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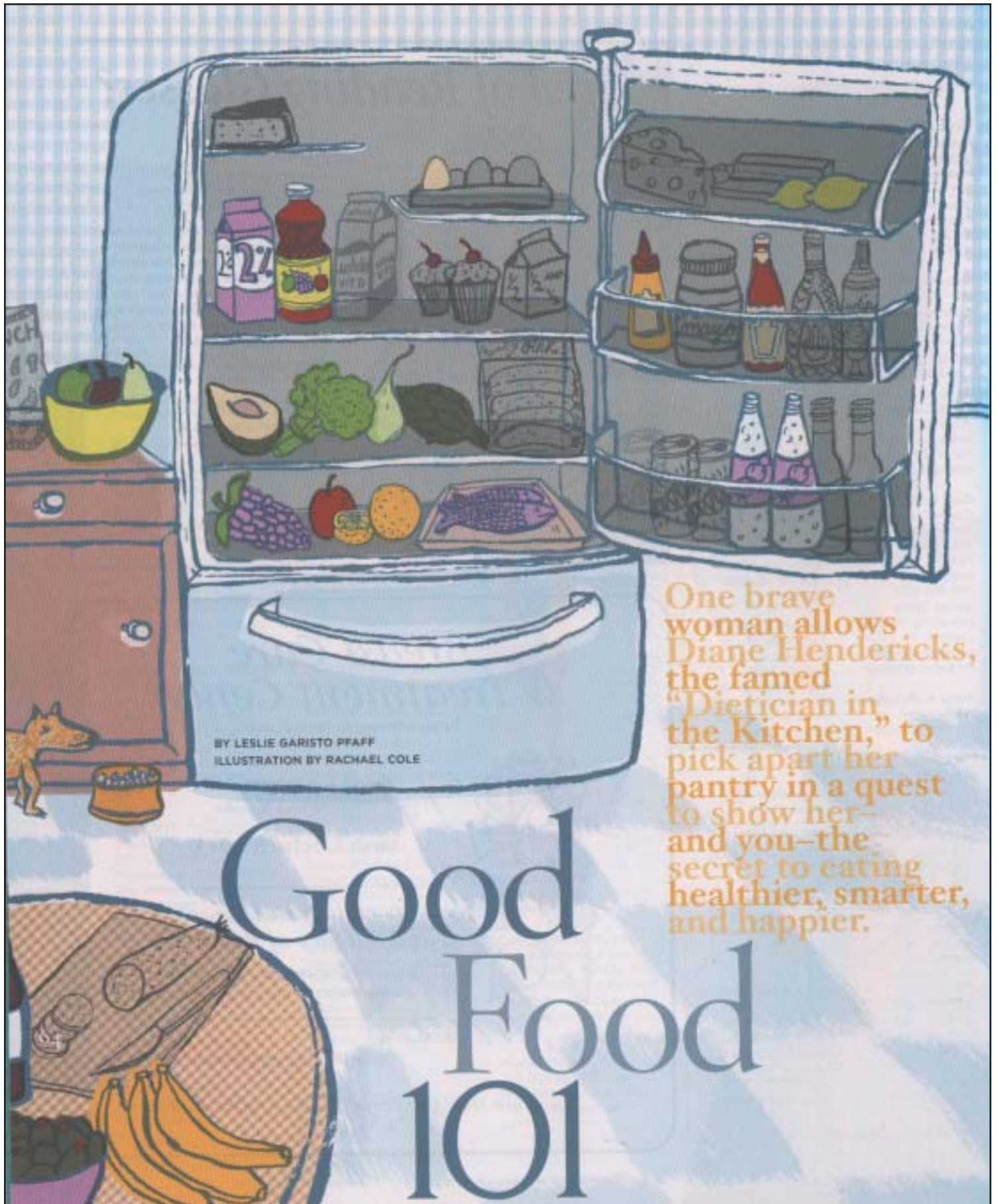
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BY LESLIE GARISTO PFAFF
ILLUSTRATION BY RACHAEL COLE

One brave woman allows Diane Hendericks, the famed "Dietician in the Kitchen," to pick apart her pantry in a quest to show her—and you—the secret to eating healthier, smarter, and happier.

Good Food 101

A HEALTHIER YOU

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Diane Henderiks is on a stepstool in my kitchen, reaching into the recesses of my upper cabinets, and she doesn't look happy. "This . . . is . . . stuck," she pants as she attempts to extract a plastic bag of something that's clearly been in there way too long. When she finally wrests it free, we both examine the contents, which appear dun-colored and lumpy.

She tries to be optimistic. "Looks like porcini mushrooms," she offers.

