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How to Get a Wow over Veggies this Holiday

by Brian Wansink, Ph.D.

(MSNBC) Worried about your family's diet over the holidays? Don't fret. You can trick them into eating more healthfully.

Because reaction to food resides as much in our heads as in our mouths, if we believe a food is going to be delicious, we're more likely to enjoy eating it. That's why simply making the name of a food more descriptive or tantalizing can lead us to believe it is tastier.

Knowing how to tease people's taste buds into liking the food you make can be a big deal if you're trying to steer your family away from the holiday cheese ball and toward leaner fare. Imagine getting your family to eat more veggies just because you call them "snappy seasonal carrots."

There's been some controversy recently over whether parents should deceive their vegetable-hating children by hiding the veggies in foods, but this taste trick is different. You're not pretending the broccoli isn't broccoli. You're conditioning them to like it with a fun word-association game.

This name game is called "confirmation bias," meaning if you say something is juicy, people almost unconsciously turn up their "juicy sensors" when they taste the food. Once these taste sensors are activated, people become pre-programmed to think a dish tastes good.

Same Food, Different Name

It's a strategy that can work with vegetables, main dishes and low-fat desserts.

In research conducted through my Cornell Food and Brand Lab, we offered six different foods to cafeteria diners on different days for six weeks. For example, one day we'd offer simple red beans and rice. Two weeks later, it would reappear on the menu as "Traditional Cajun Red Beans with Rice." One week you could buy the "Succulent Italian Seafood Filet" for \$2.90; the next week the generic-sounding seafood filet was available at the same price.

They were the exact same items — the only difference was the addition of one or two descriptive words.

When diners were finished eating they were given a short survey asking them to rate the food. Foods with the fancy descriptive names were rated as more appealing and tastier than the identical foods with the less-enticing labels. The people eating the descriptive foods tended to think the dishes were "fantastic" or "great menu items."

Consider two pieces of day-old chocolate cake. If one is named "chocolate cake," and the other is named "Belgian Black Forest Double Chocolate Cake," people will buy the second. What is especially interesting is that after trying it, people will rate the Belgian cake as tasting better than an identical piece of plain old cake.

When you positively describe the taste and smell of the food — calling it "tender grilled chicken," for example — or use a nostalgic name that triggers happy associations, such as



"grandma's chicken soup," people are more likely to respond favorably to it. In the cafeteria research, simply adding words like traditional, homemade or calling a low-fat dessert "velvety" prompted people to choose it over the same dishes with boring names.

So while serving your holiday dinner, don't just plop the green beans on the table. Take a cue from successful high-end restaurant menus and describe them as "succulent, spring-picked green beans." The image enhancement should encourage your family and dinner guests to eat more of them.

And don't worry about a backlash to the veggie hype. Research shows that if the food is reasonably good, it nearly always benefits from an appealing name.

Picking the Power Peas

It can even work with young children whose vocabularies don't include the word "succulent." Instead, use the child's frame of reference to create a positive mental association.

As part of interviews with hundreds of 3-to-5-year-olds, we found a group of preschoolers who devoured broccoli because they were pretending to be dinosaurs eating a "dinosaur tree." With a different group of children, we let them choose what they wanted from a buffet lunch, but changed the name of the foods each day. When regular peas were renamed "power peas," the number of children who ate them doubled. When we renamed a tomato-based vegetable juice "Rainforest Smoothie," we ran out of it.

Rather than begging or nagging your children to eat their vegetables, come up with some words that make them seem cool or special. Choose phrases or expressions from their favorite bedtime story or TV program. If they're a bit older, telling a story about the recipe might make it seem more enticing.

Using the power of suggestion can be a simple way to get your family to eat better not only during the holidays, but anytime — all you have to do is boost your food vocabulary.