

# to your HEALTH!

BY ALICE LAWLOR

Meet the spa chef who puts the *well* in well-being



WHILE OTHER KIDS were making mud pies, the young Laurie Erickson was creating “masterpieces” out of raw ingredients. “Actually, they were sometimes masterpieces and sometimes not,” says Sea Island’s wellness chef with a laugh, adding that an Easy-Bake oven was her favorite toy: “I’d cook and my sister would eat.” Growing up among a family of artists, Erickson was destined to be creative. But it was the influence of her grandmother, an herbalist and organic gardener, that had a profound effect. “We’d be walking along the side of the road,” recalls Erickson, “and she’d reach down, pick something and start chewing it. Then she’d tell me what it was, and its natural remedies. I think that’s really where I got the bug.”

Building on that initial inspiration, Erickson began researching the science of nutrition, learning which chemicals and preservatives to avoid. Then, in 2005, after having worked at Canyon Ranch as a pastry chef, then a demonstration chef, she joined the Sea Island staff. But with such Southern favorites as fried chicken and grits long-established as staples of resort

Wellness Chef  
Laurie Erickson at the spa.

From left: spicy grilled shrimp is low in fat and high in protein; Panko-crusted shrimp with green-tea dipping sauce; white bean and tuna salad, packed with protein and fiber; roasted root vegetables are high in natural sugars.



dining, she was expecting to encounter some resistance. Instead, it was the opposite: “Guests were telling me, ‘We need this healthy food! People are beginning to understand that obesity is the kickoff for so many other diseases.’” Along with General Manager of Spa Operations Jim Root, she came up with a wellness-cuisine philosophy for Sea Island. At its core is the importance of whole, unprocessed foods, with no chemicals or preservatives. “It’s about natural foods in their natural state,” says Erickson.

With an emphasis on guidance rather than preaching, Erickson has put together sessions that demonstrate simple ways to change eating habits. Clients were telling her how daunting the concept of healthy eating seemed, with so many conflicting cultural messages. But, Erickson reassured them, it’s really not that confusing.

Seeing people one-on-one is crucial in her confidence-building process, so there are no group sessions or weigh-ins. Instead, her programs might involve a trip to the market, where she points out healthy alternatives to items on your shopping list. Or the chef will visit your home, weed out unsuitable items and provide a quick cookery lesson. For those guests who don’t live locally, Erickson gives private cooking classes in the spa’s new lifestyle kitchen. First she consults with the clients about what they struggle with, then she comes up with a “game plan.” Crucially, many of her recipes involve just five ingredients and require little cooking time—meals that can easily be worked into a client’s dinnertime routine. “People are amazed that the way they eat makes such a difference in how they feel,” she says.

Chef Laurie, as she encourages clients to call her, also does a lot of work with fami-

lies. She often focuses on ways the whole family might eat the same meal. One Sea Island resident, for example, was regularly cooking three separate meals: one for herself, another for her husband and yet another for her 13-year-old son. She decided to hire Erickson for an in-home session and when the chef arrived, she was introduced to the very skeptical teenager. But several hours later, the curious boy found himself drawn to the kitchen. “I told him I needed his help and invited him to pick a knife from my knife roll,” says Erickson. “Before I knew it he was chopping strawberries and helping me make a smoothie.” Mom, who had tiptoed out of the kitchen, was regaled by her son’s excited cries of “taste the smoothie I made!” She was amazed—her son had never touched a smoothie before, let alone made one. “Laurie has a great talent for involving young people in the preparation,” says that mom today, “which means they’re much more likely to eat more unusual things. We’ve had her back several times. She’s made a real difference to our lives.”

Clearly, Erickson’s warm and open personality plays just as important a role in her sessions as her cooking expertise. “She is such an authentic, passionate person that there’s no way you can’t get excited about her message,” says Jim Root. “And she makes it so easy. Laurie is one of those folks who can share simple truths of the human experience without being so creative that you don’t know what she’s talking about.” And for those spa guests who are looking for a whole health and fitness program, Erickson and her fellow instructors can work together to develop one from scratch. Nutritionist Joyce Maddox talks to guests about their background—finding out what kind of

eaters they are—then they might go to fitness training and finally to Erickson. “We all work as a team,” explains the chef. “You have to get yourself in the right mindset, become stronger through exercise and then comes eating properly.”

One more way that guests can experience Chef Laurie’s wellness cuisine is by ordering her special tasting menu in the Georgian Room. Erickson worked with the restaurant’s Scott Crawford to develop a healthy bill of fare. She advised him about the potential drawbacks of too much butter, cream and bacon fat. Then Crawford took Erickson’s guidelines and created a series of dishes using lighter and leaner ingredients. “I guess you could say I gave him the pattern and the fabric, and he made the dress!” says Erickson. The menu, which is updated seasonally, has been a word-of-mouth success and led to the introduction of “Live Well” Wednesdays at the resort’s Davis Love Grill.

To what does Erickson attribute this popularity? The beauty of the menus, she says, is that “you’re going to be full but not feel sick to your stomach; feel satisfied but have energy.” And there are desserts on those menus—quick hits of sweetness that guests are encouraged to share. It’s another simple idea but one that resonates with many diners. “If someone is ready to get healthy, then I can change their life,” Erickson says, with a smile. “If they only knew how good they would feel, how much energy they’d have and how much clearer their mind would be—if they could just feel that way for an hour, they’d say, ‘Oh my gosh, I’ll stop eating my donuts tomorrow!’” ■

*To book your session with Laurie Erickson, call The Spa at Sea Island at 912-638-5148.*