



Meet Columbus Batiste, MD, the Plant-Based Cardiologist Changing Hearts and Minds

By Tami Fertig
August 18 2021

After watching his father suffer from [diabetes](#), cardiologist [Columbus Batiste, MD](#), went plant-based and launched the Integrative Cardiovascular Disease Program at California's Kaiser Permanente Riverside Medical Center, where he is chief of cardiology. We spoke with Batiste about his plant-based journey, how he incorporates nutrition into his medical practice, his go-to meals and snacks, and more.

How did you make the connection between diet and disease?

After my dad succumbed to diabetes and eventually passed away, I picked up Caldwell Esselstyn's *Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease*. The chapter that rang out to me was called "Moderation Kills." My father was "moderate." He didn't smoke. He didn't drink. He ate meat, but not all the time. He ate sweets, but not all the time. Nutrition was never really emphasized in my training, but as I read more—[T. Colin Campbell](#), [Dean Ornish](#)—I started questioning the way I was practicing medicine. I had this "aha" moment where I realized that we don't have to be prisoners of disease.

When did you start incorporating plant-based education into your cardiology practice?

I ended up taking a chance and telling a patient, who was referred to me for a complex coronary procedure, about nutrition. He followed my advice, came back, and was like, "I feel better, Doc!" Then I told another patient and another and another, and they all had benefits. And I was thinking, OK, this is the direction I need to go.

What stands out most about the integrative program you developed?

It includes a monthly two-hour conversation, predominantly with patients, but it has boasted attendance from physicians, pharmacists, and other health professionals wanting to learn more about the role of nutrition in contributing to and treating cardiovascular disease. There's also a physician- and dietitian-led cooking class, and a kitchen-basics course that teaches patients how to cook affordable, bulk plant-based meals.

Any other upcoming projects you can share with us?

We're working with the hospital administration on a much more robust plant-based dietary program for inpatients, in addition to a culinary medicine program for the resident physicians of the future. We've also started videotaping our cooking sessions with the intent of making them available to Kaiser Permanente members across Southern California and in other regions.

What's the biggest obstacle patients report after leaving the hospital?

I often tell patients that there is no wrong way to start. If someone likes to take small steps, I encourage them to keep it simple and start with a large salad before each meal. If someone has a "jump in feet first" personality, I speed their transition to get to a no-salt, no-oil, no-sugar, whole-food, plant-based diet. The goal is to get to the finish line. Some may get there faster than others, but the key is to progress toward an ideal diet.

What other heart-healthy lifestyle changes do you recommend?

I stress the importance of rest—in the form of intermittent fasting, sleep, or meditation or prayer. And I encourage activity—not necessarily structured exercise, but purposeful movement, keeping the body in motion through walking, gardening, taking the stairs. I also encourage patients to laugh. Laughter has profound therapeutic benefits that add to resiliency and health.

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Dr. Batiste's Energy Boosters

In addition to following a whole-food, plant-based diet, Dr. Batiste makes it a priority to stay active. Here are a few of his favorite post-workout meals and snacks.

- **Green Smoothies:** Blend blueberries, frozen cherries, unsweetened almond milk, banana, and broccoli or kale, plus tofu or navy beans.
- **Southwest Salads:** “I enjoy the combination of brown rice, black or pinto beans, pico de gallo, lettuce, hummus, and, if I have a little more time for preparation, seasoned jackfruit,” Batiste says.
- **Lentil Bowls:** Batiste loves Ethiopian-style lentils over brown rice, quinoa, or wild rice and a bed of greens.

To learn more about a whole-food, plant-based diet, visit our [Plant-Based Primer](#). For meal-planning support, check out [Forks Meal Planner](#), FOK's easy weekly meal-planning tool to keep you on a healthy plant-based path.