

# Food is Medicine

An Interview with Dr. David Eisenberg

*As part of its Live Well commitment, 1440 Multiversity enjoys an active strategic partnership with the Teaching Kitchen Collaborative – launched by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health’s Department of Nutrition, The Culinary Institute of America, and Dr. David Eisenberg, the director of culinary nutrition at Harvard. The principle teachings within this partnership have allowed 1440 Multiversity to implement industry-leading philosophies and best practices into its culinary work. Dr. Eisenberg recently spoke with 1440 Multiversity about his path to developing this critical work.*

**1440: How have you come to be so passionate and involved in supporting teaching kitchens?**

**Dr. David Eisenberg:** On paper, I’m a Harvard-trained doctor, board-certified internal medicine. I practiced primary care for about 20 years, and I’ve been a clinical teacher and researcher on the faculty at Harvard since 1984. That’s my conventional resume. Also, I am the son and grandson of Jewish bakers from Brooklyn. As a child, I spent almost every weekend learning to cook and bake at my father’s side.

The power of making delicious food for others is something that I learned so early on that it has been a part of everything I’ve done. Sadly, when I was 10, my father died suddenly of a heart attack. He died six weeks after his mother and my mother’s mother, all of unrelated diseases. And about a year later, my other living grandfather died. My mother was left with four children, ranging in age from one to 13. I was the second, age 10. And it was horrible.

**1440: That is tragic. Based on how well you have done, I gather your mother managed okay?**

**Dr. Eisenberg:** I’m happy to say that we recently celebrated her 90th birthday. And from being the girl who pumped gas in Brooklyn and met my father delivering challahs, to being a widow at age 37, she became a federal judge and only retired five years ago.

**1440: That’s outstanding. And what about the effects on you, of your father’s death?**

**Dr. Eisenberg:** As a result of that tragic time, I wanted to study medicine because I couldn’t understand what had happened. I was accepted to Harvard College during my senior year in high school, in the early ’70s. At that time, the first reports of Chinese medicine, particularly acupuncture, came to the West. I saw the iconic front-page *New York Times* article by their op-ed editor in chief, James Reston, who was tracking Henry Kissinger in Beijing. In trying to figure out what Kissinger was doing in Beijing, Reston developed acute appendicitis. He was operated on by Chinese surgeons at the medical school which was built by John D. Rockefeller, where the doctors had all learned medicine in English from Ivy League physicians in the ’40s. After his operation, Reston had abdominal pain, and they brought in an acupuncturist to treat the pain. He wrote about a thin needle being placed in his knee and his pain evaporating.

As a high school senior who wanted to be premed, I thought that was about the coolest thing I had ever read. So, when I entered Harvard College in 1972, I asked to do an independent study on acupuncture.

**1440: Back in 1972, you asked to do a study on acupuncture?**

**Dr. Eisenberg:** Yeah. And they said, “Knock yourself out.” But there was nothing in English in the more than 100 libraries at Harvard College that had anything to do with acupuncture and surgery. Nobody in the West knew what it was. I found one book that had been translated in the early ’40s called *The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine*.

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1440 TEACHING KITCHEN & JOANIE'S GARDEN



**1440: There must have been some interest somehow in the '40s, then, in what are often now referred to as complementary approaches.**

**Dr. Eisenberg:** Yes, there was. In the first few chapters of that book—and I think this is relevant to

1440's destiny—there are two main points that really stopped me in my tracks. The first was that prevention is always superior to intervention. And the second epiphany, to me at least, was that how we eat and move and think—which they described as controlling our spirits, or our emotions—impacts our health and gives us our recuperative capacity.

**1440: Is it challenging to prove the efficacy of preventative medicine, since the disease never manifests?**

**Dr. Eisenberg:** That's the point of our research conferences. We will show what we're preventing. Back in 1971, the concept of prevention was nowhere to be found in the premedical curriculum or in medical school. When I went to Harvard Medical School, nobody was studying the impact of what we ate, how we moved, or how our mind-body connection impacted our

physiology or our health. So, I decided to learn Chinese and go to China. I became the first person to document in *The New England Journal of Medicine* the frequency with which Americans were using all these therapies. That catapulted my career and helped me do some of the early research on acupuncture, herbal medicine, massage, and mind-body work.

I was the recipient of the first large National Institutes of Health grant to build a center of excellence at Harvard looking at complementary, alternative, and integrative medicine. Most of my career was spent there doing research, training people who now head up complementary, integrative medicine, and mind-body programs around the country and around the world.

