

March 11, 2009

Michelle Obama's Agenda Includes Healthful Eating

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WASHINGTON

THE television cameras were rolling, the journalists were scribbling and the first lady, [Michelle Obama](#), was standing in a soup kitchen rhapsodizing about steamed broccoli. And homemade mushroom [risotto](#). And freshly baked apple-carrot muffins.

Mrs. Obama was praising the menu last week at Miriam's Kitchen, a nonprofit drop-in center serving this city's homeless. And she seized the moment to urge Americans to provide fresh, unprocessed and locally grown foods to their families and to the neediest in their communities.

"You know, we want to make sure our guests here and across the nation are eating nutritious items," said Mrs. Obama, who served lunch to several homeless men and women and delivered eight cases of fresh fruit to the soup kitchen, all donated by White House employees.

"Collect some fruits and vegetables; bring by some good healthy food," she said. "We can provide this kind of healthy food for communities across the country, and we can do it by each of us lending a hand."

In her first weeks in the White House, Mrs. Obama has emerged as a champion of healthful food and healthful living. She has praised community vegetable gardens, opened up her own kitchen to show off the White House chefs' prowess with vegetables and told stories about feeding less fattening foods to her daughters.

White House officials say the focus on healthy living will be a significant item on Mrs. Obama's agenda, which already includes supporting working families and military spouses. As the nation battles an obesity epidemic and a hard-to-break taste for oversweetened and oversalted dishes, her message is clear: Fresh, nutritious foods are not delicacies to be savored by the wealthy, but critical components of the diets of ordinary and struggling families.

It is a notable shift in direction. The former first lady, [Laura Bush](#), insisted that fresh, organic foods be served in the White House, but did not broadcast that fact to the public, according to Walter Scheib, who served as executive chef under Presidents [Bill Clinton](#) and [George W. Bush](#).

"She just didn't talk much about it outside the house," Mr. Scheib said of Mrs. Bush. "Mrs. Obama is taking a higher profile."

In a speech at the Department of Agriculture last month, Mrs. Obama described herself as "a big believer" in community gardens that provide "fresh fruits and vegetables for so many communities across this nation

and world.”

A few days later, she invited television cameras into the White House kitchen and made a point of praising the chefs' nutritious creations, including creamed spinach without the cream.

Mrs. Obama presented herself not as a celebrity who has appeared on the cover of *Vogue* — though, of course, she has appeared on the cover of *Vogue* — but as a down-to-earth mom who works hard to keep in shape and to please the palates of her two daughters, [Sasha](#), 7, and [Malia](#), 10, who sometimes wrinkle their noses at the greenery on their plates.

“It's like: How do we keep the calories down but keep the flavors up?” said Mrs. Obama, who also praised a healthy broccoli soup prepared by White House chefs.

“That's one of the things that we're talking a lot about,” she said. “When you grow something yourself and it's close and it's local, oftentimes it tastes really good.

“And when you're dealing with kids, for example, you want to get them to try that carrot. Well, if it tastes like a real carrot and it's really sweet, they're going to think that it's a piece of candy. So my kids are more inclined to try different vegetables if they're fresh and local and delicious.”

The secret to that creamless creamed spinach? Sautéed spinach, olive oil and shallots are whipped into a purée that is light and delicious, according to Cristeta Comerford, the White House executive chef.

Even so, Mrs. Obama conceded, the dish was not a hit with Sasha. No matter what you do, she said ruefully, “sometimes kids are like, ‘It's green!’ ”

Some of those who had called on [President Obama](#) to use the White House as a bully pulpit to help improve Americans' eating habits are cheering Mrs. Obama on.

They were thrilled to learn that the White House gets fresh fruits and vegetables from farms in Maryland, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. And they delighted in the news that the Obamas had served organic wine at their first big White House dinner, a gathering of the nation's governors last month.

[Danny Meyer](#), the restaurateur, praised Mrs. Obama for speaking “in real human terms about what kind of choices real human beings can make in terms of their own lives.”

[Ruth Reichl](#), the editor of *Gourmet* magazine, said she was impressed to see Mrs. Obama showcase a soup kitchen that serves only fresh food — nothing canned or processed — to the poor.

“They're not just saying, I want to feed my family this; this is good for us,” said Ms. Reichl of the Obamas. “Clearly Mrs. Obama is making a point. She thinks communities across the nation deserve to have access to fresh fruits and vegetables.”

In addition to speeches, Mrs. Obama is also spreading the word through interviews with celebrity and parents' magazines.

In the March 9 issue of *People* magazine, for instance, the first lady described her early morning workouts with the president and bared her famously toned arms on the cover. And in the November issue of *Parents*

magazine, she and her husband described their decision to ditch juice boxes and processed foods.

“A couple of years ago — you’d never know it by looking at her now — Malia was getting a little chubby,” Mr. Obama told the magazine.

They took action, Mrs. Obama said, when “her doctor — he really monitors this type of thing — suggested we look at her diet. So we cut out juice boxes, sweets and processed foods.”

Advocates for healthful food and living want the Obamas to do even more.

Ms. Reichl would like the White House kitchen to issue regular news releases that describe what the first couple and their daughters are eating. (Then parents across the country could tell their children, “You know, Malia and Sasha were eating salad yesterday. ...”)

Roger Doiron, founding director of Kitchen Gardeners International, a nonprofit group, is one of several people who want the Obamas to plant an edible garden that would serve as a national model.

Mr. Scheib cautioned that no one should expect the Obamas to upend their lifestyle. “This is not to say they’re going to be eating rice cakes and [tofu](#) three meals a day, not at all,” he said.

In fact, Mrs. Obama cheerfully admits to an occasional hankering for fast food. It’s all about eating in moderation, she said, emphasizing the kind of flexibility that might make it easier for people to relate to her message.

Last month, the first lady took her staff out to lunch at Five Guys Burgers and Fries, a hamburger chain, where she had a cheeseburger, fries and a Coke. (No, not a Diet Coke.)

Mrs. Obama also enjoys waffles and grits for breakfast, though not every day. And she said that the White House chefs, who can make nutritious meals tasty, have other talents as well.

“They can also make a mean batch of French fries when you want it done,” she said.

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