

FIRST PERSON

## ROAD TRIP!



ILLUSTRATION BY DREW SHANNON

We finally had the time to explore those wineries, but did we really have the money? **Virginia Foley** and her husband chose to seize the day

My husband and I had just finished packing the car with the last few bits of this and that, making sure our cooler and a bag of snacks were within reach, before starting out on our cross-country trek. We were methodical in our organization so that when we were ready to call it quits for the day, our luggage would be easy to grab-and-go. We'd left one empty space in the back seat, reserved for our littlest traveller. This is where our 15-pound mutt would be spending the next five weeks.

This was not an adventure we thought we'd be taking at this stage in our life. While we'd dreamily talked about doing a winery-hopping road trip, we thought it would be after retirement. But the economy had taken a nosedive and my husband found himself out of work, with no hope of future employment in the small town where we'd lived for 10 years. So here we were, fiftysomethings with a house to sell and a future to redesign.

For the most part we stayed positive, at times even adopting a devil-may-care attitude, though deep down we knew the seriousness of our plight. But one day, my unshaven, coffee-cup-holding husband slammed down the lid of his laptop, his constant companion in his non-stop job search, and declared: "The three of us are hitting the road!" Within a few weeks we were crammed into our leased SUV and pointed west.

I was worried. Should we be spending money at this time? Would people think we'd lost our marbles, along with the job? What if he was called for an interview while we were on the road? But my husband was adamant that this was the best time to pursue the dream. It was also the first time in weeks that I'd seen him excited, a man with a mission. Maybe he was right.

Our plan was to visit as many family-run, pet-friendly wineries as we could while criss-crossing 14 states with a foray into the Okanagan region of British Columbia. We had a list of wineries we'd wanted to visit and decided that each night we'd individually blog about our day and then compare notes. Our self-imposed production and deadlines would (almost) feel like work. We even talked about collating our blogs at the end of our travels and publishing a book. So with a grand sense of purpose we took to the wide-open roads.

Our first stop was an unexpected one. Wisconsin – land of cheese, beer and Green Bay Packers-mania – wasn't exactly where we'd expected to find a winery. But, through pounding rain and fog, a wooden sign post appeared, pointing us to a terraced landscape of naked vines: Botham Winery. We clambered out of the car and across the empty parking lot. Bounding into their tasting room we shook ourselves off like wet dogs while the owners welcomed us warmly.

Over a glass of wine at their tasting bar, we gazed out through a window and onto their rain-soaked

patio, where empty picnic tables, plastic umbrellas and bare trellises lay in wait for the hum of guests. I could easily imagine the warmer months, when visitors gather for wine and conversation. I could smell the pungent air, ripe with the autumn crush. There were better days to come.

And so we continued on our journey, discovering vineyards in the most desolate of places, meeting passionate wine makers, more than happy to share their stories and in some instances their homes for the night. And though my partner of 15 years and I thought we knew each other well, there was just so much more to discover spending 42 straight days together. Turned out we liked each other a whole lot more.

In five weeks, we covered a lot of land. We drove across flat, dusty prairies and climbed winding snow-covered mountain roads. Red-rock formations gave way to mesas that rose commandingly from desert floors. We marvelled at giant saguaro cactuses and tumbleweed that sashayed along dusty roads. Valleys chock full of tiered vineyards captured the sun's rays. We splashed in the Pacific Ocean in California and skipped along the foggy, wet sands of Oregon. One day in Wyoming, our pup, who spent most days quiet and cozy in his backseat bed, suddenly climbed into the front of the car, trembling, whining, in retrospect trying to warn us that we were about to slam headlong into the worst snowstorm through which either of us had ever driven.

Wind and rain and snow, sunshine, warm breezes and twinkling starlight, we saw the country in all its natural splendor. We saw the good, the bad and the ugly and spent equal amounts of time in exultation and reflection. we saw the country in all its natural splendor. We saw the good, the bad and the ugly and spent equal amounts of time in exultation and reflection. It gave us a lot to write about. Even though we saw the same places together and often tasted the same wines, when we sat down at our laptops each night, our words flowed in different directions. My partner was much more technical in his descriptions, explaining techniques and complexities of the wine-making process. My writings were more evocative: what I saw, what I heard, how it felt. It was fun each night, to trade laptops and read about each other's days, even though we'd spent them completely together. I saw the world through his eyes and he through mine.

He's back in the workaday world again after a nine-month hiatus. There were many times when we wondered whether unemployment might be a permanent condition but as with the empty winery and stark vineyards at the first stop on our trek, our world now flourishes with possibilities for the future.

