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THE
CrossFit JOURNAL

CROSSFIT CULINARY NINJA: BEYOND A BLAND BOWL OF BROCCOLI

BY EMILY BEERS

Chef Nick Massie teaches athletes how to mix their macros for delicious fare that supports a healthy lifestyle.



Head ninja Nick Massie is trying to get CrossFit athletes out of the “macro rut” with delicious recipes and food combinations.

Phillip Gomez used to suffer from mageirocophobia—the fear of cooking.

“I thought cooking was hard. I didn’t know how to cook, so it seemed like a waste of money because I figured I’d mess it up,” said Gomez, a police officer and coach at Turn 2 CrossFit in Murrieta, California.

“It was scary and unknown. I didn’t even have time to think about making anything in the kitchen, never mind prepping large portions for the week. So I didn’t do it. I didn’t want to have any part of it.”

Gomez also avoided cooking because healthy foods—which he tried to eat—just didn’t taste that good. He knew food was essential for survival, health and athletic performance, but eating didn’t excite him, he explained.

That changed when he and wife Michelle Gomez took CrossFit’s inaugural **Culinary Ninja Specialty Course** in April 2016 at CrossFit Del Mar in San Diego, California.

Macros, Unite!

Chef Nick Massie, with more than 20 years of experience, is the Culinary Ninja instructor. He said Gomez is typical of many CrossFit athletes he meets.

“A lot of CrossFit (athletes) aren’t interested in cooking. And they don’t think eating healthy tastes good,” said Massie, the man behind **PaleoNick.com** and the owner of **Ice Age Meals**.

Because mealtime has become boring, food prepping and cooking feel like a time-sucking nuisance, he added.

Given the importance of nutrition to good health and performance—two things CrossFit athletes care a great deal about—food prep and cooking should never be afterthoughts, Massie explained.

“Their priorities are skewed in that nutrition is the foundation. But how much effort are (CrossFit athletes) putting into the kitchen compared to the gym? There’s a huge disconnect,” Massie said.

The biggest reason for kitchen laziness? The “macro rut”: Athletes focus on getting the right amount of macronutrients but don’t bother to combine the foods, nor do they take the time to make their meals taste good, Massie said.

“Their food is bland and boring. I compare it to functional movements versus isolation movements. They’ll make rice and

chicken and broccoli and keep their macros all separate and isolated. Food is more exciting and tastes better when you combine them all into one dish in the form of something like chili, lasagna or fajita pie.”

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—Nick Massie

Massie said he thinks many athletes also avoid the kitchen because they assume cooking takes up too much of their precious training time.

“They just need to learn how to be more efficient with their food prep,” he said.

In creating his culinary ninjas, Massie is determined to teach CrossFit athletes and coaches how to be more efficient in the kitchen, get them out of the macro rut, and show them that healthy eating can taste good.

What Ninjas Know

Massie’s one-day seminar is part hands-on cooking course and part nutrition-theory course—based on Dr. Barry Sears’ **Zone Diet**.

The theory side of the course teaches attendees about nutrition math, such as calories-to-grams conversions, Zone-block measurement and macronutrient percentage calculations. The practical side of the course has novice ninjas cooking various meals. Massie also introduces cooking concepts such as seasoning, salting, toasting spices and using herbs, as well as efficiency tips including batch cooking and crock potting.

“Crock potting allows you to cook overnight. Things are getting done in the kitchen while you’re sleeping. That resonated with people at the course,” Massie said.

The idea of making healthy food taste good also piqued the interest of attendees, he added.



Just like other CrossFit courses, the Culinary Ninja seminar includes lots of hands-on work.

“We talk(ed) about basic things like salting meats properly, about using heat instead of sweet, like using jalapeños instead of sugar, or putting sriracha on chicken instead of ketchup.”

To emphasize the point that healthy can be tasty, Massie made **mayonnaise** in front of the group to show them it doesn't have to be littered with sugar. His mayo combines olive oil with lemon juice, mustard, egg yolk, garlic and some spices.

