
Converting Your Friends

The Art of Seducing People into Making Healthier Food Choices

Nels Ferré

We all have them. People close to us — friends, relatives, children — whom we shudder upon viewing their cupboards. No matter how much food-awareness you have, you just can't seem to escape the masses of loved ones who don't know much, and, generally, just don't care much about making conscious food decisions.

Critiquing people's diets can be disastrous, and if you cannot keep your big trap shut you may have noticed a few things. The first being that most people are stubborn to change, especially when it comes to a sacred cow like their diet. Also, most people are convinced that they already make relatively smart food decisions. Years of health being used as a political tool and propaganda from subsidized farmers do not help this, but it is part of the unfortunate reality of most modern food practices.

Well slow down there, cowboy. As we all have learned at one point or another, getting on your soapbox can have disastrous consequences. There is an art to changing opinion, and, how you approach your brethren can make all the difference between getting results and getting sent out of the kitchen to watch the game with all the other people who were deemed a distraction to the dinner agenda.



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Perhaps one of the biggest factors is tone. Keeping your comments positive will have an immediate impact. Complementing somebody's cooking and then asking if they got their veggies from the local market will obviously go a lot further than stating how you would never buy your groceries from the nearest Corporate Super-Village. The power of resisting those negative comments and staying positive cannot be overstated.

Subtlety can also work to your benefit. Just think about it; do you

enjoy somebody hammering you over the head with their opinions? Of course not. Keep this in the back of your head when you choose to intervene and your advice is more likely to get a positive reaction.

Leave openings in the dialogue. Everyone loves feeling involved and communication is a two-way street. You don't seem as pushy and they get a chance to be a contributor to the solution, whatever it may be.

You just never know, by mentioning how you found a new brand of rice that is farmed within 40 miles of where you reside your friend might jump in and claim that they are always looking for local products and start lecturing you on miles-to-market. Of course, your friend also may just grumble that it is probably twice as expensive as their brand, but that is just an invitation to exclaim how affordable it actually is, and this leads us into the next point:

One of the biggest barriers to healthy eating is the notion that the grocery bills will skyrocket. Of course that is not true, but, there are healthy food items that get pretty pricey. Have you seen the price of almond butter recently? Sheesh! I don't blame my cheap friends for sticking with peanut butter and neither should you.

Also, acknowledge your limits.

Some of your friends may never be ready to make the jump to kombucha, this doesn't mean they aren't ready to make the switch to something else, and that is okay. If you've seen the 1991 comedy film *What About Bob* than you know proceeding reference...baby steps! After all, getting your friends to be a little bit healthier and little more food conscious is better than none at all.

Now that we have discussed the method let us talk about how to set up situations where you can give out advice without seeming like a crazy person.

GO SHOPPING WITH THEM

While it should be obvious there really isn't a better opportunity. You can literally show them what, where, why, and how (much it really costs). It also empowers them to make healthier food purchases right then and there. They may even have some shopping-secrets to share with you.

What to say: "You know what would be fun? Going food shopping sometime, I'm always curious to see how other people get their essentials."

What not to say: "Well you obviously couldn't find something healthy if it hit you over the head! – sigh– Looks like I need to show you what real food is."

Why to say 'this' and not 'that': You don't want to sound condescending or authoritative. Empower them by giving them choices and the ideas become more personalized, which can lead to more lasting changes.

Be prepared to: Bite your tongue. Whether it's the meat counter or the cookie aisle there will be a battle you can't win and you'll just have to let them do their thing. Remember, baby steps.

TRADE YOUR COOK-BOOKS AND RECIPES

Two reasons to do this; first, you help them cook better even when you aren't there, and, second, you get to read what they consider important cooking traits. Not only does this expose both of you to potential new ideas but you also learn how your friends acquired their cooking methods.

What to say: "That book looks awesome, want to trade? I have something at home you might enjoy."

What not to say: "This book will change your life!"

Why to say 'this' and not 'that': If you keep your comments positive, people are more inclined to have positive reactions. But keep that in perspective! The book may change their life, but let them find out on their own. It is better to undersell and let them be impressed than to raise their expectations to levels that might not be met.

Be prepared to: Actually read the cookbooks and use the recipes. You can't expect them to read yours if you don't read theirs. It's okay to alter recipes for your dietary concerns, (and if they ask, be honest with them), but, like with shopping together, you cannot expect them to be open to new ideas if you aren't.

POTLUCKS, POTLUCKS, POTLUCKS

No event screams, "share my food opinions" more than a potluck. Stay positive, and, remember that most everyone is expecting at least one food-critic who is a jerk, so don't let it be you!

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What to say: "I loved your dish! Would you like to trade recipes or go food shopping together sometime?"

What not to say: "Hey everybody! Don't forget to try my completely vegan, one hundred percent organic, fair trade hiziki salad."

Why to say 'this' and not 'that': Potlucks are great for networking and sharing ideas; but, it is a fine line between being the conscious attendee and getting accused of 'holier-than-thou' syndrome. If you want people to know anything about the dish you brought, put a note or card next to it.

Be prepared to: Deal with the aforementioned food-critic jerk. They are notorious for being at potlucks. Just smile and remember that while people are tuning him out, you are helping make the world a little healthier, one loved one at a time.

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