We often drink a toast to life, to all her winding roads and detours and her lush, sun-baked valleys and majestic mountains. They are all worth visiting.

Virginia Foley lives near Windsor, Ont.

First Person is a daily personal piece submitted by readers

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## Six cooking habits that hurt your diet

LESLIE BECK

OPINION



If your goal is to eat a healthier diet – one that's packed with nutrient- and antioxidant-rich whole foods – consider adding more home-cooked meals to your menu.

Research has found that people who frequently eat home-cooked meals have a higher intake of fruit and vegetables, healthier cholesterol and blood sugar levels and a lower risk of being overweight. Depending on how you cook and prep your foods, though, you may be unknowingly undermining your diet.

Certain cooking habits can deplete the nutritional value of your favourite meals and others may even jeopardize your health.

If the following kitchen habits are part of your routine, it's time to break them.

## RINSING CHICKEN BEFORE COOKING

Washing raw meat or poultry won't make it clean or free of bacteria. Doing so can actually increase the risk of food poisoning by scattering bacteria to the sink, the countertop and other ready-to-eat foods.

The only way to kill bacteria that may be present on the surface of raw meat is by cooking to proper temperatures. If you want to remove some of the juices, pat meat dry with a paper towel.

## HEATING OIL UNTIL IT SMOKES

If you see wisps of smoke rising from the skillet, you've overheated your cooking oil. Heating an oil past its smoke point – the temperature at which it starts to burn and smoke – does more than impart a burnt flavour to your food.

When oils are overheated, beneficial nutrients and phytochemicals are lost and harmful free radicals are formed.

Your cooking oil is hot when its surface glistens and shimmers or it flows smoothly like water in the pan.

## NOT LETTING CHOPPED GARLIC SIT

Sulphur compounds in garlic are thought to reduce the risk of certain cancers by preventing damage to DNA in cells. But if after chopping or crushing garlic, you add it immediately to the sauté pan, you're not getting all of its beneficial phytochemicals.

An enzyme in raw garlic that's needed to generate its anti-cancer compounds is inactivated by heat. Research has found that letting chopped garlic stand for 10 minutes before cooking preserves its protective effect against DNA damage.

## GRILLING MEAT TO WELL-DONE

Whether your steak is cooked medium-rare or well-done, the nutrient content is the same. Well-done meat, however, will contain more potential carcinogens called heterocyclic amines (HCAs) than meat that's cooked for a shorter time.

HCAs are formed when meat is grilled, fried or broiled at high temperatures. HCAs have been linked to cancer in lab animals and colon polyps in people.

To minimize the formation of HCAs, keep portions small to reduce grilling time. For a large cut that requires a longer cooking time, partly precook it in the microwave, drain the juices and then finish on the grill.

Another tip: Marinate meat for 10 minutes before grilling. Ingredients such as vinegar, lemon juice, herbs and spices help reduce HCA formation.

## OVERCOOKING CRUCIFEROUS VEGETABLES

It's true that boiling vegetables causes a significant amount of water-soluble nutrients – vitamin C, folate, thiamin (B1) – to be leached away.

Overcooking cruciferous vegetables, such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and Brussels sprouts, can also strip them of their cancer-fighting potential.

These vegetables contain compounds that, with the help of an enzyme called myrosinase, are converted to anti-cancer phytochemicals called isothiocyanates.

Heating cruciferous vegetables inactivates the enzyme and reduces the formation of isothiocyanates. Steam cruciferous vegetables or stir-fry them briefly until tender, but crisp.

## DITCHING THE GOOD STUFF

When you remove the peel or toss away stems and green tops, you're losing valuable fibre, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

Beet greens – packed with calcium, potassium and lutein (an antioxidant that keeps our eyes healthy) – can be sautéed and enjoyed as a side dish.

Broccoli stalks, equally as nutritious as the crown, are a good source of prebiotic fibres. Use them in soups and stir-fries.

Leave edible peels on fruits and vegetables to maximize your nutrient intake; always wash produce before cooking and eating. Or, refrigerate or freeze edible peels for later use in a homemade soup broth. Before juicing a lemon, lime or orange, wash it and then zest it.

Citrus zest, an excellent source of anti-inflammatory flavonoids, can be added to smoothies, vinaigrette dressings, marinades or muffin and pancake batters. Can't use the zest right away? Freeze it for later use.

Leslie Beck, a Toronto-based private practice dietitian, is Director of Food and Nutrition at Medcan.