

Con Brio! Low Salt Living With Style

By Rosemary Knower

It's no secret to anybody who pays attention to health news these days that we eat far too much salt. If you're sensible, you're watching your salt intake. If you've been diagnosed with any of the common consequences of getting older--too much weight, high blood pressure, diabetes, or congestive heart failure, to mention just a few—your doctor has probably recommended a low-sodium diet.

If you're also fond of good living, and have a taste for adventurous cuisine from all corners of the world, this may send you into the doldrums. A lifetime of tasteless, bland food? No more chili, no more Chinese, no more glorious salads or well-seasoned soups or crusty breads?

Not if you follow Don Gazzaniga's excellent advice. Gazzaniga is the author of three wonderful cookbooks that contain easy-to-follow recipes for everything from soups to desserts, and he ought to know. A sophisticated world traveler, Gazzaniga was diagnosed in 1997 with congestive heart failure and put on the heart transplant waiting list. He was told he had about six months to live. Instead of lying down and accepting a prospect of pabulum and inactivity, Gazzaniga, who is a fighter, rolled up his metaphorical sleeves and went to work to solve the problem.

He and his wife, Maureen began some aggressive experimentation in the kitchen, sharing their findings with others via the web. The result was the first cookbook, (*The No-Salt Lowest-Sodium Cookbook*, Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's Press,) and a grass roots

movement that has linked people all over the country, sharing tips and recipes and information about how to triumph over the supposed limitations of a low-salt diet.

“The day I was diagnosed, I went fishing,” he says. “When Maureen (his wife of 42 years) asked me what I was doing, I said, ‘A day you fish is a day you didn’t lose.’”

Today, Gazzaniga has returned to an active lifestyle, is off the transplant list, and has recently published the third book in the series, **The No-Salt-Lowest-Sodium Light Meals Book**, which advocates grazing and mini-meals (as opposed to the old-fashioned three square meals that tend to weigh you down and sap your will to exercise.)

Just a glance at the recipes is enough to make your mouth water. It’s also an eye-opener, for those who have given up favorite foods like pizza and Philly steaks and tortillas because of their high salt content. The book contains low-sodium versions of these, all under 100 mg of sodium per serving. (If you’re new to low-sodium thinking, here’s a ballpark marker: a single ¼ teaspoon—about a fat pinch—of table salt has 590 milligrams of salt. Gazzaniga sticks to a diet of about 500 milligrams a day.) But it’s also, like the best cookbooks, full of the unusual, like *Curried Chicken Salad*, and *Shrimp Salad with Snow Peas* and *Spicy Thai Soup*.

“The **Light Meals** book was a co-effort,” he points out. “Maureen and I worked together. She is very good at putting soups and salads together—I excel in baking.” Not that he started out as a baker, but as he says in the first book, it’s very difficult to find good low-sodium bread, and most brand-name breads have as much as 250 milligrams of salt a slice. “I wanted to be able to go out with my grandchildren to restaurants, and they love burgers. So now, I carry my own rolls,” he chuckles, “and I give the place we go a heads-up on not adding salt to the burgers.” The breads he’s evolved are also a reflection

of the family's sophisticated tastes, from French Garlic Rolls to a robust whole-grain loaf. "In the new book, there are more breads that give the lessons I've learned about baking bread without salt," he points out. "The web site has them, and people can sign up for the newsletter on the web. The profits from the book, after we cover costs, go to medical research."

And if you're thinking these recipes condemn you to a life in the kitchen, you're wrong. The Gazzanigas are far too active to have time for that, since both are frequent guests these days at conventions of health professionals, and both have a lot living to do. Among other things, the books contain good tips on how to choose a bread machine, to take the baby-sitting for the rise out of baking, and on making things ahead and freezing them, so you have the convenience of frozen dinners without the dietary consequences of the store brands, most of which are loaded with salt. This is a particular blessing for the one or two person household, because it's an economical and sensible way to vary your diet. As Irma Rombauer observed in *The Joy of Cooking*, "Eternity is two people and a ham." It's also two people and a roast chicken. The Gazzaniga's recipes take care of that, with treats like *Chicken in Almond Sauce*, and *Barbecued Lemon Chicken*.

The payoff in following a low salt regime is a better life. "When this first happened to me, I was a competitive rower—skulls, in the masters division," says Gazzaniga. "The oldest guy in our boat was 81, and had been in the 1920s Olympics. He's still rowing, and so am I. 'Why light meals?' Well, as I age, I've changed my eating pattern radically. Our brains may be 20, but our bodies aren't. My large meal is at noon, and I graze during the day and eat lightly at supper. I'm not gaining weight, I'm having a lot more energy, and I'm moving better. I exercise every day."

Here are some tips for the Low-Salt Lifestyle.

Learn to be a label-reader! The salt content of many foods may surprise you.

Tell your local store you want more low-salt products! Many already carry brands that make a low-sodium version of everything from tomato sauce to bread. But stores respond to customer requests when they stock, so speak up! Both Trader Joe's and Whole Foods are particularly responsive to requests.

Ask for low salt information when you shop! All the local chains have pamphlets and info on their low sodium products, and health food stores do too.

Can't find no-sodium baking soda or baking powder? Then how can you make biscuits and pancakes and cookies? Go to Pete Eiden's Healthy Heart Market on the web:

(www.healthyheartmarket.com) The best site on the web for finding products that have low or no sodium, including hard-to-find items like ketchup, barbecue sauce, and bouillon. Pete, who was diagnosed with congestive heart failure in 1995, when he was only 33, shares both his experiences and his extensive list of links and sources on the site, including direct info links on difficult-to-find items like really good low-sodium cheeses. (HealthyHeartMarket doesn't carry items that need refrigeration, but they tell you where to find them.) "Many of these are considered specialty products," says Eiden, "and are made by small Mom-and-Pop companies in small quantities."

The Gazzanigas' Web Site is www.megaheart.com The cookbooks are available from Amazon.