Now, remember, I'm a baker's son. So, in 1998, I approached the top cooking school in the United States, the Culinary Institute of America, and I said to them, "It's been my observation that nobody in medicine, meaning doctors, knows anything about nutrition. And even fewer people know anything about cooking or shopping for food and making delicious, healthy food." And, I said, "I would like to teach my colleagues about nutrition, shopping, and cooking as well as lifestyle."

And they said, "That's great because we want to teach our chefs about nutrition. They don't understand the science."

We shook hands, myself and the head of the nutrition department, Professor Walter Willett, and we launched a conference called Healthy Kitchens, Healthy Lives, which has been given 15 times since 2006, always sold out.

That's where I met Kenny Woods, executive chef at 1440, and he introduced me to Joanie and Scott Kriens, the cocreators of 1440 Multiversity.

**1440: Tell us about Healthy Kitchens, Healthy Lives.**

**Dr. Eisenberg:** Healthy Kitchens, Healthy Lives is presented to 400 people a year at the conference center of the Culinary Institute in Napa, California, where participants learn the science behind what they should be eating more of or less of and why. We teach how to translate the science into healthy, delicious, and sustainable recipes, the kind of food Chef Kenny makes at 1440. Then we talk about mindfulness and its role in eating, cooking, enjoying food, and living. We talk about exercise and about strategies to change behavior when you're stuck. Over the course of three days, the registrants taste 325 different dishes

Ever since I began this conference, I started with an imaginary future saying, "Someday we should build kitchens as teaching kitchens in hospitals to teach people a different relationship to food and optimal lifestyle." Then, in 2012, I started an experiment. We condensed this into a curriculum, and we went to the main campus of the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York, and we offered the curriculum as an experiment to employees of the CIA who were not the chefs.

By the end of 16 weeks, they could cook anything. They went from afraid to hold a knife to a choreographed ballet in the kitchen. We proved that people would do this, that they loved it, and the ones who were fat lost weight; the ones that were hypertensive, their blood pressure came down; the ones that had high cholesterol, their cholesterol came down. They started eating healthier food, moving more, and being more mindful.

**1440: The results are incredible.**

**Dr. Eisenberg:** Yes, and while that experiment was going on, at the annual conference of Healthy Kitchens, Healthy Lives I asked, "By the way, for those of you who have come back, do any of you have a teaching kitchen in your hospital?" One hundred hands went up. It wasn't 100 different hospitals, but it was 30 or 40. And I realized, "The movement has begun. And it's never going to stop." So, I became the director of the

Teaching Kitchen Collaborative, where I could cherry-pick the organizations with teaching kitchens where they were teaching people to eat, cook, move, and think better about their choices.

The goal of the Teaching Kitchen Collaborative has been to share our best practices. Over the last two years we have met, we have created best practices, and we are ready to do our first multi-site demonstration project to show that this would work in three different cities, three different kitchens, with three different teaching ensembles. We hope to prove that it's replicable, scalable, and impactful.

We want to show it can change people's behaviors and change their biomarkers—their weight, their blood pressure, their blood sugar; change their clinical outcomes—are they no longer diabetic or poorly controlled diabetic? Are they no longer hypertensive? And from the data we could predict enormous cost savings, regardless of who their third-party payer is.

That's the ultimate goal. Because if we could show that it saves money, then they will be covered by third-party insurers. Once we do that, it's a hop, skip, and a jump to make the argument that ultimately the target is children to prevent these problems in the first place. And, we'll start building teaching kitchens in schools and colleges and universities.

The Teaching Kitchen Research Conference is where we can showcase not only what we're thinking of doing but also the actual results from 20, 30, and 40 teaching kitchens across the United States and around the world.

**1440: This conference is also sponsored in part by the National Institutes of Health, how is that significant?**

**Dr. Eisenberg:** A year ago I applied to the National Institutes of Health for a grant to support our scientific research meeting. They awarded us a grant which pays for a portion of the costs. So, this conference is co-sponsored, if you will, by the National Institutes of Health, which validates the importance of figuring out: what's the science of teaching kitchens, and what kind of novel contributions can they make to the medical, public health, and scientific communities.

1440 is the hosting site for world-class scientists, public health experts, physicians, and thought leaders in the health and sustainability world to come together and share their research. I personally can't think of a more appropriate site for such a conference. ■