Health Risks & Environmental Issues
by Rose Marie Williams, MA
jwill52739@aol.com

Health Cruise – 2008

Health cruise sounds like an oxymoron, because on most cruises, folks tend to overindulge on all the wrong foods and drinks. However, Vegetarian Times and a Taste of Health (www.atast eofhealth.org) teamed up to offer guests an opportunity to eat specially prepared healthful and tasty macrobiotic meals and beverages. On March 30th, 2008, I was among 975 like-minded individuals who sailed out of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, aboard the beautiful liner Fortuna, of the Costa Fleet, for a seven-day cruise to the eastern Caribbean. My husband came along as a favor to me, but enjoyed the meals, classes, and speakers so much, he is enthusiastically telling everyone what a “great time” he had.

The Costa Cruise Line gets high marks for environmentally sensitive practices and supports several wildlife organizations. The cabins were attractive, comfortable, and reasonably spacious. I particularly appreciated the fact that our cabin did not smell of toxic cleansers or room deodorizers. It was a great relief to find the cabin air entirely pleasant.

Four years ago, 420 guests signed onto the health cruise. Each year since, the health cruise has grown in popularity and interest. The 2008 health cruise set sail with 975 health-oriented guests and 30 instructors offering 140 holistic lectures, workshops, and cooking classes.

Macrobiotics = Great Life

A staff of macrobiotic chefs prepared the breakfast, lunch, and dinner meals, all of which were served in a lovely dining room reserved exclusively for the health cruise guests. Miso soup and brown rice (or other whole grains) with pumpkin seeds were served at every breakfast with a vegetable and lightly cooked fruit. These might be accompanied by vegan pancakes, vegan muffins, or vegan omelets. (Vegan cooking uses no animal products including dairy, eggs, or fish.) For the more traditional guests, there was always a breakfast buffet with granola, muesli, cereals, fresh fruit, toast, and more.

Lunch and dinner meals were varied and quite delicious, with some exceptionally tasty desserts. There were several courses at each meal, all beautifully presented and quite filling. Folks could also order any item from Costa’s regular menu, and many did. Guests who stuck closely to the macrobiotic foods were surprised to notice some digestive improvements after only a few days.

One memorable dinner featured corn cakes over pesto. We could not imagine how vegan pesto (no cheese) could be so delicious. At the end of each dinner, the head chef usually came out to talk with guests. My husband asked about the pesto. The chef’s recipe consisted of half basil-half parsley, and in place of cheese, he substituted Umeboshi Plum (very salty pickled plum puree). We look forward to trying it ourselves.

At each meal, we enjoyed meeting different people with varied backgrounds and experiences. On two successive evenings, we sat with two different couples and were amazed to hear each of the wives describe nearly identical experiences. Both women suffered from painful arthritic hands so swollen they could barely hold onto a steering wheel, and each had made a remarkable recovery after a few months on the macrobiotic diet. They also both admitted that their symptoms returned when they strayed from the diet for too long. It was very inspiring to hear people’s real-life experiences.
My husband and I were among the neophytes. Although I had a rudimentary understanding of macrobiotics, I always associated it with Japanese foods and flavors, mostly due to its association with the Kushi Institute in Massachusetts. Founder Michio Kushi has helped thousands of individuals recover from serious illnesses and degenerative conditions by teaching them about the health-restoring benefits of brown rice, fermented soy foods like miso and tempeh, vitamin- and mineral-rich green leafy vegetables such as kale, cabbages, broccoli, and sea vegetables, and low-caffeine twig tea. The Kushi Institute has mentored numerous followers from all areas of the country, who are now recognized instructors themselves, several of whom presented classes or workshops on the cruise.

