

SLIMMING DOWN

Chefs drop pounds and tweak menus. PAGE 13

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Trimming the fat

Chefs take a challenge to change their diets and lose weight

By Lucia Huntington
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

You know that resolution to lose 10 pounds? Imagine trying to keep it while surrounded by great food, chopping, frying, baking, steaming, and tasting.

And imagine it's not just 10 pounds.

Four local chefs bit into that challenge, and over the last year they've dropped and kept off between 46 and 100 pounds — without changing jobs.

Michael Scelfo, 35, of Temple Bar in Cambridge started his diet as a bet with Peter Piumara, his former boss at Good Life. Scelfo won: "I sprinted out of the gate and he was still standing at the starting line with an ice-cream cone in his hand." Scelfo dropped 80 pounds — so much that his colleagues started to complain he looked skeletal.

"It became a way of life. The more I lost the more committed I got," he says. He's at 220 now and aiming to get to 210, the weight at which he feels healthiest.

At their most successful, good diets feed off themselves. Jeremy Sewall, 38, the chef at Eastern Standard in Kenmore Square and chef-owner of Lineage in Brookline, got so caught up that for a time he was exercising twice a day, before and after long shifts. He's lost 46 pounds.

Scelfo admits that at one point he was almost starving himself, dropping five or six pounds a week, but after his father had a heart attack he adapted to a modified Mediterranean diet and slowed the weight loss to a healthy pound or two every seven days. "It was just tasting really good, using really fat-free ingredients," like faro, brown rice, vegetables, and fresh fruits, Scelfo says. "Extra-virgin olive oil was the only fat I would allow myself to have."

Phyllis Kaplowitz, executive chef at Bakers Best in Newton Highlands, took an early shortcut on her way to losing nearly 100 pounds: a bariatric bypass. But surgery, she says, "is just a tool."

"You have to change your lifestyle drastically and change your diet," says Kaplowitz, 40. "You're with your best friend and your worst enemy every day of your life if you have a passion for food, as most chefs do. You have to think about becoming more healthy so you can be a better chef. You have to make some changes."

Some of those changes have made their way onto their menus. Kaplowitz experiments with healthier cooking oils, substitutes agave syrup for honey, and has worked with tempeh and tofu to satisfy her vegetarian clients.

Scelfo's new way of eating led to more vegetarian and vegan dishes at his restaurant, and Lineage's chef de cuisine, 27-year-old Anthony Marco, says that since losing 100 pounds, "When I go to make a sauce, I ask, 'Do I need to use that butter? What can I do to make it healthier?'"

Most of the chefs' dietary advice is



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Phyllis Kaplowitz (above and left) lost nearly 100 pounds; Michael Scelfo (below and bottom left) dropped 80.



ERIK JACOBS



JESSICA STAMBAUGH



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Cracked wheat salad

Serves 4

- 2 cups water or vegetable stock
- 1 cup bulgur wheat
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- 1 shallot, thinly sliced
- ¼ cup roughly chopped mixed fresh herbs (parsley, thyme, cilantro)
- 3 scallions, coarsely chopped
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- Juice of 1 lemon
- Salt and pepper, to taste

1. In a saucepan, bring the water or stock to a boil.
2. In a large heatproof bowl, combine the bulgur, garlic, and shallot. Pour the water or stock over them and cover with plastic wrap; set aside for 30 minutes.
3. Add the fresh herbs and scallions, olive oil, lemon juice, salt, and pepper. Stir with a fork. Let the salad sit at room temperature for 15 minutes. Adapted from Michael Scelfo

about what you'd hear from any professional. Eat breakfast. Exercise. Set reasonable goals. Cut down on sugars, processed foods, and unhealthy fats such as butter or lard. Snack on fruits and vegetables. Stock up on yogurt ("taking in calcium helps burn fat," says Kaplowitz). And eat in moderation. Have a healthy hand.

lick the back of the spoon, rather than slurp up a ladle.

"It's like quitting smoking, the same thing happens with food, you just reach for it," says Scelfo. "I walk past a sheet pan of gnocchi and you grab them like popcorn. But they're not the answer if you're trying to lose weight."

Turkey and squash roll-ups

Serves 4

Chef Michael Scelfo says, "This is a go-to meal for me. I was eating it three times a week at one point." He uses low-carb lavash, fat-free feta, and low-fat hummus. Add chopped lettuce or other crisp greens to each roll-up, if you like.

- 1/2 peeled butternut squash
- Olive oil (for sprinkling)
- 1 pound 99 percent fat-free ground turkey
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 jalapeno or other small hot chili pepper, seeded and sliced (leave in seeds if you like heat)
- Salt and black pepper, to taste
- 4 sheets lavash or soft wheat tortillas
- 4 tablespoons hummus
- ¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 bunch scallions, very thinly sliced
- 3 tablespoons crumbled feta
- Juice of 1 lime
- 1 teaspoon olive oil

1. Set the oven at 400 degrees.
2. Cut the squash into 1-inch cubes. Toss with enough olive oil (you'll only need a few drops) to barely moisten it. Lay on a rimmed baking sheet. Roast the squash for 30 minutes, turning often, or until it is tender.
3. In a skillet over medium heat, cook the turkey, onion, garlic, and jalapeno or other chili pepper, stirring constantly, for 10 minutes or until it is cooked through.
4. Add salt, black pepper, and squash. Continue cooking for 2 minutes more.
5. Lay the lavash or tortillas on the counter. Spread 1 tablespoon of the hummus on each one.
6. Add the cilantro, scallions, feta, lime juice, and olive oil to the turkey mixture. Taste for seasoning and add more salt and pepper, if you like.
7. Divide the turkey mixture among the rounds and roll up. Adapted from Michael Scelfo

Sewall was inspired by Marco, who began his diet after his two older brothers were diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. "Watching [Marco] take really small tastes while we're cooking — that was how I learned the behavior, by watching him," says Sewall. "To not snack, that's really what it is."

But not snacking doesn't mean torturing yourself. Marco and his wife still have "cheat days" with pizza and ice cream.

"It's OK to have a couple of bad days," he says. "It's not OK to have a month of them."