



FOOD & DRINK

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Pens' chef fuels team's success with 'clean eating'

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As the Pittsburgh Penguins head into the Stanley Cup playoffs, the chef who prepares their training table helps fuel the team's success.



“What you put into your body affects your performance,” says Geoff Straub, executive chef for Markhurst Dining, a division of Eat 'n Park Hospitality Group, at the UPMC Sports Complex and Pittsburgh Penguins cafe in Cranberry. **TRIBLIVE**
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“There’s been a big shift in thinking among professional athletes — and even amateurs are starting to realize — that you’ll get much more on the ice or on the field if you eat well,” he says.

For the Pens, that means whole grains, organic meats and vegetables, nothing deep-fried or overprocessed, and no refined sugars. “It’s clean eating,” he says.

Defenseman Brian Dumoulin, who is known among the players as a pre-eminent foodie and capable cook, praises Straub’s menu.

“His variety is a lot better than mine,” Dumoulin says. “He’s very good. Every time we go in there, he’s got something different for us. And I’d say he knows how to prepare them all really well.

“For me, whenever I try (to cook) something new, it’s kind of a guessing game. Everything that Chef Geoff prepares for us is tremendous.”

Straub’s guidance comes in large part from Gary Roberts, a former National Hockey League player who now helps direct sports performance training at the UPMC complex. Roberts’ 20 years in the NHL — an exceptionally long career — often is credited to the emphasis he put on nutrition and fitness.

Roberts was among the first experts Straub consulted when he joined the Pens as chef during training camp last year. Besides breakfast and lunch, Straub prepares the boxed meals the team eats aboard its airplane when flying out of town.

Concocting popular foods with a health-conscious spin presents a particular challenge, says Straub, 35, a graduate of the Pennsylvania Institute of Culinary Arts who previously worked at Bravo, Buca di Beppo and B Gourmet in Sewickley.

“Coming into this job, I never had to cook so healthy in my life,” he says. “I did a lot of research, I read a ton of books, and I did a lot of experimenting.”

Straub went through nine different recipes for pizza dough before developing one he liked with spelt, an ancient grain typically found in health-food stores and believed to be richer in protein and minerals than refined white or whole-wheat flour.



He makes ketchup from scratch with honey or agave nectar because commercially prepared brands contain corn syrup or sugar. Straub uses honey or agave in the jellies and jams he makes from pureed organic berries and chia seeds, a nutrient-packed food that provides the gelatinous texture.

"We're so used to eating the same things every day — steak and stuff like that," Dumoulin says. "So for him to come in here and cook some unfamiliar things — and I am a big foodie, I like to try everything — so it's nice to have (something different) every once in a while."

Desserts are a rare treat, but when Straub prepares something sweet, such as pumpkin muffins, it is likely to contain coconut sugar, an Asian staple derived from the sap of the coconut palm and then dehydrated to a granular consistency resembling brown sugar.

Straub likes coconut oil or extra-virgin olive oil for omelets and stir-fry and uses coconut milk when a recipe calls for dairy, although saucy dishes and bisque-style soups are seldom on his menu.

"We focus on hearty soups," he says. "One of the players' favorites is split pea with ham."

Pancakes offered at breakfast are made with buckwheat flour or they are Straub's version of banana-chocolate chip.

"I use raw cacao instead of chocolate," he says. "It tastes like unsweetened chocolate, but I fold pureed bananas into the batter and that offsets the bitterness."

Only pure maple syrup is served, he adds.

"I wake up, and I'm so excited to get here just to get my omelet or my eggs over-easy freshly made, fresh-cut fruit and yogurt, sausage and bacon and whatever's there," says Pens right winger Tom Kuhnhackl. "It's so exciting to get here in the morning.

"After, you get unbelievable lunches with steak or fish or taco salads with whatever he makes. It's a big difference between the AHL and here. It's unbelievable. You're always excited when he makes that food."

Straub says the players seem to like his emphasis on nutrition.

"One thing that intrigued me right away is how disciplined the players are when it comes to their diets," he says. "They know what they should eat and they stick with it. Of course, if my body was going to make me millions of dollars, I would do the same thing."



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On occasion, Straub will get special requests from players, such as the Swedish team members who asked him to prepare something they missed from their homeland.

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"I made them Swedish meatballs," Straub says. "They seemed to appreciate that."

Straub plans his menus a month in advance and tries to keep things interesting. Last fall, when the Pens were training on a Steelers Sunday, he sought approval from Roberts for a tailgate-themed lunch with a wholesome twist.

"He said, 'Awesome,'" says Straub, who served organic, grass-fed beef hotdogs and burgers on sprouted-grain buns and kale slaw instead of conventional coleslaw.

Straub buys from Penn's Corner Farm Alliance, which represents about three dozen local agricultural producers of fruits and vegetables, meat, honey, yogurt and other items. Besides organic meats, he likes heritage breeds of pork, such as Duroc or Berkshire, because, he says, "the pigs are well cared for and haven't been modified or messed with."

Eggs are from free-range chickens, and Straub tries to buy wild-caught, not farm-raised, fish, he says. "We serve a lot of fish. It's usually whatever the catch of the day is from our supplier ... maybe salmon one day and halibut the next, or maybe we'll do barramundi."

"I try to keep the players guessing, but I also like challenging myself."

Because he also oversees the Training Table Cafe — a public concession stand at the sports complex — Straub ensures the Pens' philosophy about food is replicated there, too, he says.

"People are dismayed we don't serve french fries, but the whole idea is to eat like the pros. We're a training and sports medicine complex. Why would we throw in a bunch of stuff that isn't healthy when we're focused on good health?"

Other hockey teams get to try Straub's cooking, too, because he makes boxed meals for their outbound flights. The feedback he gets has been positive.

"When the Winnipeg Jets were here in February, we sent their plane pan-seared Cobia, braised brisket and stuffed chicken roulade," he says. "The sides included mashed sweet potatoes and sauteed kale. They loved it. They thought our menu from a health standpoint was ahead of the curve."

Deborah Weisberg is a Tribune-Review contributing writer. Staff writers William West and Jonathan Bombulie contributed.

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Mark Hatkevich

Great job Chef Straub.I'm a friend of your Dad,we go to the Erie Otter games.Very good story and keep up the great work.

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Joline Pinto Atkins

"whole grains, organic meats and vegetables, nothing deep-fried or overprocessed, and no refined sugars. "It's clean eating,"

In other words, FOOD! Everything sounds delicious - as food should be.

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Wonderful.....recipes please!

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This article made me hungry.

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