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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Big Easy Does It

CrossFit trainers everywhere struggle to keep members eating healthy during the season of ubiquitous treats and festivities galore. For coaches in New Orleans, it's nearly impossible.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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Chris Graythen/Getty Images

*"This is a Caribbean city, an exuberant, semi-tropical city, perhaps the most hedonistic city in the United States. You see more orgies (and more nuns) in New Orleans than anywhere else in the nation." —R.W. Apple, former *New York Times* associate editor, in his 2002 book *Apple's America**

It's difficult for Tiffany Kasunich to articulate what it's like living in New Orleans, La.

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"I can't even," she said, prematurely ending her sentence to start a new one.

"It's just unbelievable. Sometimes it's hard to put into words for people who have never been here—just the fried food, the portion sizes. The excessive alcohol that's available down here is just mind-blowing."

If it's not deep fried, it's coated in butter and salt. Sometimes it's both. And when it comes to booze, you're free to walk around the city with your poison of choice. Hell, there are even drive-thru daiquiri stands.

All the more reason, Kasunich said, to educate members of newly affiliated 4th Quarter CrossFit about nutrition. And not just that, but also to keep them from the influence of the world's most notoriously decadent city during the season of encouraged overindulgence.

"The holiday parties out here are so excessive. It's almost impossible not to go to one every weekend," noted Kasunich, business development director at Velocity

Sports Performance, which houses 4th Quarter CrossFit in Mid-City New Orleans. She moved to New Orleans from New Jersey in October.

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Affiliates the world over are fighting the same battle—trying to keep members away from the seductive temptations of pumpkin pie and brandied egg nog. But in a place like New Orleans, it's less a battle and more a war.



ROBYN BECK/AFP/Getty Images

*Beignets are a delicious companion to a bender, but they're far from fuel for elite performance.*



Louisiana was the most obese state in the country in 2012, with 34.7 percent of its adults falling into that category, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Colorado was at the opposite end of that list; only 20.5 percent of its adult residents are obese. In the New Orleans metro area, 32.6 percent of adults were obese in 2010, according to the most-recent CDC data available for America's metro areas.

### A Diet Named Desire

At 4th Quarter CrossFit, which affiliated in early December, members will have a certified sports-performance nutritionist and a registered dietician on staff. To speak to the general population simply looking to become fitter, Kasunich takes to social media.

In the days leading up to Thanksgiving, she posted tips on Facebook and Twitter: "After your meal, go for a brisk 30-minute walk. The cool air and physical activity will refresh you." And, "If you wear a fitted outfit—make sure it has a zipper or buttons—your waistband will instantly remind you when you've had enough."

At CrossFit NOLA, which sits near the banks of the Mississippi River in New Orleans, nutrition is discussed weekly.

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**—Jeff Germond**

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As a way to break the ice during fundamentals classes for beginners, coaches ask athletes what they ate for breakfast, taking the opportunity to suggest eggs instead of beignets, for example, said affiliate owner Jeff Germond, who is originally from Michigan.

About 5 miles east, also along the windy Mississippi, Big Easy CrossFit takes a similar approach during its on-ramp classes.

"We lay it out: 'OK, guys, what did you guys have for breakfast today?'" owner Zack DiBenedetto said. "If they had a bowl of cereal, we say that's a big no-no."

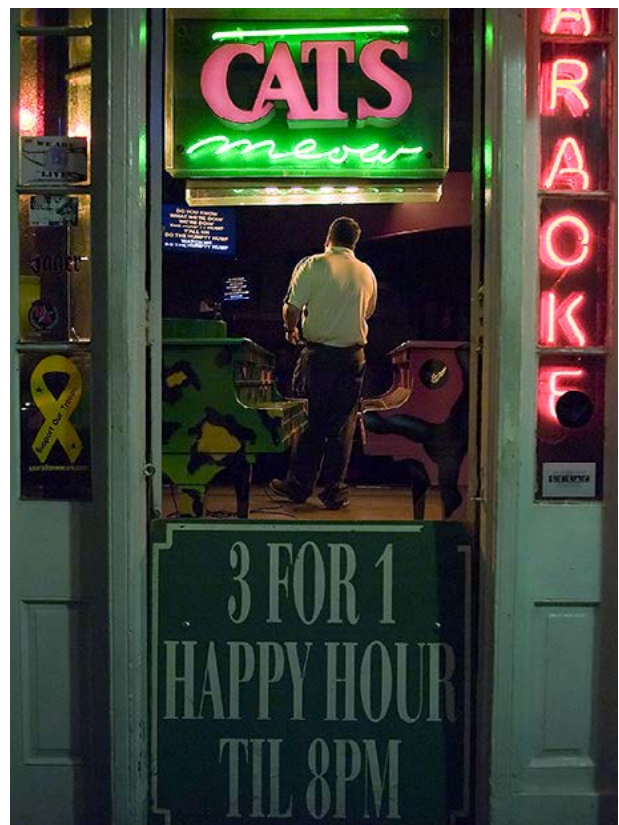
CrossFit NOLA also encourages members to participate in a nutrition challenge from September through November, and then again in January through March.

