is bad for you. You chose to buy fresh leafy greens, you're fantastic because that's how we want you to eat." And so what I wanted to do when I was thinking about culture and the culture of eating and food, is to reintroduce an idea of how we talk about health and how we can encourage people to actually engage in the act of eating, the act of eating foods that are nourishing and the act of eating foods that are representative of where they came from, how they grew up without shame.

Mary Purdy:

And there's so much shame attached to food. There's so much blame, there's so many shoulds, and it's hard to move away from that. And so it sounds like you are allowing your patients and the communities that you're working with to get rid of this preconceived notion of Fiber One Cereal with low fat yogurt and maybe something else on top of that. And also the idea of the Mediterranean diet, which gets so much play in the news and really represents a fraction of the people out there, even within the Mediterranean. So taking that judgment and taking that preconceived or that fitting into a specific box that makes you somehow healthy and good and a good eater. I remember in college, I took a semester abroad and lived in Indonesia for several months. And my breakfast there was chicken heads and rice delicious and some kind of green beansque thing, which I don't think was actually green beans.

So I had to shift my notion of what it meant to wake up in the morning and not have General Mills be infiltrating my plate. So interesting stuff here. I'm Mary Purdy and you're listening to the Good Clean Nutrition podcast. We're on with Maya Feller, registered dietitian nutritionist, and nationally recognized nutrition expert. Next, we'll dive into more about fueling for the future and what that means for both practitioners as they offer nutritional advice and for consumers as they navigate all the information that's out there. But first, a word from the sponsor of this podcast, Orgain.

Acacia Wright:

Thanks, Mary. In honor of National Nutrition Month, I wanted to introduce myself. I'm Acacia, registered dietitian and nutrition communications manager here at Orgain. If you're a credentialed healthcare professional, we invite you to join Orgain's Healthcare Ambassador Program. As a healthcare ambassador, you can request free product samples for yourself and your clients, watch webinars available for continuing education credit and obtain resources designed for you. Learn more and sign up for free at healthcare.orgain.com. Now, back to you, Mary.

Mary Purdy:

Now let's get back to our conversation with Maya. So Maya, as you may know because you're a dietitian, but most people out there do not know. We have a National Nutrition month every March, and in 2023, our theme is Fueling for the Future. So there's a lot of headline right now about the economy, about how expensive food is, and I think everyone is curious, well, what is the future of food? So I'm curious about you and what you think fueling for the future actually looks like.



Maya Feller:

That's a huge question, Mary. Probably the biggest question out there, because as you said, we're in a climate crisis and thinking about the future, I don't want to be too doom and gloom, but the outlook is fairly grim, right? And I say this all the time, part of what we're looking at if they're not radical shifts is middle class refugees. And this is something that I feel like people don't often think about or take into consideration. We're accustomed to seeing poor people being displaced, but we don't really understand middle or upper middle-class displacement. And if we don't think about the health of this planet with all of these major shifts, that's what we're looking at. And I pull back and think about it from a food lens that, "Okay, feeding the entire planet, I know that major shifts have to happen. I know that huge, large scale agricultural industry absolutely has to be the leader in planetary health. I know that huge industry at large, car makers, automobiles, airplanes, all of that.

Any industry that is big and meeting or reaching the majority of the market share has to prioritize the planet as a part of their 10, 15, 20 year plan. And food is a big one. So everything from our animal proteins to our produce to our beverage manufacturers, that just has to be the priority. And many do have goals and are actually engaged in changing over to sustainable packaging and thinking about what are we feeding animals and how do we reduce the methane emissions and how do we think about soil health? That has to be the forefront of just how every major company is thinking. And then there have to be options for people who are in marginalized areas. We want this top down, bottom up approach because if you go into lower income communities and you go into a corner store or a dollar store and someone's having a cookout, while we want folks in those areas to have an affordable choice around nourishing foods that are grown from a sustainable ethos.

And also this is something that I often think about, Mary, that I learned from working in communities is many people don't use reusable plates. We all think, all of us nutrition folks, we're like, "Well, styrofoam is gone." No, it's not. So what does the cookout look like when 100 people come together and it's all styrofoam and single use? So when we're talking about the future of food, and I don't want to go too far off, we're really talking about a major shift in terms of everything from how we grow our food, how we harvest our food, how we process our food, how we serve our food, how we manage food waste, what we're putting our food on, and then the price of it all. I think that there has to be a combination of foods that are processed and foods in their whole and minimally processed form to sustained feeding the people that are on this planet. That's a huge question.

Mary Purdy:

I know. I hope I didn't overwhelm you with that one because I feel you. I feel this every day that this topic is so enormous and it's going to take change on such a grand systemic level from as you mentioned, the top down, but also from the bottom up. Our voices as consumers, as advocates are also part of creating the change that we hope to see in our food and agricultural system. And you mentioned a lot of brands, a lot of companies, a lot of businesses are embracing planetary health because ultimately they know it's the right thing, hopefully. And it also affects their bottom line. Consumers are demanding this right now. Sustainability is the buzzword. When you work with patients, for whom maybe sustainability is not top of mind, they are trying to make a living.

They're trying to feed their kids, they're trying to get their kids to school, they're trying to pay their bills, pay their medical bills, working with health issues. Where does sustainability for you as a practitioner fit



into the conversation and how do you have those conversations realistically in a way that meets people where they're at and also takes into consideration where they may not be able to participate as fully because of what they have access to?

