

Levana's Meal Replacements

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A family health crisis inspired chef Levana Kirschenbaum's latest project. As she says, "A bad ordeal gives you the impetus to do good."

In March 2014, her husband Maurice Kirschenbaum, a hardy, tall man whose noticeable, long, quick stride was a familiar sight on Upper Broadway, was diagnosed with multiple myeloma (a cancer of the blood plasma in the bone marrow). He was treated with chemotherapy, radiation, two surgeries for fractures of vertebrae and a

stem cell transplant in November 2015. Along the way, he lost his appetite and lots of weight; he says his taste buds were shot and he suffered long bouts of constipation.

During that time, while tinkering in her home kitchen with powdered and ground food, Levana found ways to prepare nutritious and appealing blends of natural food that he could tolerate. It was nearly impossible for him to ingest the food replacement products suggested by the hospital, which included corn syrup, water and chemicals, what she calls “meals without food.” Her homemade powdered supplements mixed with liquids and later on added to food helped him to regain his strength and energy, gain necessary weight and avoid constipation, and enhanced his path to healing.

Happily, Maurice is striding down Broadway again, albeit more slowly. And Levana has developed a line of all-natural, kosher meal replacements that have no added chemicals and are free of gluten, sugar, nuts, dairy and the chalky taste of commercial chemical-based supplements. Working with doctors and nutritionists, she has created five powdered blends — three varieties for making cold drinks or breakfast shakes, mixed with liquids or yogurt: vanilla, chocolate and berry, and two types for warm, savory soups or for blending into other dishes: vegetable and miso with mushroom. Her plan is to have FDA approval and kosher certification in place by September, when she will market the products through e-commerce (the levanamealreplacement.com website is live, with information about the products and a request for testers).

Levana has made a career of cooking, writing, serving and teaching about healthy, fresh, flavorful, whole foods, combined creatively, served with simple elegance. She’s the author of several cookbooks, “Levana’s Table: Kosher Cooking for Everyone,” “Levana Cooks Dairy-Free,” “In Short Order,” and “The Whole Foods Kosher Kitchen: Glorious Meals Pure and Simple.”

Born in Casablanca, Morocco, she studied in France, came to New York in 1972, opened Levana’s Bakery on the Upper West Side in 1977, and then, with her husband and two brothers-in-law, opened Levana’s Restaurant in the late 1970s, one of the first gourmet kosher fine dining establishments (which closed after more than 30 years). On the Upper West Side, she is legendary for her hospitality and delicious, gorgeous Shabbat table.

On a recent January evening, she hosted around 25 nutritionists, physicians, journalists, potential investors and others interested in the meal replacement project for a tasting. After signing a non-disclosure agreement, guests were led to her dining room to sample and evaluate homemade dishes, including blend-boosted fish appetizers, kale salad (with blend-boosted dressing), pasta (gluten-free) with blend-boosted tomato sauce, vegetable soup with red lentils, miso soup with scallions, blend-boosted frittata with corn and spinach, blend-boosted oatmeal cookies, vanilla shake with coconut milk, berry shake with coconut milk and chocolate mousse.

“I say this tastes not only not objectionable but very good,” Levana said.

“I’m a picky eater and liked it all, and left with some cookies in my pocket and some samples of the blends for my mother to try.”

Levana explained to the group that while she was extremely grateful to the doctors on her husband’s “stellar medical team” and respectful of their work, she did not understand the general disregard for nutrition that she encountered. “After treatment, patients are left very depleted, with excruciating pain – if morphine is administered, patients are often left with severe constipation, then given Ensure, which causes more constipation. It’s an infernal Catch 22.”

When her husband – the 6-foot Kirschenbaum was down to 134 pounds – most needed nutritious food, hospital workers offered products like Ensure, and one nurse suggested he eat canned soup with pasta, right out of the can.

“This, in a hospital?” she asked. “We need to treat the cancer and the symptoms so that those who survive will have quality of life.”

Dr. Elion Krok, a physician at St. Barnabas Medical Center, works with cancer patients and his specialization includes CACS (Cancer Anorexia Cachexia Syndrome; many advanced cancer patients suffer from this combination of anorexia, loss of weight, loss of body mass, aversion to food, weakness, fatigue and its accompanying poor quality of life).

“Nutrition alone is not the treatment for CACS, but without nutrition there is decreased hope. You need calories, and all calories are not equal,” Krok said.

He explained that most currently available oral nutrition supplements are pro-inflammatory, and with CACS, patients are already hyper-catabolic with increased inflammation. He can see recommending Levana’s products, once they get proper approvals, as they are anti-inflammatory.

Kirschenbaum has also had interest from cancer patients, geriatric care centers and also those dealing with children and cancer.

Moshe Reiss, a nurse practitioner who has worked in health care for 15 years and is now studying toward an MBA in health care administration, often serves as a cancer consultant in the Jewish community.

“If kids with cancer are malnourished, they are more at risk for infection. For kids for whom the traditional boosts are not palatable, we sometimes have to use a feeding tube. We’d rather have natural calories. I think this has great potential. It’s also cost-saving, as using IV nutrition is very expensive,” he said.

Georganne Backman Garfinkel, a private consultant in cancer and nutrition research and education, said, “A large challenge is to make nutrition more palatable for cancer patients. Levana is the one to do that.”

Levana explained that because of her experience in the food business developing recipes, she has a good sense of which foods go together well, what serves as a balance, and how to achieve the right texture and optimum flavor. She avoided exotic ingredients and stuck with foods that would be familiar to patients. The cold-mix powders include chia, hemp, flax, almond flour, vanilla bean and coconut milk; the savory mixes include sweet potato, fennel, leek, turmeric, garlic extract, parsley, kale, celery, carrots and more. She is working with Dr. Joe Regenstein, professor emeritus of food science at Cornell University, who helped her assemble the official USDA nutrition information for all of her ingredients and is also involved with other technical aspects of the program.

“As a caterer, I didn’t boil an egg without insurance,” she said. “For this all the more reason.” She and her team are working to select a production plant, secure FDA approval, design graphics and hash out all the legal and financial details. She plans to work with the Orthodox Union for kosher certification, as she worked with the agency at the restaurant.

In a post on the Levana Meal Replacement website, Maurice Kirschenbaum wrote, “I feel sure that my rehabilitation and road to well-being would not have been possible without Levana’s magic potion.”

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