CROSSFIT CULINARY NINJA: BEYOND A BLAND BOWL OF BROCCOLI

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

BY EMILY BEERS
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.

“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.
“We talked 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.

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

“We other culinary classes are often just about making food that tastes good and not necessarily food that helps you in the gym.”

—Cynthia Martinez
Gomez said makes him feel healthier.

“Wm 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.

**About the Author:** Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at CrossFit Vancouver. She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.