

## Brody's new executive dean discusses ways to remain healthy

**D**ear Readers: Continuing my tradition of interviewing key medical school leaders about their views and visions for nutrition and what we can do to support a healthy community, Julia Firnhaber, a second-year Brody medical student and I visited with Dr. Jason Higginson, the new executive dean of the Brody School of Medicine. We had a great visit, but Julia did most of the work in preparing this column. Here is how our visit went.

Although Dr. Jason Higginson is the new executive dean of Brody School of Medicine, he is not a newcomer to the Brody family or the Greenville community. He previously served in the Department of Pediatrics and has been in Greenville almost 10 years. We started our conversation asking about favorite foods. Higginson said he grew up on his family's ranch, so he tends to be a meat eater. Recently in support of one of his children's decision to follow a vegetarian diet, the whole family is making efforts to choose more plant-based options.



KATHY KOLASA



HIGGINSON

In terms of physical activity, Higginson keeps himself busy. He is an ex-marathoner, runner and biker, and has recently started rucking — walking or hiking with a heavy backpack or rucksack. As an active-duty Naval officer, he must meet the U.S. Navy's fitness standards which includes a plank test instead of sit ups. Planking has been shown to be safer for the lower back and a better measure of overall core strength. Higginson smiled when he shared that holding the position for 3 minutes would max out the plank test, so of course he's aiming for 3.5.

As an avid runner and biker, he recognizes that a major barrier to health in our community is lack of access to safe areas for walking, running, biking and other outdoor activities. He applauds the efforts to extend Greenville's greenway system as well as work over the years to increase the number of sidewalks and trails in our community. But he believes there is more to do.

Growing up in Los Angeles and living through large cities like Washington, D.C., he knows that good infrastructure facilitates safe exercise and wishes the same for our community. He recounted that while in DC he biked to work but would not feel safe doing it here in Greenville. As the daughter of an avid biker, I've too asked my father to avoid biking to work because I worry when he bikes without bike lanes or trails.

As someone who personally and professionally wears many hats, it's no surprise that Higginson has a unique take on what nutrition means. He said that most of his mentality about nutrition stems

from his military training, where a focus is on healthy eating to improve performance. Higginson said that these views transfer to all aspects of life. If you aren't well nourished, you won't perform well. He has seen that as a clinician trained in pediatrics with a specialty in neonatology, as a parent of two children, and now as a leader of our medical school it is important to work toward optimal health.

But he recognizes we all face challenges. For example, since his appointment as executive dean he was not great at tending to his own health needs — finding himself often dehydrated or way too hungry and irritable. He found a solution that is working. He is scheduling "health breaks" — a few minutes scattered throughout his day of busy meetings and other important tasks to ensure that he is taking care of himself. He said it best: "You don't perform well when you aren't well nourished."

As for his vision for keeping the Brody family healthy, he recognizes that often the path of least resistance is also the most restrictive. For example, with the pandemic it can be easier to cancel classes instead of finding ways to safely engage. He is deployed overseas for most of the pandemic and experienced the need to foster connections among others who were deployed while remaining safe. Like many of us, he relied heavily on video chatting with family and friends to stay engaged. Going forward he wants to make sure we don't take the easy way out but instead recognize the learning needs of all students which may require hybrid options for students who aren't comfortable or able to be in person.

As for his vision for Brody and the surrounding community, he feels the people he is serving should set the agenda. It's well known that weight and overall health correlate to longevity and quality of life. Higginson feels that as a community we can focus on the goals we hold in common — to live a long and healthy life.

We shared with him the North Carolina's Plan to Address Overweight and Obesity (<https://www.eatsmartmorenc.com/resource/north-carolinas-plan-to-address-overweight-and-obesity-balance-how-we-eat-drink-and-move/>), pointing out the evidence based strategies known to work in medical care, colleges and universities and workites to help people achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Higginson feels that the three-fold mission of the school — focusing on increasing the supply of primary care physicians in North Carolina, improving the health status of the citizens of eastern North Carolina, and enhancing access of minority and disadvantaged students to medical education, closely aligns with the work and strategies set forth in the N.C. Obesity Plan.

*Professor emerita Kathy Kolasa, a registered dietitian nutritionist and Ph.D., is an affiliate professor in the Brody School of Medicine at ECU. Contact her at kolasaka@ecu.edu.*

## Berry-ful meringue brings flavor

**E**very berry lover should have a recipe for meringues up their sleeve. Snow white, light as air and egg-shell crisp, meringues will dress up your favorite berries in these easy do-ahead desserts.



LYNDA BALSLEV

Crumble and shower meringues as a sweet and dusty garnish, hollow their centers to fill as a sugary edible vessel, or simply fold them into dollops of billowy whipped cream.

Meringues can be stored at room temperature for up to two weeks (or longer if store-bought) and are the perfect secret ingredient to pull out for fresh desserts and easy summer entertaining.

