

Remarkable Woman: Karyn Calabrese

Chicago's own vegevangelist is living proof of the power of clean eating

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"People try to go all or nothing right away," Remarkable Woman Karyn Calabrese says of changing your diet. "Allow it to be a process for you. Realize that food is supposed to be delicious." (Phil Velasquez, Chicago Tribune)

For evidence that eating vegetables (especially raw ones) is good for you, look no further than Karyn Calabrese. You'll probably find her perched at the desk in her office, one floor up from the restaurant, cafe and holistic therapy center on North Halsted Street that bears her name.



Calabrese has been preaching her gospel of good eating and the power of wheat grass for almost 20 years, opening her first restaurant, Karyn's Fresh Corner and Garden Cafe, on North Lincoln Avenue, in 1995. She now has four eponymous restaurants: Fresh Corner and Raw Bistro, both on Halsted, Cooked and On Green. Also: a takeout meal program (Karyn's at Home), holistic therapy programs (Inner Beauty Center), a book ("Soak Your Nuts: Cleansing with Karyn: Detox Secrets for Inner Healing and Outer Beauty"), a line of Karyn-branded food products (from agave nectar to yacon syrup), makeup and skin care lines, speeches, workshops and a staff of more than 100. Overseeing it all is the energetic ("I'm 5-foot-7, 107 pounds"), almost 65-year-old Calabrese.

Yet her road to raw food evangelism was by no means direct. Born in Hyde Park, she began cooking early. "My great-grandmother and I — we used to cook for the church ladies on Sunday," she remembers. "I was butt high, and I would be in the kitchen helping her wash greens or helping her put the fat on top of the biscuits."

A 17-year modeling career (magazines, commercials, album covers, etc.) followed. So did a family. "I have a living daughter. My son passed away four years ago. And I have two grandchildren from my son," Calabrese says. "I am on my second marriage, and we just celebrated our 19th wedding anniversary. We've been together 30 years."

A vegetarian for decades, Calabrese is far from inflexible on the matter. "People try to go all or nothing right away. Allow it to be a process for you. Realize that food is supposed to be delicious. A lot of people think that boring, bland food is vegetarian food, like steamed rice and boiled vegetables. There's no way I could have eaten this way for 43 years if I was eating steamed rice and boiled vegetables.

"I feel my role is to bring a whole different aspect to a plant-based diet because people tend to have this narrow view of what people are who are vegan, vegetarian or rawfoodist. I don't fit the mold."

Q: How did you find your way to vegetarian, vegan and raw food diets?

A: All the women in my family died overweight and very young. My mom died at 48. My grandmother at 50 and my great-grandmother at 60. I was very sickly. And they had all

started out tiny like me, and they all got very large, and they died of degenerative diseases. I was just very fortunate, blessed to meet the right people at the right time in my life to inspire me to go a different route. My mother was the first to inspire me. She started me drinking vegetable juice.

I believe we all intuitively know how to take care of ourselves. ... But we've covered it up, so that we've forgotten how to think for ourselves. I really believe everybody knows how to vibrate in the kitchen. We're just so used to giving it away we don't do it any longer.

Q: What is the best lesson you learned from your mother?

A: She taught me that they made a mistake when they wrote the word "can't" into the English language. It doesn't exist. There's no such word as "can't." When I opened up the first raw food restaurant, it never occurred to me that I was opening up a raw food restaurant in Chicago, the meatpacking capital of the world. It never occurred to me that, oh, that doesn't make sense.

Q: What is your greatest attribute?

A: I'm very focused. When I get something in my mind that needs to be done, it doesn't leave until it's done.

Q: And your greatest fault?

A: I buy shoes. I love to shop, I love clothes, I love shoes — if that's a fault. I love beauty, the beauty of things. But also, I have a tendency to never say no to anything and try to act on everything I want to do which can really kind of jumble up your plate too much sometimes.

Q: What is your secret to success?

A: That would be where the focus comes in. And acting on your ideas — and my gut — and not expecting it to go from A to Z overnight either. Allow the process, and feel comfortable with it along the way. You know, when I had my little hippie joint up on Lincoln Avenue, I had no idea that I wasn't successful. I thought I was. It never occurred to me that I wasn't. I always say that God takes care of fools and children, and I'm not a child.

Q: What was your biggest mistake?

A: That's hard to say because I believe all my mistakes (propelled) me to the success that I have. My biggest mistake — probably the turmoil that I went through with my first divorce for my children. It was not an easy divorce, though we're best friends now. ... I feel bad for what my children went through with my divorce. If I could do that differently, I would.

Q: What is your professional mantra?

A: I can. And I will

Q: What did you want to be when you were 13?

A: Well, actually I was a candy stripper for a while, and I wanted to be a radiologist.

Q: What is your least favorite vegetable?

A: Until we started making it at Green, it was Brussels sprouts. We make raw Brussels sprouts into a salad, marinated. I'm not real big on cooking them, though we do a glazed one at Green Street that's really delicious.

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