

Aging happens: A meal can be about so much more than just food

By Ellen Waldman

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What's for lunch?

Here are two true comments. They are just so typical of what I hear from time to time, and I thoroughly enjoy them.

Sylvia liked to go out for lunch. She lived in assisted living in Ashland and had a care provider who took her out for meals a few times a week. They frequented different local restaurants so she could enjoy a variety of food choices. She placed her order for an item that she had not tried in past.

Here's what she said when she finished her meal: "The food is really bad, and they don't give you enough of it."

So, did she want a lot more bad food, I wondered? Another time, she experimented with fettucine Alfredo, something she had not tasted before. Her response to this meal was, "I really loved this. I'll never order it again." Now, aren't these great stories?

Eating lunch serves many purposes for aging adults. It's more than food; it's almost an event, and it's often a time for some real socialization. For many, especially women, their days of cooking are behind them, often by choice. After 40-plus years of making two or more meals a day, not everyone wants to keep cooking, if they have an option.

Enter the realm of what's next. If you live in Ashland, you might consider a visit to the Ashland Senior Center at lunchtime. Now wait, you might think this is for "really old" people, or those who can't afford to buy lunch elsewhere. But I met with Christine (Chris) Dodson, senior program director (1699 Homes Ave.; ashlandseniorcenter.org; 541-488-5342), and this program is not what you might think. On an average day, there are 32 people coming in to eat lunch, and 35 more are getting a hot, home-delivered meal. The average age is mid- 70s for those attending these meals, and there are currently four men in their 90's as well.

Here are some other statistics you might find surprising. In one year, (June 2013-July 2014), the center served 7,453 meals on site to 322 different clients. There were 8,720 home delivered meals to 57 individuals. This is all managed by a crew of about 44 volunteers, each month. That's a lot of people benefiting from and serving these programs.

Let's talk about the Food and Friends program first. This is the organization that oversees the onsite meals. They operate under the Rogue Valley Council of Governments Senior and Disability Services. For a modest donation of \$2.75 or more (or whatever is affordable), a person 60 and older can share a hot nutritious meal with many others. The food is cooked in a kitchen in Medford, except for the veggies. To have them crispy and fresh daily, they are steamed on site.

Being able to socialize is so important for everyone. Too often, people just stop eating well after the loss of a spouse or some other change in circumstance. Skipping meals can lead to a cascade of problematic

health events. Being lonely is considered a health risk, so once a day at minimum, these people have others to talk with, get support from, and also enjoy a healthy meal. You know, when a meal shows up in front of you, you tend to eat it.

The Meals on Wheels program addresses those who are homebound, either temporarily or ongoing. These deliveries mean so much more than food. For some, this might be one of the only contacts they have with others in a day. They also have a food box program that brings other items to homebound people. It's coordinated with the Food Bank in Ashland, and a box with items such as green tea, dried fruit, nuts and other food products, gets delivered to the home.

Food and Friends is happy to answer your questions and is always looking for those who want to volunteer, either on site or as drivers. Call: 541-734-9505 for more information. Chris Dodson can also help you out, if you call the Ashland Senior Center at the number above.

The next time you're thinking about where to eat a meal with others, be daring and try the Ashland Senior Center. And if you know someone who needs a hot meal, or a place to socialize, please refer them to Chris. She knows everything there is to know about this program.