

## Take a timeout with a tuna-topped salad

Sometimes we just need a salad, even when it's the middle of winter. Salads can be satisfying and restorative in the cold weather, especially when layered with protein and sturdy vegetables. For an enticing salad respite, a salade nicoise comes to mind.

While this Provençal-inspired salad is easily associated with sipping rosé on a sunny terrace on the Cote d'Azur (don't we wish), a salade nicoise is relatively flexible and composed of heartier ingredients for a light and fresh midwinter meal. The salad traditionally comprises a clockwork of ingredients, artfully arranged on a plate or platter.

The co-star of the salad is tuna, and while you may sometimes find a piece of rare ahi tuna perched on your plate, I prefer to use jarred high-quality tuna in olive oil. Yep, the fancy stuff, which incidentally can be purchased in advance and stashed in the pantry, ready for an impulsive weeknight dinner.

Note that the olive oil truly makes a difference and is worth the caloric splurge. Unlike water, oil adds richness, body and lip-smacking flavor to the tuna. And the term "co-star" is correct, because a salade nicoise is essentially the sum of its ingredients — in this case, parboiled potatoes, al dente green beans, hard-cooked eggs, and a smattering of salty, briny garnishes, all of which complement each other beautifully and are bound together by an herby, piquant Dijon vinaigrette.

### Salade Nicoise

- Active time:** 30 minutes  
**Total time:** 30 minutes, plus cooling time  
**Yield:** Serves 2 as a light main course  
**Vinaigrette ingredients:**  
 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar  
 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice  
 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard  
 1 garlic clove, minced or pushed through a press  
 1 teaspoon minced tarragon (optional)  
 ½ teaspoon kosher salt  
 ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper  
 ⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil  
**Salad ingredients:**  
 4 ounces green beans or haricots verts  
 8 ounces new or small potatoes  
 Butter lettuce leaves  
 2 hard-cooked eggs, peeled, halved or quartered  
 ½ small English cucumber, with skin, sliced on the diagonal  
 1 cup halved grape or cherry tomatoes  
 ¼ cup black olives, such as Kalamata or nicoise  
 6 ounces tuna fillets in olive oil (half-heart-



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Tuna is just one co-star in Salade Nicoise.

edly drained)  
 ¼ small red onion, thinly sliced  
 1 tablespoon capers, drained  
 2 tablespoons chopped fresh Italian parsley leaves  
 Finely grated lemon zest  
**Steps:**  
 Whisk the vinegar, lemon juice, mustard, garlic, tarragon, salt and pepper in a small bowl. Add the oil in a steady stream, whisking constantly to emulsify. Set aside until use (briefly whisk again before serving).  
 Bring a medium pot of salted water to a boil. Add the beans and cook until bright in color and crisp-tender, 1 to 2 minutes. Remove with tongs or a slotted spoon, transfer to a colander and run under cold water to stop the cooking process.  
 To the same pot, add the potatoes. Bring the water back to a boil, then partially cover

the pot and simmer until the potatoes are tender when pierced with a knife, about 15 minutes, depending on size. Drain and cool. Halve the potatoes and place in a small bowl. Add 1 tablespoon of the vinaigrette and toss to coat.  
 Arrange the lettuce leaves on a serving platter or in a large, shallow serving bowl. Mound the beans, potatoes, egg halves, cucumbers, tomatoes and olives in a clockwise fashion around the plate. Place the tuna in the center. Scatter the onions and capers over the salad, then drizzle with the dressing to your taste. Garnish with parsley and lemon zest and serve immediately.

*Lynda Balslev is an award-winning cookbook author, recipe developer, tester and editor. Taste Food is distributed by Andrews McMeel Syndication.*

## COVID-19 vaccine does not alter genetic makeup

Hello, dear readers, and welcome to a bonus letters column devoted to your ongoing questions about the coronavirus and its vaccines and boosters. You've brought up important and complex topics, and we'll do our best to provide clear and helpful information.

Several readers have requested help in discussing the coronavirus vaccine with hesitant friends and relatives. The focus is often the makeup of the vaccine itself.

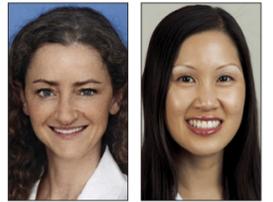
"One of my sister's main objections to the COVID-19 vaccine is that, unlike the flu vaccine, it does not use a portion of the virus itself to trigger an immune response," she wrote. "My sister believes the vaccine is altering your body's genetic makeup to fight off the virus. Is that correct?" The answer is no, none of the coronavirus vaccines affect or alter the body's genetic makeup.

Just as with the flu vaccine, the coronavirus vaccines are teaching the immune system to recognize a specific characteristic of the virus. The difference lies in the teaching tool that the two vaccines use. The flu vaccine uses a deactivated or weakened version of the virus to instruct the immune system. The coronavirus vaccine instructs the immune system with a fragment of genetic code, known as mRNA. That bit of code does not — and CANNOT — affect or become part of the recipient's genetic code. In fact, our cells dismantle and get rid of the mRNA in a vaccine within a few days.

We have heard from several vaccinated readers who, after getting a breakthrough COVID-19 infection, have questions about the booster shot.

