

# Creative Menu Planning for Health-Promoting Meals

by Cherie Soria



How can you be sure that you are providing the most nutrient dense, well-balanced meals for yourself and your family? The truth is most of us are just happy if our families eat raw foods, and nutrition is secondary. But raw is not enough—in fact, some lightly cooked foods are better choices than many raw foods might be. Why? Because a diet high in fats, even raw fats like soaked nuts and seeds or extra-virgin olive oil, fills us up too quickly and doesn't allow room for other, more nutritious, foods. A certain amount of good fats are essential, but the majority of what we eat, by volume, should be green vegetables. At Living Light, we say, "Make green your favorite color!"

There are a lot of reasons why health-conscious raw food chefs have much more to consider than traditional chefs when planning a menu. In addition to balancing flavor, texture, and appearance, raw food chefs need to balance their desire to please and impress their families and guests with their responsibility to provide meals that are easy to digest and contain all the nutrients required for optimal health.

Most raw food chefs also demand the freshest, ripest, most nutrient-dense seasonal raw organic ingredients, while limiting fats and salt. Wow, that's a lot to think about! But wait, there's more!

Let's not forget your budget. This is even more important today than ever. Just because money is tight doesn't mean that meals have to be less nourishing. In fact, it is sometimes just the opposite. When times are tough, people often cut back on richer ingredients and eat more in-season, garden-fresh foods.

In many ways it's easier to create menu plans for the family (even your finicky eaters) than for guests, since you

know their preferences, whereas lot of unknowns come into play when preparing a menu for guests. Do they like spicy food? Are they on a special diet? Do they have food allergies? Are their tastes simple or sophisticated? In any case, remember to balance rich foods with lighter ones, to keep fat to less than 30% of the meal's calories. That sounds high, but it isn't unusual for raw food meals to be more than 50% fat. Here is an example of a typical high-fat raw food meal:

**Appetizer:** Guacamole or hummus with crudités or flax crackers

**Green salad:** Made with sun-dried olives and dressing made with oil, avocado, or tahini

**Soup:** Made creamy with the use of avocado or nut cream

**Entrée:** With avocado, nut paté or cream sauce

**Dessert:** Made with avocado-, coconut-, or nuts

If three of the five menu items above were replaced with low-fat or fat-free recipes, the menu would still be more than 30% fat, so a keen eye on fat is essential. (See my previous article, "Cutting Fat without Cutting Flavor.") Other things to think about when preparing a menu:

- **The order in which foods are served:** Flavors should build in a menu, or the palate cannot perceive the subtle flavors of subsequent courses.
- **Color:** Human appetite responds to color, and a variety of colors ensures an abundance of phytonutrients in the meal. Of all the colors, make sure green predominates.
- **Quantity:** Serve enough food to satisfy, without offering so much that people overeat.
- **Preparation time:** Make your menu realistic. One gourmet item is enough to showcase the

potential of raw food (and your skill as a chef), and the remainder can be simple, easy-to-prepare, lower-fat selections.

- **Budget:** Buy seasonally for the freshest, most nutritious, and least-costly menu. Choose common seeds like sunflower or pumpkin over more costly, exotic nuts like macadamia or pine nuts.
- **Textures:** Contrasting textures like a creamy dip paired with a crispy cracker are always more pleasing than when everything is the same texture.
- **Range of flavors:** Include all five flavor categories in your menu—sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and pungent. Also, complement strongly flavored dishes with milder ones.

- **Digestibility:** Follow food-combining principles as much as possible, to ensure easy digestion.
- **Nutrition:** Make sure your menu is nutritionally adequate. (See Raw Food Revolution Diet for sample menus containing nutritional evaluations.)

Menu planning is fun and creative when you know the rules. It's also an important part of health assurance—so don't just make a bunch of delicious foods without a well-thought-out plan. With some forethought, you can showcase your beautiful culinary creations and ensure that you, your family, and your friends are getting the nutrients they need!

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## *A Few Different Kinds of Menu-Planning Methods*

Here is a brief synopsis of several approaches to menu planning. Some are for everyday family meals, and others are for preparing catered meals for special guests and people whose preferences you are not familiar with. All of the following approaches assume that a focus on nutrition is primary.

1. **A daily menu planned the night before:** This approach is most often used for immediate family, whose preferences are known. It is usually based on what is in the refrigerator or the garden at the time, what is available at the market (if you have time to shop), and how much time you have to prepare the meal. Organizing your menu the night before allows you a little advance preparation for steps like soaking nuts and seeds or making a component that is required for the next day.
2. **A weekly menu of meals you might prepare for your family:** This approach is also used most often for immediate family, whose preferences are known. It takes into consideration what is on sale or available at the farmers market and in your garden, as well as what is left over from one day to the next. It also allows time to shop and gather ingredients in advance, considers how much food-preparation time you anticipate having on particular days, and provides the opportunity to make a few things in advance.
3. **A rotating set of a dozen or more menus, based on family preferences:** These menus vary little, except for seasonal ingredients that can be easily replaced by others that are available all year. Most families enjoy the same ten or twelve meals and appreciate knowing what to expect. Having a set of rotating favorites takes the guesswork out of meal planning and ensures that the family will be happy. This approach takes a while to organize, but once it's done, it takes the guesswork out of meal planning. Then, if you wish to try new dishes, you have to set a day aside specifically for that purpose.
4. **A special-occasion menu for your family and friends:** This approach comes into play during holidays and other celebrations. The menu is usually planned in advance and takes into consideration the event or theme, family preferences, what is on sale or what is available at the farmers market and in your garden, and how much time and energy you have for preparation. Presumably it includes time to make a few things in advance.
5. **A special event menu for a variety of guests, many whom you do not know:** This approach encompasses the factors listed in #4 above, with the addition of several added considerations. To address these, we at Living Light teach a course entitled Catering and Elegant Entertaining. Some of the things we advise students to focus on include:
  - **Event location/venue:** Note the amount of refrigeration required, the available preparation space, and whether the room layout and furniture are more amenable to a buffet or service menu.
  - **Guests:** considerations include the number of guests and their general food preferences.
  - **Type of event:** holiday, wedding, art show, etc.
  - **Menu or event theme:** ethnic, seasonal, appetizers, etc.
  - **Budget:** it's easy to exceed budget if you don't buy seasonally. Limit exotic ingredients and expensive nuts.
  - **Production time:** consider preparing some simpler dishes, especially if you are serving a lot of people. Plan to prepare some dishes in advance.