

DEPARTURES

Is Your Meal SPE Certified?

By Heidi Mitchell
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Forget farm-to-table—a new categorization is taking over the food world.

Your food is making you sick. The hydrogenated oils in your peanut butter increase your risk of heart disease. The simple carbohydrates in an unassuming dinner roll are quickly converted into heart-suffocating fat. Even that subtle sprinkling of bacon in your carbonara—it might actually cause cancer.

The silver lining to all the doomsday declarations is that your food can also make you healthy. This isn't breaking news—Hippocrates asserted “Let thy food be thy medicine” more than two millennia ago—but it's still headline-grabbing. The media is awash in studies on Greek centenarians subsisting on little more than wine and olive oil. The recent, highly conclusive findings by a team of University of Barcelona scientists that a Mediterranean diet rich in fish, fruits and nuts can decrease heart attack and stroke by 30 percent has gone as viral as “Gangnam Style.”

Emmanuel Verstraeten didn't need a buzzy trend to open his mind to the relationship between healthy eating and longevity. Twelve years ago, the serial entrepreneur hired a culinary nutritionist and a top-tier chef to debut Rouge Tomate, a restaurant in Brussels with the lofty goal of showcasing high-end health food that doesn't compromise on taste—and a lightbulb went off. “We realized our guests were really part of an experiment,” Verstraeten says. Within three years, he had cut the ribbon on a healthy fast-food chain. Over a beautifully plated dish of “pastrami-

spiced” octopus with braised Brussels sprouts at the New York outpost of Rouge Tomate, which opened in 2008 (and quickly earned a Michelin star), Verstraeten adds, “We wanted to create a safe harbor wherever you eat, whether it’s at Starbucks in the Moscow airport or at a fine-dining restaurant in New York.”

It’s taken eight years, but that safe harbor has manifested itself in a 90-page charter for Verstraeten’s latest venture, SPE Certified. Like LEED certification for environmentally friendly buildings, SPE—which stands for Sanitas Per Escam (“health through food”), or Sourcing, Preparing, Enhancing, depending on Verstraeten’s audience—is a culinary designation for dishes that adhere to an exacting set of standards laid out by nutritionists, medical doctors and epidemiologists. Farm-to-table’s got nothing on SPE Certified.

To earn the little red squiggle that serves as the SPE stamp of approval, a culinary nutritionist and an SPE chef work with a restaurant’s chef to sustainably source produce and protein. Cooking techniques are altered to elevate nutritional value—a *la plancha* instead of grilling, say, or sous vide instead of boiling. Ingredients are combined on the plate to enhance the body’s intake of vitamins; spinach and lentils, which are high in iron, for example, might be combined with a good source of vitamin C to help with absorption. Butter and cream are largely eliminated, except for necessary trace amounts in desserts. Calories, unhealthy fat and sodium are dramatically reduced. The goal is to have a diner eat 40 percent of his daily essential vitamins and minerals in one meal—and to have a culinary experience on par with the world’s great restaurants.

At Manhattan’s Rouge Tomate, you will never see a plain green salad. Nor will you dig into a bland, boneless, skinless chicken breast; leave that to Dean Ornish and the Zone Diet. The walu ceviche in yuzu sauce is its most popular dish. The blanched Brussels sprouts salad with hazelnut oil and prosciutto is a close second. In SPE’s test kitchen, culinary nutritionist Kristy Lambrou works with SPE executive chef Anthony Moraes to make sure that the vegan coconut soup doesn’t test too high in saturated fat and that pork belly and some smoked sea salt banish the use of carcinogenic bacon. Five years since opening, the restaurant is still packed with titans of industry—most of whom don’t realize the SPE-certified dishes they’re eating are “diet food.”

Since officially launching in May, SPE has certified a dozen restaurants. Lead culinary nutritionist Natalia Hancock, R.D., recently revamped the menus at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, which serves more than 40,000 meals a day. By fall, the main dining room and the Aqua Spa Café across the entire fleet of the Celebrity Cruise line will be SPE-certified.

Verstraeten hopes that his little red squiggle will proliferate and ultimately force the hand of the fast-food industry. “This has been my vision since day one,” he says, remarking on a recent TEDx talk that focused on McDonald’s goal to make the farming industry more humane by 2022. “We must prevent obesity in our kids. When the industry is ready, we’ll be the first to help them.”

Rouge Tomate is at 10 E. 60th St.; 646-237-8977; rougetomatenyc.com. Its summer food cart is located at 64th Street and Fifth Avenue.

Anatomy of an SPE Dish

Chef Hooni Kim of New York’s Danji, a Korean small-plates restaurant (346 W. 52nd St.; 212-586-2880; danjinyc.com), breaks down his SPE-certified Soy Poached Sablefish with Daikon—one of the most popular entrées on the menu.

Wild-caught sablefish is sourced in the Pacific. One of the fattiest fishes available, sablefish is high (2,350 grams a serving) in omega-3 fatty acids, which lower bad cholesterol.

A serving is just five ounces of fish, with an equal amount of daikon radish. “We try to make the daikon similar in texture to the fish, so you’re fooled into thinking you’re eating ten grams of fish,” chef Kim says.

The garnish is a leafy, seasonal vegetable. In spring, for example, it’s Chinese yu choy, which is high in iron.

Soy sauce, sake, mirin, fresh ginger, onion, garlic and some pepper flakes are the only seasoning. “But it has a rich flavor, so it’s very satisfying,” he says. The soy sauce accounts for most of the total sodium count for the dish—1,050 grams, about half of the daily allowance according to USDA dietary guidelines.

Along with many other nutrients, the dish offers 80 percent of the recommended daily intake of selenium (to protect cells from free radicals); 30 percent of magnesium (to aid in bone health); and 60 percent of vitamin C (to boost the immune system).

The total calorie count is 430, 190 (21 grams) of which come from the fish’s “good” fat.

Ratio of fat to carbs and protein: 2:1:1.

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