"I received the vaccination from Pfizer (two shots) in December 2020 and January 2021," a reader from California wrote. "In September 2021, I contracted COVID-19. Do I still need to get the booster?" The recommendation from the CDC is that, yes, vaccinated individuals with a breakthrough infection should receive a

### ASK THE DOCTORS



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booster. They should wait before getting the shot until their symptoms have fully resolved and they are beyond their isolation window.

The reason for recommending the booster after a bout of COVID-19 is that the degree of post-infection immunity remains unclear. Emerging evidence shows that getting a booster after you recover from a COVID-19 infection provides added protection.

We have also been receiving requests for guidance in choosing a booster.

"I got the J&J vaccine and am now eligible for a booster," a reader from Florida wrote. "The CDC says I may receive a booster of any of the three vaccines, but they make no recommendations as to which one."

Based on the most recent data, the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine booster shots appear to provide more robust protection than the Johnson & Johnson booster. There is also strong evidence that, for those who received the two-shot series of Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, a mix-and-match approach to boosters improves immune response.

What's most important is to get fully vaccinated, and to be vigilant about following up with a booster when you become eligible. The evidence is clear — the coronavirus vaccines are effective at preventing severe illness and death.

We welcome your coronavirus and vaccine-related questions and hope you will continue to reach out.

*Eve Glazier, M.D., MBA, and Elizabeth Ko, M.D., are internists and assistant professors of medicine at UCLA Health.*

## Religious fasting poses challenges and benefits

*The COVID-19 pandemic is not over. Please stay the course for your own well-being and for others' health and safety. Eat healthy, be physically active, wash your hands often, stay home if you feel ill and wear your masks inside as we do at ECU Physicians.*



KATHY KOLASA

students and I have written a good deal about the evidence of potential benefits and harms of intermittent fasting or various



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I did not grow up in a churchgoing family. I recently joined a church that requires me to fast. I understand that fasting is part of a believer's lifestyle. My pastor tells me fasting is more than skipping meals, but it helps me pray more intentionally and to focus more fully. But can it help or hurt my health? KJ, Winterville

As we approach spring as well as the Lenten season, the act of fasting is on the minds of many in our community. As Madison Sims, a senior ECU dietetic student describes, there are many reasons people choose to fast. Some honor a religious tradition or regulation while other may fast for the simple reason to better manage their weight.

The dietetic and medical

meal timing schedules that restrict eating for weight loss. So, today, Madison focuses on fasting rituals associated with different faith traditions that are followed by many of the patients we see at ECU Family Medicine.

Many of them have shared that this is a time for spiritual growth as well as improving their physical health. Experts who study the practice of fasting note that over history the potential benefits and harms to physical health have been debated, but with the so many different ways that people fast, there is no one conclusion. Researchers have shown fasting can delay or prevent the onset of diseases if the quality of the diet remains high.

Religious fasting is performed for many different

reasons. For example, Lent fasting is popular within Christian religions and occurs 48 days before Easter. Individuals may be asked to eat no meat on Friday or to eat only two meals a day. We know people who "give up" chocolate, candy, desserts or alcoholic drinks during Lent as both a sacrifice of giving up something pleasurable, but often with the thought there is a health benefit of consuming fewer calories but still meeting nutritional needs.

Some members of the Eastern Orthodox Church are encouraged to restrict diets by eating a full meal only on prescribed days as well as avoiding meat, eggs, dairy, fish, wine, oil and foods with these

ingredients. Ramadan is a holy month in the spring when Muslims are asked to refrain from food and beverages from dawn to dusk. Many faiths recommend setting aside time for prayer to commune with God while abstaining from all food, drink or both.

Fasting can last for one day, seven days, one month, or longer. People of the Jewish faith fast for 25 hours from sundown to sundown during Yom Kippur, a time of atonement in the fall season. And many Christians in addition to the Lenten fast periodically fast when there's a need to reinforce spiritual discipline, receive direction from God in their lives, or experience divine interven-

tion during tough times.

The Daniel Fast is a popular, strict vegan diet in our area, based on a story from the biblical Book of Daniel. It also restricts leavened breads, processed foods, caffeine, and alcohol for 10-21 days. Some folks follow the diet as an act of spiritual devotion. And while it is not intended as a weight loss diet, some do experience weight loss.

Religions that expect their members to follow fasting rituals usually do not require the ill, children, or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding to do so. This is in recognition that restrictions might cause these individuals to consume too few nutrients and calories for good health.

Some people say fasting and praying helps them "reset" their lives. The type and length of fasting chosen will determine if it is harmful, helpful or make no difference to your physical health.

If you are taking any medications that are timed with meals or need to be taken with food, be sure to discuss your fasting strategy with your doctor or registered dietitian nutri-

tionist to ensure there is no potential harm. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, you need to make sure you get all the needed nutrients and fluids to nourish you and your baby.

Again, discuss with your health care provider. If you are engaged in an occupation that requires alertness and levels of energy that may be negatively impacted by fasting, try it out on a non-workday to see how you react. If you experience fatigue or headache or other discomfort, select the time you fast carefully.

If you choose to eat fewer animal products, you may want to track your protein with the help of a registered dietitian nutritionist or using an app to make sure you meet your basic nutrient needs. Fasting may not be right for everyone. You will want to discuss your concerns with your doctor and your religious adviser.

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