"Mmm—I don't think so," I confess sheepishly, not even attempting to identify the contents. With that, she offers her professional directive—"toss it"—and it plops in a garbage bag rapidly filling along with the old, the expired, and the nutritionally worthless.

Henderiks is here to give me a makeover—a food makeover. A licensed nutritionist, she's the founder of Dietician in the Kitchen, an Oakhurst based firm that offers everything from old-fashioned healthy eating regimens to cooking classes for the balanced-diet challenged. A trim, energetic thirty-something with glossy dark curls, a ready smile, and a purposeful manner, she's equal parts detective, clinician, and mother hen. As an obsessive food-label reader and supplement buyer, I figure she won't have much to teach me. Now, with the congealed bag of they're-not really-porcini-mushrooms sinking into the garbage, I'm beginning to see the error of that assumption.

Henderiks's strength is that she's direct. And when you're talking about what you're putting into your body on a daily basis, that's a big plus.

After I blurt out my fierce allegiance to all things carb, she reassures me by stating that "any diet that completely eliminates a food group isn't healthy." That said, it appears my orange juice fetish also needs to be cleaned out of my kitchen. "Juice doesn't belong in anyone's home. When you make juice, you're separating the sugar from everything that's good in the fruit. Eat the fruit instead."

Step 1: Finding Your Food Identity

We proceed to the actual makeover, which begins with filling out a questionnaire together. Henderiks asks me who does the cooking (both my husband and myself) and the grocery shopping (my husband, mostly—bless him) and whether we eat together as a family (nearly every night). How often do we eat takeout? (Not often enough—my husband's a stickler for a home-cooked meal.) It's all looking good.

Then she throws me the nutritional curve ball: Do I, by any chance, have a "junk" cabinet? Well, yes: that would be our so-called "cereal" cabinet—if the definition of cereal can reasonably be extended to potato chips, cookies, and a year's supply of Peppermint Patties. I'm quick to explain

"If my clients crave something sweet or chocolaty, I tell them to eat five or six Hershey's kisses or something similar," the dietician says. "You can't give up everything."

(too quick, actually) that the Peppermint Patties are my way of dealing with a chocolate fixation that might otherwise get out of hand; I swear to her that I eat only

three small patties a night, and while this is true, I feel inexplicably guilty. But Henderiks is forgiving. In fact, she likes the idea. "If my clients crave something sweet or chocolaty, I tell them to eat five or six Hershey's kisses or something similar," she says. "You can't give up everything."

Finally, she asks me if there are specific ways I want her to help me. I respond that overall I think I eat pretty well, but I do have an addiction to salt, and a condition affecting my inner ear called Meniere's disease, for which excessive salt is definitely contraindicated (it makes me dizzy and distorts my hearing). There's also the fact that my daughter, who has a wonderfully sophisticated palate for a 12-year-old, is something of a sugar fiend. (Me again to blame, though I swear this time it's the genes, not the cereal cabinet.)

Henderiks looks energized—problems to

solve!—and slips on her trademark burgundy apron. "Let's get going," she says. I imagine she'd be zealously rubbing her hands together if propriety didn't dictate otherwise.

Step 2: The Fridge

We open the refrigerator and I wince, waiting for an onslaught of finger-wagging. The first thing she sees is the bottle of purple Juicy Juice. "It's my daughter's," I say, a little too defensively. I can't seem to encourage my daughter to drink more water. Henderiks' solution is less radical than I would have imagined: Buy a pack of little water bottles and use them to replace the juice in her lunchbox a few times a week. She also instructs me to dilute the Juicy Juice with water so that the ratio's roughly 50/50. "I bet your daughter won't even notice," she says.

She picks up my container of fat-free sour cream, and I expect praise. Sensing this, she lets me down easy. "I know this looks like the best option," she says, "but this is actually a case where low-fat is better than fat-free." She twirls the carton around and points out the list of ingredients, which include unsavory-sounding things like dried corn syrup and xanthan gum. "Low-fat sour cream has fewer additives—including sugars—than fat-free," she explains.

I rebound by, surprisingly, getting a thumb's-up for my stash of pure maple syrup. "That's good," Henderiks says. "It's the real stuff." Most products sold as "syrup," she says, actually contain no maple syrup at all, but lots of sugar. So to make up for the flavor deficit, people tend to slather too much all over their pancakes. If it doesn't say on the label it's 100 percent pure, it isn't.

Since we're talking sweet stuff, she reaches for the Hershey's syrup, my secret weapon for getting my daughter to drink more milk. As the mother of a six year old herself she gets it, but wants me to use Ovaltine instead, which offers a slew of vitamins and minerals along with its jolt of chocolate. She's less tolerant when it comes to the strawberry syrup, which is completely bereft of any nutrients. "This is just garbage—get rid of it."