“I did a mayo demonstration for a 120-block chicken salad, and I added chicken, grapes, celery, honey and toasted pecans. The mayo gave us our fat, and that became our lunch,” he said.

In keeping with CrossFit philosophy, the course is very hands on: Ninjas made meals themselves and left with 16 different three-block dishes, including chili and lasagna.

“They made four gallons of chili. And we used the same meat sauce in the chili as the lasagna,” Massie said. “This showed (attendees) they can make more than one meal at a time, and they can turn a simple meat sauce into a variety of different dinners that all taste completely different. It opened their eyes to being more efficient.”

From kitchen efficiency to knife skills, Massie said the concepts he teaches are simple but effective. Most importantly, they're practical, he added.

“(CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg) Glassman is big on practical application. You can go to a nutrition class anywhere and listen to the science all day long, but if it doesn't translate to make your life better, then what's the point?” Massie asked.

“I want people to take what they learn here and use it every day.”

Nutrition Is the Foundation

Cynthia Martinez was another attendee at the first Culinary Ninja course.

Unlike Gomez—whose fear of cooking caused him to avoid it altogether—Gomez has always enjoyed spending time in the kitchen preparing healthy food.

Her focus on quality nutrition became even more important to her last year when she suffered a major heart attack.

“I didn't know I had heart disease. I don't remember the event because my heart stopped for 40 minutes,” said Martinez, now 43, who was revived by a paramedic in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

With a renewed desire to stay healthy through proper nutrition—and to help those around her use food to fuel good health—Martinez enrolled in the course. Her plan was to acquire more cooking and nutrition knowledge, which she could then pass on to the athletes at her affiliate, CrossFit Point A in San Marcos, California.

“A lot of times people come into our gym and they want us to give them the whole package of coaching. They want to work out and be physically fit, but they also want a nutrition plan,” Martinez said.

“Other culinary classes are often just about making food that tastes good and not necessarily food that helps you in the gym.”
—Cynthia Martinez

She knew there were many options for culinary and nutrition courses, but she wanted one dedicated to teaching the nutritional concepts she believed in. Taking a course at a local culinary school wouldn't have given her the same confidence, she explained.

“Other culinary classes are often just about making food that tastes good and not necessarily food that helps you in the gym,” Gomez said. “This particular way of eating that Massie teaches helps fuel performance.”

Since taking the course, Martinez said she has become better at delivering nutrition, cooking and recipe advice to her athletes.

“We're now implementing (Massie's methods) to new members who come in. We have different options for them on the nutritional side and ways to help them meet their goals,” she said.

The Massie Effect

Today, Gomez is no longer afraid of the kitchen and he no longer shies away from helping his wife with dinner. The days of unseasoned, uninspired meat and vegetables sitting apart from each other on the plate are over.

In recent weeks, Gomez has been cooking and trying new recipes with his wife, all the while sticking to Zone Diet principles, which

Gomez said makes him feel healthier.

“I’m not afraid of carbs any more. I used to think carbs were the enemy. And I’ve added more fat to my diet, too,” Gomez said. “I always thought, ‘Why can’t I get any stronger?’ I’m a small-framed guy and I was stuck at this particular size and weight. Now I know I wasn’t eating enough carbs and fat. I can see the difference in my body already.”

On top of it all, cooking isn’t nearly as hard as he thought it would be.

“Nick showed us how easy it is to make mayo. I always used to switch to mustard because I thought it was healthier, but now I see how easy it is to make my own, and I don’t have to feel guilty about eating mayo,” said Gomez, who has made Massie’s mayo a handful of times since the course.

All this has added up to a more enjoyable, tastier life, Gomez explained.

“I had been in this rut for so long. Now I’m actually enjoying food again.”

For more information and a list of upcoming CrossFit Culinary Ninja courses, visit [Training.CrossFit.com](https://www.trainingcrossfit.com). ■

About the Author: Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at [CrossFit Vancouver](https://www.crossfitvancouver.com). She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.