Maya Feller:

Well, you know what's really interesting, Mary, is that some of my patients who are on fixed income and live in marginalized neighborhoods are the biggest advocates for shifts in sustainability. They want the trash out of their neighborhoods. They want clean water, they want affordable produce. They do not waste food in ways that my patients who have much more means do. They're very good at reusing and recycling. So they're actually some of the biggest advocates and are already engaged in some of that consumer behavior that we all love so much when we're thinking about planetary health. And there's quite a bit of anger because those are the areas where we see the highest rates of asthma and eczema because people are dumping and polluting there.

The conversations interestingly enough are, well, what can we do to stretch your food dollars? And that is huge in terms of food waste, they're just not throwing things out at the same rate. And I will say many of my patients who do have limited incomes actually prefer brand name goods, which is great in terms of sustainability because it's the big brands that are making some of the big market shifts.

And many of my patients are from all around the world, whether or not it is parts of Asia or parts of Western Europe, parts of the African diaspora or Latin America. And there is a complete desire to actually maintain that cooking of home food and they have a strong market culture, very strong market culture. So I have patients that are shopping all the markets in Chinatown and getting all the fresh things, you know what I mean? And making just the most amazing delicious meals you can imagine. And then I've got patients who are in Flatbush, same thing, seeking out all the green stands. And then for the ones that do go to the farmer's market, because they're so focused on stretching those dollars, they use farmer's market bucks so that they can actually double their spending power and they can actually purchase more. It's fascinating because they're doing the bulk of what I want all my patients to be doing.

Mary Purdy:

It sounds like it's out of necessity, but it's also maybe the natural approach that's part of their culture to embrace market culture or to use things until they cannot be used anymore, to save paper towels or to not throw away food. A lot of the waste that happens I think is happening because people don't value food. They don't value the money that perhaps they spent on that food. Whereas somebody who might come from a lower socioeconomic background might say, "Are you kidding? I'm going to use every last drop of this, or I'm going to use every part of this chicken that I bought just so that I can make as many food, meals come out of it as possible." So that's wonderful to hear. And I know that you have talked about... You are originally from, or your family is from Trinidad and Tobago, is that right?

Maya Feller:

I was born in Cambridge and my biological mom is from Trinidad and Tobago, and then my dad is from Haiti. So I'm first generation, full Afro-Caribbean descent.



Mary Purdy:

And I was reading in your book that when you go back there that there is a culture around food that is about growing it in a way that is sustainable. It's simply the way things are done. It's not necessarily an intentional, "Oh, now we are engaging in sustainable practices. It just is what is." Is that accurate?

Maya Feller:

So I spent much more time in Trinidad and Tobago than I did, I've only been to Haiti once just because of all the kind of political upheaval. And so I spent more time in Trinidad and Tobago, and yeah when I would go up into the countryside with my grandparents, people had chickens and they would be out in the yard, the chickens and the goats, and they ate whatever the grubs were, the grass, and then you had that chicken and it was literally a pastured chicken. Or I think about my grandmother's garden where she grew herbs and spices and they would compost and they would feed the garden. I completely remember banana peels and peanut shells, all these things to fix the nitrogen and think about the soil health that just were done and will yield this incredible, vibrant food. Granted, the soil in the Caribbean, untouched virgin soil, you can throw a seed down and it grows in a second, but that also has to do with the practices of people really respecting the earth in a very different way.

Mary Purdy:

It's so interesting. It sounds like you have gotten back to your roots. And I want to talk a little bit about your book, because so much of it is a walkthrough, the global world in one's own kitchen. You're kind of finding all these different connections to food and culture and health.

In terms of your book, let us know maybe a couple of recipes that either you discovered while creating the book or perhaps something that you brought into the creation of the book that you were really excited about.

Maya Feller:

So this is probably the most shocking thing that people are not ready for, is that as a dietitian, I've been taught to remove everything from food. So no added sugar, no added salts, no added fats.

For the most part, I was very clear that if I was going to use those additives, I wanted it to be real salt, real sugar or fruit juice or something like a date syrup, and then a real fat. So you see avocado oil, you see olive oil.

And Mary, Monica Pierini, who was the food stylist for the photos, said that she's never cooked that many recipes. So there's over 50 pictures in the book. She's never made that many recipes and used such little salt, but had so much flavor.

Mary Purdy:

How interesting. And I feel like the foods that have flavor often make you feel more satiated. There's a whole experience, there's this physiology orchestra happening in our bodies that when food tastes good, ironically, we often need less of it because we have become so satiated. So flavor with whether it's salt or fat or a little bit of sweetness, can really augment that whole experience. So Maya, I know we've got listeners out there who want to know more about you. Where can they find you?



Maya Feller:

So your listeners can find me across social at Maya Feller RD, and they can pick up a copy of Eating From Our Roots everywhere that books are sold. And if they're interested in finding a dietitian who works from a lens of cultural humility, my team can be found at mayafellernutrition.com.

Mary Purdy:

Excellent. Well, thank you for joining us. This was such a fantastic conversation. I know I learned a lot. I know the folks out there listening learned a lot, and it was just wonderful to be able to have a conversation with you. Maya, really appreciate it.

Maya Feller:

Mary, I'm so glad to be in conversation with you and absolutely relish the time.

Mary Purdy:

Great. Thanks for tuning in to this episode of the Good Clean Nutrition Podcast. To stay up to date on the latest episodes of this podcast, be sure to subscribe and don't forget to take our survey linked in the description of this episode and on our website, healthcare.orgain.com/podcast. If you like the podcast, we would also appreciate it if you would give it a five-star rating, review or a thumbs up on your favorite podcast platform like Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and, hello, YouTube. Thanks so much and see you next time.