Step 3: The Cabinets

Henderiks makes her way to my cabinets, and like my fridge, they harbor a mixture of the good, the bad, and the inedible. She likes my beans and lentils but gives my white rice a thumbs-down ("kind of worthless"). The economy-size bottle of extra-virgin olive oil gets her stamp of

approval, but not the vegetable oil that I use for stir-frying.

"Combination vegetable oils are higher in trans fats, which can lead to heart disease," she says. "Try canola oil instead."

She advises me to use my kosher salt more often, because "iodized salt is higher in sodium than kosher salt." (Who knew?) And she gently suggests I try whole wheat pasta. Although by my standards it doesn't taste as good, she says it's worth a shot, for the increased fiber. She also touts the wonders of natural peanut butter. "No sugar or hydrogenated oil," she says. "And if you get it at a high-end whole foods market, it won't separate."

As we continue canvassing the cupboards, it becomes clear that my problems are organizational as well as nutritional. There are two cans of Just Whites (dried egg whites for use in holiday cookie icing), both expired; several packs of identical cookies, all greedily torn into; and five opened containers of breadcrumbs (three in my pasta cabinet, two with the staples). In the fridge, there's a desiccated pineapple wrapped in foil, lemons and limes that look like shrunken heads, and—I'm horrified to discover—a wealth of hidden mold, in everything from my pimientos to apple-

sauce. Much of what's jamming my cabinets exceeded its expiration date long ago, including a jar of chicken bouillon powder that should have met its maker in, well, 1996. While most of us can easily spy a moldy chunk of cheese putrifying in the refrigerator, we tend not to be so careful with packaged goods. But items like cereals and dried beans don't have unlimited shelf life: they tend to lose their fresh taste over time and may not serve up as well.

Henderiks has a plan of attack for all of this as well: Keep like items together; store unopened containers at the back of the fridge and cabinets; and buy smaller packages of infrequently used items (individual serving sizes of applesauce instead of jars, for instance). She efficiently puts these principles to work and, when the process is over, we've filled two tall trash bags with tossed food. My cabinets are so empty that my cat crawls into one of them and, unbeknownst to me, falls asleep. (I'm apprised of this later, when I hear a frantic knocking from within, which I initially take to be the ghost of trans-fatty acids past.)

Step 4: Making Changes

For her regular clients, Henderiks generally finishes with a trip to the grocery store and a lesson in the creation of some simple

sauces that are high in flavor and low in fat. Though we don't have time for that, she leaves me with a food diary that she wants me to fill out over the course of the next month. I promise to take her recommendations to heart.

Over the next several days I see some immediate benefits of the makeover. My daughter is happily (if ignorantly) drinking her diluted Juicy Juice, and I'm using kosher salt in most of my cooking. We all agree that the fancy natural peanut butter purchased from Whole Foods is a lot better than we expected, though none of us is brave enough to yet abandon our white pasta for whole wheat. And I discover that brown rice doesn't taste half bad in chicken soup.

When no one's around, I open my newly tidied cabinets and stare into them with dazed admiration, and when I go looking for a jar of capers, I can actually find them. I feel not only healthier, but more virtuous. Taking a last, lingering look at my cereal cabinet, I can't help but notice that the ratio of cereal to cookies has increased significantly

Now if I could only rout the cat...

Ready for a makeover?

To arrange for Diane Henderiks to come and make over your eating habits, call her at 732.922.6269, or e-mail her at diane@DianeRD.com. An initial consultation is \$250 (\$350 if a shopping expedition is involved); follow-up visits are \$150. For more information, log on to DianeRD.com. Or, to find a registered dietician in your area, contact the New Jersey Dietetic Association at 609-5855458, or online at eatright-nj.org

8 quick steps to eating better

To eat healthy for life, Diane Henderiks suggests making the following eight principles part of your day-to-day food regimen:

Eat breakfast. It's necessary to jump-start your metabolism.

Downsize your main meals. You'll put less stress on your digestive system.

Snack. Small snacks (on things like a piece of fruit, a dozen unsalted nuts, raw veggies with hummus, or low-fat cottage cheese with half a cup of Grape Nuts) keep your metabolism going.

Choose nutrient-dense foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains over those that offer empty calories, such as candy and chips.

Drink more water.

Plan ahead. Keep good stuff on hand at work so you won't have to fall back on vending machines and convenience stores.

Get colorful. To fight cancer, choose intensely colored fruits and vegetables, like berries, grapes, pomegranates, broccoli, and carrots.

Visualize success. Chances are if you see yourself as healthy, you will be.