"It gives people ... bookends," Germond said, referencing the month of December.

"We know people aren't going to be perfect over the holidays in New Orleans, where drinking nights are five to seven nights a week. We're fighting an uphill battle, for sure."

The box also offers a class on Thanksgiving Day and on Christmas Day "to give people a chance to come in and work out if they're going to be eating food they shouldn't be eating," Germond added.

DiBenedetto, meanwhile, recommends small changes to his members' eating plans.



JIM WATSON/AFP/Getty Images

*"Three-for-one drinks? Maybe we'll just stop in for a minute."*



***Bigger is not always better, especially when talking about bottles of beer and fitness.***

"Too much too quick gets too overwhelming and then you back out and don't go through with it," he said.

To keep athletes on the nutrition wagon this holiday season, Supra CrossFit owner Jonas Deffes has challenged those who are interested to simply not gain any weight in December.

"They have to take pictures of everything they eat," he said. And then they must post those photos in a Facebook group.

"It's good because it's short. It's not overbearing. It's not like we're doing a 12-week nutrition program. Usually when they see, 'Oh, it's gonna be like three weeks or four weeks of eating clean,' it's doable in their eyes," Deffes said.

And, he noted, the photos are a reality check.

"It brings a little self-awareness of what they're putting in their mouth," said Deffes, who opened his affiliate this month after about six years of doing CrossFit at other area affiliates.

For members headed to holiday potluck parties, Deffes is ready with Paleo-compliant recipes that are healthy, "actually taste good" and won't make them "feel awkward."

"It tastes better than stupid canned yam with marshmallows on it," he joked.

**Beer Before Liquor Just Makes You Sicker**

Because of the city's ingrained drinking culture, much of the nutrition discussion at New Orleans CrossFit affiliates this holiday season centers on booze.

"New Orleans is a huge drinking town. Drinking and the parties are a big deal down here, and that's a big feat for our members (to overcome)," Kasunich said.

"(Most people are) not informed on what alcohol does to the body in terms of fitness. We definitely try to touch on that because we have such a large group of people who are indulging in the alcoholic beverages on the weekend."

So much so that classes thin out as members choose local libations from Abita Brewing Co. over burpees.

"Friday night in the gym is dead," DiBenedetto said.

He noted: "People like to booze up a lot."

Same goes at CrossFit NOLA.

"We occasionally have days where Wednesday's class is 12 to 13 (people) and Thursday is, like, two," Germond said.

He added: "A lot of people work in bars and restaurants, so weekends are real busy (for them)."

The city's booming tourism industry has some spots open until 3 or 4 a.m. or later. CrossFit NOLA members who work at such establishments have been known to have a drink after work and end up staying awake until 5 or 6 a.m.

And when athletes are off celebrating at holiday parties or at one of the city's myriad music or culture festivals, he advised "making better choices."

"Instead of beer," DiBenedetto said, "stick to vodka or tequila."



### About the Author

*Andréa Maria Cecil is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and editor.*

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"And that's what their weekend cycle looks like," Germond said. "Basically, any physical activity doesn't get done during the weekend. The Saturday class doesn't necessarily work for them because they haven't gone to bed yet."

Talking nutrition in Deffes' hometown is difficult at best.

"In New Orleans, there's something going on every weekend. If it's not Mardi Gras, there's FoodFest, there's Jazz Fest," he said.

Indeed, changing a culture is no easy task.

That's why DiBenedetto, also a New Orleans native, said his approach is more relaxed.

"If it makes you feel more human to go out and have a beer one night a week or two nights a week, that's OK," he said.

Members just need to remember how to eat, DiBenedetto stressed.

"Make sure you have your macronutrients first," he said.