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Connecting With Food and Place, Prudence Athearn Returns to Roots

By REMY TUMIN

Food that's worth it takes longer to prepare, Prudence Athearn Levy often tells her four-year-old son Kyle. Taking time to slow things down makes the experience worth the wait, whether that means brewing loose leaf tea rather than the bagged version or in the case of Mrs. Levy's family, watching the carrots grow in their backyard of Morning Glory Farm.

Mrs. Levy and her husband Josh Levy are putting that theory to practice in their new business at Vineyard Nutrition, consulting clients on how to take a few extra moments to relish simple food rather than fear its complexities, and step away from the processed foods and so they can do it themselves. The Levys bought the Edgartown business from longtime nutritionist Denise Guest and began seeing patients earlier this month.



Prudence Athearn Levy and husband Josh Levy.

The Levys' philosophy goes beyond reaching for fruits, vegetables and whole grains rather than processed foods and sugars, although it's a part of it. They emphasize taking the time to sit down, take the pace down a notch and find a connection with food.

It's a homecoming for Mrs. Levy, who grew up just a mile down the road from her new office on Cooke street in Edgartown. Her parents, Jim and Debbie Athearn, own Morning Glory Farm. From explaining to customers at the farm stand how to incorporate chard into their diet to teaching families how to make it delicious, Mrs. Levy easily incorporates her farm experience into the couple's nutrition practice.

Finding a connection to food was second nature to Mrs. Levy growing up in the fields of Morning Glory Farm and as the farm stand manager interacting with customers. She took that passion for food with her to Colorado State University, where she met Mr. Levy while completing their masters degrees. Connecting food and nutrition was always something she was interested in.

“I always found myself listing recipes,” Mrs. Levy recalled one day last week. “When I see the amazing community support my parents and brothers have gotten on the farm, it’s exciting for us to think we can help the same people take it to another level.”

The Levys, both registered dieticians with masters degrees in human nutrition, plan to expand the business beyond one-on-one consultations to include cooking classes, refrigerator and cabinet overhauls and working in the schools.

Mrs. Levy said being near family was the biggest reason for their move back to the Island. She said that their children, Kyle, four, and Judah, two, are ecstatic to be living in Edgartown. After successful stints at hospitals and private practices in Boulder, Co. and Portland, Me., Mr. and Mrs. Levy decided it was time to return home.

“Both of our kids love the farm, Kyle especially ... he’s a little farmer already,” Mrs. Levy said. “He knows the types of tractors, picks everything just the way a grown up would do, and loves to prepare it. He’s our little chef.”

“They’re just ravenous for vegetables,” she said. “And that’s the way I grew up.”

The trick is to get people excited about their food, starting with kids, Mrs. Levy said, and to improve their relationship with it. Mrs. Levy and her family were always enthusiastic about the food they ate.

“Growing up on the farm I was excited about food all the time ... we had a minimum of two vegetables on every plate, usually three. It wasn’t anything fancy, it was steamed up or roasted but we all ate it,” she recalled. “We were out there barefoot in the fields ... and it changed my love for food and how people got excited about it.”

The Levys described their refrigerator as overflowing fruits and vegetables, plenty of color, yogurt, and cupboards packed with canisters of different grains and nuts. They take time in the morning for breakfast with the kids, sometimes slow cooked oatmeal with apples, nuts and flax seed, other times whole grain French toast with extra eggs and fruit.

It’s a morning ritual they hope to inspire other families to do.

“We sit down at the table together and that’s one thing we work on with so many

people is the importance meal time — sit down, connect with your family, connect with your kids, it's so important," Mr. Levy said. "One of the biggest ways kids learn how to eat is watching their parents. So if mom and dad have it every day that's going to teach them one way or the other."

The Levys teach skills that make recommendations seem not so daunting and the healthier options appealing. Plain quinoa grain could be as appealing as cardboard to some until you add something like avocado, tomatoes and olive oil, a salad the Levys sent their kids to school with one day last week.

Food can be a scary thing for some people, Mr. Levy added, whether it be how it makes them feel or how it looks, but to get over that fear they recommend getting your hands dirty in the kitchen.

"We want them to get in the kitchen and have some fun, trying things out, feel it, touch it, experiment," he said. "For us a lot of what we're going to do is the basics, getting people to the basics, and then from there the sky's the limit. So much we're planning on doing and we're excited about because it's what we believe in."

One quick tip is as simple as using Sundays to your advantage, and preplanning for the week ahead.

"We're teaching people ... one hour on Sunday they can prepare food for the entire week, when they're relaxed and in Sunday mode," Mr. Levy said. "As opposed to coming home on a Tuesday after a full day of work with kids in the car, opening the cabinets and trying to have a moment of culinary inspiration — that's not going to happen."

"A starving brain is not going to make the best choices and having that Sunday time for thinking ahead of dinners this week," Mrs. Levy added. "It's hard to get started on that but we give people the tools to do it ... and you end up not having to pick up a frozen meal because you already have a frozen meal you've made yourself."

Nutrition is only one piece of looking at the whole health picture, Mrs. Levy said, and working with other health care providers is an important connection to make.

"You're caring for this person, making sure you're consistent with the plan and communicating with them so we can provide the best care and look at the whole person," Mrs. Levy said. "The lifestyle modifications we can do are really, really powerful."

The Levys' work with pre-diabetes and diabetes patients to change their eating

patterns allowed those patients to transition off of medicine and naturally lower their blood sugar and carbohydrate levels.

In their work in hospitals and private practices the Levys said they've seen more children with cases of diabetes and obesity at younger ages, and the only way to combat that trend is to stop it as soon as possible.

“Children who are overweight or have diabetes will carry on forever unless it's addressed right then and you turn the kids around into excited healthy eaters,” Mrs. Levy said. “The trend of obesity and diabetes getting younger and younger is a tough one to swallow, but we're doing what we're doing because we feel so strongly that people can feel so much better when they look at their nutrition.”

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