

Dishing on food, friends and family



Celebrity chef Mario Batali addresses the role of food in wellness and MS.

by Marcella Durand

You might call it “the three F’s”: food, friends, and family. When that triad comes together, whether, for a daily meal or a special occasion, it helps strengthen the support networks that sustain many people living with multiple sclerosis and contributes to a good, or even great, quality of life.

At a National MS Society event held in April to raise awareness and support for people living with MS, internationally celebrated chef Mario Batali spoke about the magic that can happen when the three F’s are thoughtfully brought together. “When you cook at home, you are creating something that is magical and delightful for everyone around you. It may not heal them, but it will put them in a better state of mind to deal with whatever situation [they are facing],” Batali said during the event for Golden Circle members (those who donate at least \$1,000 annually to the Society), titled “Food. Wellness. MS.”

Batali believes this is especially true for the children his Mario Batali Foundation is dedicated to protecting and empowering. This year, the foundation will donate close to \$40,000 to Society-sponsored pediatric MS research. “My goal is to help children live the best life they can,” Batali said. “By identifying some of the key causes and related issues, we can better understand the disease and hopefully slow it down.”

Like many people, Batali and his wife, Susan Cahn, have been touched by MS. In 2011, Julie Gaines—who is married to Cahn’s cousin—was diagnosed with the disease. “Seeing Julie’s

commitment to bring awareness to this disease, and understanding the struggle so many people with MS go through, has inspired me to support their research,” Batali said.

In return, Gaines says frequent family dinners with Batali, other relatives, and friends remind her how important food and family are in helping her cope with her disease. “I always go home feeling full of love, so to speak,” she says. “The sincerity and quality of the food set the tone for a warm and supportive environment, and I take that very much to heart.”

Seeing the glass half full

Gaines and her husband, David Lenovitz, are the founders of Fishs Eddy, a quirky kitchenware store in the Flatiron district of New York City. And it was Gaines’ vision to address wellness in the context of food and family. So it was in Fishs Eddy, surrounded by shelves of unique dishware that lend a comfortable and homey air, that Gaines welcomed attendees to the Society event with Batali.

Gaines told the approximately 75 attendees that she found out she had MS when she couldn’t walk the day after a long bike ride along the west side of Manhattan, where she lives. “We spent the next few weeks trying to figure it out. I was very, very, very scared,” she remembers. But since that moment, she says, “Dave has not stopped trying to keep my spirits up and making me laugh.”

Gaines credits not only Batali, Cahn and her husband, but also their son, Ben, 23, and daughter, Susie, 19, as well as numerous friends and co-workers, for keeping her outlook positive amid symptoms that include fatigue and cognitive issues. “We have a sense of humor in the house and we laugh a lot. Everyone takes care of everyone else,” she says.

“My immediate family, my extended family, and my family at Fishs Eddy have been my everything,” Gaines adds. “Because of them, I can look at all these beautiful glasses in this beautiful store and see them as half full.”

However, Gaines also acknowledges that not everyone with MS has such a strong support network. She recalls meeting other people with MS at a support group who “felt alone, and that was very sobering.” It was then that she realized the importance of MS research and how it can help everyone living with the disease, no matter what his or her personal circumstances are.

That’s why, despite MS symptoms such as numbness and weakness, Gaines participates annually in Climb to the Top. She scales 66 flights of stairs to the Top of the Rock Observation Deck in New York City’s Rockefeller Center to raise awareness and funds for the MS movement. “I’m very proud that I climb,” says Gaines, given, she says, “that I often feel like I have three-pound weights on my ankles.”

Get the recipe: Pannelle with zucchini and corn salsa



Photo courtesy of Quentin Bacon; provided courtesy of **America: Farm to Table** (Grand Central Life & Style, 2014).

One of the hors d'oeuvres served at the Golden Circle event featuring Mario Batali were these panelle, or Sicilian fritters, included in his book, **America: Farm to Table**. Learn how to make [panelle with zucchini and corn salsa](#)!

Diet on the research menu

Not surprisingly, at an event that featured Mario Batali as a speaker, and where hors d'oeuvres made from recipes from his new book, **America: Farm to Table**, were served, the main topic of discussion was food—more specifically, what research is uncovering about the link between food and MS.

“Diet is one of those areas that people with MS care deeply about,” says Timothy Coetzee, PhD, the Society’s chief advocacy, services and research officer. “And it’s great to have someone of Batali’s standing and recognition in the community talking about living well and taking advantage of nutrition as part of one’s strategy in managing MS.”

So far, there’s no specific diet that’s recommended for people with MS, other than a healthful, Mediterranean-style approach. Dr. Coetzee envisions future research into MS and diet that encompasses a whole picture of wellness, rather than focusing on eating plans that may be unrealistic or difficult to adhere to. “The biggest challenge is practicality—making sure that a diet is just sensible, that people can do it, that it fits in with their life, that it doesn’t become a burden. If you have to spend twice your budget on food, or if your family isn’t supportive, that can be a challenge,” he says. “What the scientists might be interested in are the mechanics, but at the end of the day, people living with MS want to know how they can have a better life.”

Getting to the gut level

Dr. Patrizia Casaccia, chief of the Center for Excellence for Myelin Repair at the Friedman Brain Institute at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, spoke at the Fishs Eddy event about her research in this area, noting that her aunt's and cousin's MS diagnoses influenced the direction of her research. Because of them, Dr. Casaccia realized how important wellness is to people with MS and how diet might play a key part in that.

To that end, she began researching the microbiome—the colonies of beneficial bacteria in the human gut, which not only assist in the digestion of food, but also may play a role in immunity and potentially for the development of MS.

Dr. Casaccia is a member of the MS Microbiome Consortium, a collaborative team of six scientists from four U.S. Research centers. The team plans to analyze and compare gut bacteria between people with relapsing MS, people with primary-progressive MS, and people without MS. The goal of the research is to understand the unique signature of the bacteria in the guts of people with MS. Ultimately, Dr. Casaccia envisions that changing the microbiota composition—by creating more beneficial bacteria in the gut—could be an important factor in the treatment of MS.

Batali closed out the event with a chef's perspective: "Food is a great way to make sure you manifest both joy and satisfaction at the same time you receive nutrition." And of course, eating that delicious something with loved ones adds "the human touch," he says.

"Food is part of connection," adds Dr. Coetzee. "We're all in this together."

Marcella Durand is a frequent contributor to Momentum.

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To learn more about what we know so far about MS , diet and wellness, read the Society's white paper at nationalMSSociety.org/MSWellness.

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