### Strawberry meringue parfaits with balsamic syrup

**Active time:** 25 minutes  
**Total time:** 25 minutes, plus cooling time and standing time  
**Yield:** Serves 6 to 8  
1/2 cup balsamic vinegar  
3 tablespoons sugar  
1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice  
1 1/2 pounds strawberries  
1 cup heavy cream  
8 ounces mascarpone  
2 tablespoons sugar  
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract  
4 ounces crisp meringues, store-bought or homemade (recipe below), crumbled  
Finely grated lemon zest for garnish

Combine the vinegar, sugar and lemon in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring to dissolve the sugar. Reduce the heat to medium and simmer until reduced by half and syrupy in consistency, stirring occasionally, about 5 minutes. Transfer to a small heat-proof bowl to cool to room temperature. (Syrup may be prepared up to two days in advance. Cover and refrigerate until use.)

Wash, dry and hull the strawberries. Slice 1/4-inch thick. Reserve 6 to 8 slices for garnish and place the remaining berries in a medium bowl. Pour the balsamic syrup over the berries and gently stir to coat. Let stand at room temperature for 30 minutes (or cover and refrigerate for up to 4 hours).

Combine the cream, mascarpone, sugar and vanilla in the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a whisk attachment. Beat at high speed until soft peaks form. (Cream may be prepared up to 4 hours in advance. Cover and refrigerate until use.)



LYNDA BALSLEV/TASTEFULL

### Strawberry meringue parfaits with balsamic syrup.

To serve, divide half of the strawberries between serving glasses. Spoon the cream over strawberries to cover. Sprinkle with meringues. Repeat the layering process. Garnish with reserved sliced strawberries and lemon zest. Serve immediately.

### Crisp Meringues

**Active time:** 20 minutes  
**Total time:** 1 1/2 to 2 hours, plus cooking time  
**Yield:** Makes about 40 (2-inch) meringues  
4 large organic egg whites, room temperature  
1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar  
1 cup granulated sugar

1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract  
Heat the oven to 225 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper.

Beat the egg whites and cream of tartar in the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a whisk attachment until foamy. With the mixer running, add the sugar, 1 to 2 tablespoons at a time, mixing about 5 seconds after each addition to fully incorporate the sugar. Mix in the vanilla.

Pipe the meringue through a pastry bag in decorative rounds or drop large spoonfuls on the parchment and flatten slightly.

Bake in the oven until the meringues are firm, 1 to 1 1/2 hours. Turn off the oven. Do not

remove the meringues or open the oven door. Let the meringues dry and cool completely in the oven.

Store in an airtight container with parchment or wax paper between the layers for up to 2 weeks. Meringues can be re-crisped in a 200-degree oven for 15 to 20 minutes. (Recipe adapted from the Incredible Egg)

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

## Cooperative Extension program helps with food insecurity

More in My Basket help the hungry make the most of SNAP benefits.

### N.C. Cooperative Extension Service

Hunger affects every community in North Carolina. Within Pitt County, 16 percent of the total population suffer from food insecurity, according to county health rankings. Food insecurity can be defined in two ways: low food security indicates reports of reduced quality, variety or desirability of diet with little or no indication of reduced food intake; very low food security is defined as reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake (USDA). Children and older adults have the greatest risk of being hungry.

When people lack access to adequate and healthy foods, their health and well-being suffers. Children are unable to concentrate on learning, mental clarity is reduced,

and people of all ages are more likely to be sick. Food insecurity can be worsened by other social factors including education level, low financial security, and insufficient access to housing, and health care.

There are several programs that help people access food. The largest federal program is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP (formerly Food Stamps). In North Carolina the program is called Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) and operates through the Department of Health and Human Services. SNAP benefits are accepted at grocery stores, convenience stores, select Farmers' Markets, discount stores, and some membership warehouses.

Large local retailers have begun accepting the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT card) online. Some of the larger retailers include Aldi, Amazon, BJ's, Carlie's, Food Lion, Publix, and Walmart. Many households

depend on the SNAP monthly food supplement to help expand their grocery budget and purchase healthier foods. Pitt County Cooperative Extension offers a program called More in My Basket (MIMB), which provides education about the SNAP/FNS program. Through More in My Basket, participants learn if they are likely eligible for SNAP/FNS, how SNAP/FNS can expand their food budget, and receive individualized assistance with completing an application. MIMB strives to reach people who may benefit from SNAP through increasing SNAP information dissemination via social media, websites, newsletters, newspapers, radio, and other online platforms.

More in My Basket was developed at North Carolina State University by Carolyn Bird, professor and family resource management specialist. "People with limited resources must make tough decisions about how to spend their money," Bird

said. "With the pandemic, formerly food-secure families are struggling to meet their nutrition needs. They may forego medical care to put food on the table. They may skip meals to pay utility bills. Through More in My Basket, we help connect more people to SNAP/FNS, allowing them to better manage their financial resources. FNS is not only good for families, but it helps the community as well. Research shows that for every \$5 of FNS spent, there is a \$9 impact in the community."

MIMB staff reach the community to screen for SNAP eligibility, assist with SNAP application completion, and bridge the gap between community and local Department of Social Services. Assistance is provided through private, individual phone conversations.

Contact Taneisha Armstrong to learn more about the More in My Basket Program at [taneisha\\_armstrong@ncsu.edu](mailto:taneisha_armstrong@ncsu.edu) or 252-902-1714.