

Dina's healthy lifestyle: "Chunkie Dunkies" and "eating with good sense"

Looking at the vibrant, glowing Dina Lauro, you would find it hard to imagine that this chef, health educator, cooking teacher and owner of The Raw Vegan Gourmet grew up pretty much like the rest of us. In her deeply ethnic Italian family, pasta, bread and meat ruled.

Philadelphia-born and raised, her grandfather owned a cheesesteak shop. That might sound like a recipe for a health disaster, but Lauro got lucky in her grandmother.

"Grandma was a nutritionist, and did not allow soda, snacks or chips in the house," she says. "As it happened, I turned out to be an emotional eater anyway, and was always looking for a diet to try, along with workouts. Like everyone else, I tried everything to lose weight."

Following graduation from Penn State, Lauro kicked around in a variety of jobs, but had no clear picture of what she wanted to do. Above all, she loved food and animals always, but did not know how to make those two loves work for her. She enrolled in the Natural Gourmet Institute in New York City, commuting from Philadelphia, and when the time came to choose an internship, she made the decision that would literally change the course of her life.

"I knew about the Hippocrates Institute in West Palm Beach, so I called them and asked if I could come here for my internship. They accepted me, and I arrived, planning to stay just six weeks," she recalled. "I wound up getting hired instead. I took the nine-week health educator's course, and ended up returning to Philadelphia, packing my belongings and moving here."

Her Chunkie Dunkie cookie creations (available in eight flavors) are a product of her time at Hippocrates. "I just sat on the couch and played with flavor combinations and ideas, then experimented with ingredients, until I got the results I wanted." The gluten-free Chunkie Dunkies are available in several local stores, and will be on sale beginning this week at the Palm Beach Gardens Greenmarket, and in December, January and February at the West Palm Beach Greenmarket. Lauro will also have crackers, nut cheese, soups and brownies for sale.

Her overall philosophy about food is surprisingly relaxed; definitely not what you expect from someone with a business called The Raw Vegan Gourmet. "I try to live healthy; it's easy to do. Healthy food can and does taste good. To me, the important thing is knowing the source of your food, and make it simple to do good things for yourself by integrating good food into your day."

Lauro also cautions people to read labels. "When the label says 'healthy' and you cannot pronounce the ingredients, or you cannot figure out their source, something's wrong."

Lauro suggests starting small to make changes. "Experiment with new things. Buy small amounts of new grains or produce. Start by making them into something you recognize, like a casserole, smoothie or a salad. It's about balance and enjoyment. If you don't like what you're eating, not matter how healthy it is, you won't continue to try new things. Be healthy first and foremost, and if you choose vegan, that's fine."

Lauro's cooking classes, which take place at the Home Depot Plaza in Palm Beach Gardens, are a reflection of her philosophy. Relaxed and informal, she provides recipes, but also offers additional tips and help. Her teaching is more about the real world, and includes ideas on how to fix recipes if the unexpected happens.

Dina Lauro did not start out on a holier-than-thou, high vegan pedestal. She ate like many of us do as kids, and came to a realization later in life that she could do better for her body by eating healthier and sharing what she's learned. She's the first to admit that she's not perfect, and does not preach perfection for anyone else. You can check out her cookie website and her vegan gourmet website, but better yet: head to this week's Greenmarket, or her next cooking class, and meet her in person. You'll be surprised at what healthy looks and tastes like.

— Nancy Munro, *Jupiter Food Examiner*



www.ChunkieDunkies.com

www.TheRawVeganGourmet.com