Japanese cuisine is gaining popularity in this country, but a strict macrobiotic diet of brown rice, miso soup, kale, broccoli, adzuki beans, and onions might be too restrictive for some individuals to adhere to faithfully. I thought, surely, other regions of the world must have equally health-giving foods and expressed this to one of the macrobiotic instructors, Denny Waxman, who teaches classes in his hometown of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and in New York City (www.dennywaxman.com). He assured me this was absolutely true. Most cultures have their own indigenous whole grains, beans, and life-giving green vegetables, or comparable foods. This was very validating, and I asked if he ever considered writing about multicultural macrobiotics. He responded that this project was already underway with chapters sitting all over his house waiting to be put together for publication. I told him I could hardly wait to read this new book (after which I'll submit a review for Townsend Letter).

Iceberg Lettuce Gets Some Respect

After going through the lunch buffet one day, I commented to the guest next to me how ironic it was to see iceberg lettuce alongside the brown rice, since I had long ago ascribed iceberg lettuce to the status of low or no nutrition. The other guest said this was the second time she heard that comment. She was a macrobiotic practitioner and gently explained that iceberg lettuce is a cooling food, and since inflammation is so rampant in our culture, it is often recommended in macrobiotic diets. Now that I have a new respect for iceberg lettuce, I might even serve it on some very hot summer days.

Classes and Survivors Panel

Early risers could participate in yoga, Pilates, Qigong, self-massage, meditation, or run-walk-stretch exercises. Cooking classes included Macrobiotics, Healthy Sandwiches, Strong Bones, Vegan, Seasonal Foods, Cookies, and more. Attendees were rewarded with tasty samples at the end of each demonstration.

Classes in weight loss, natural vision improvement, relaxation, healthy bones, breathing, posture, healthy skin,
Health Cruise – 2008

> hypnosis and healing, sleep, herbs and weeds, anti-aging, natural pet care, swing golf, swing dancing, and much more filled each day. Private consultations and treatments were available as well. There were so many wonderful selections, it was impossible to attend them all.

One of the most memorable presentations was the Recovery Panel discussion by ten individuals, from differing backgrounds and different parts of the country, who had survived against all odds, using the macrobiotic diet to recover from very serious illnesses. Their stories were unique, touching, sometimes humorous, and always impressive. Outside the panel discussion, these individuals graciously made themselves available to talk with other guests and answer questions.

Entertainment

It wasn’t all work and no play. There was a variety of music and dancing on the ship throughout the day and evening, plus island stops in San Juan (Puerto Rico), St. Maarten, Tortola (British Virgin Islands), and Grand Turk. Snorkeling, diving, fishing, sailing, swimming in pristine tropical beaches were available for the adventurersome. Island touring and shopping were favorites of the less adventuresome.

The health group enjoyed a special vegan pizza party, vegan ice cream social, a well-attended talent show, and farewell disco party. It was truly a wonderful learning experience: a great way to vacation, visit beautiful places, and, most importantly, eat delicious nutritious food and return rejuvenated, inspired, and healthier.

Speakers

I was able to interview the major keynote speakers, Sherry Rogers, MD, internationally known environmental illness expert, author of numerous health books and

the widely read newsletter Total Wellness (www.prestigepublishing.com, 800-846-6687), and Neal Barnard, MD, founder of Physician’s Committee for Responsible Medicine (www.pcrm.org), a very active and successful pro-consumer organization. These two outstanding individuals are doing everything they possibly can to improve the lives and health of all Americans. My next column will cover these interviews.

Plans are already underway for the 2009 Holistic Holiday at Sea, scheduled for March 1 through March 8, 2008. One keynote speaker will be T. Colin Campbell, PhD, author of The China Study, The Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted. The author grew up on a dairy farm in Pennsylvania, decided to study nutrition to help improve the lives of third-world populations, and later became a vegetarian, then a vegan, eschewing all dairy products. I recently read his book and must say it is a real eye-opener. To learn more about healthy cruising for 2009, readers can check www.atasteofhealth.org.

Rose Marie Williams, MA
156 Sparkling Ridge Road, New Paltz, NY 12561
845-255-0836
jwill52739@aol.com