

ANNELIZE ZEELIE

FROM “CAN’T HAVE!” TO “ENJOY!”

**Tsebo’s divisional dietitian brings
great taste to good nutrition**

Do you wish to know how to make permanent changes to your health through nutrition intervention, or eat your favourite food but with a healthier twist? Do you know which bacteria can cause food poisoning? Perhaps you want to encourage your clients to support their immune function? The answer is simple, ask a dietitian!



“I hate it when people think of a dietitian as being someone who says, ‘you can’t eat this, you can’t eat that’. I always say I’m a dietitian because I like to eat, I love food. I believe that any diet should be one of inclusion, not exclusion. People are quick to say, ‘you can’t have’ when someone has a health concern, but there are so many foods you can have and I believe in focussing on that,” says Annelize Zeelie, Divisional Dietitian, Tsebo Catering Solutions.

Zeelie heads a passionate team of 10 dietitians. They work closely with Tsebo’s chefs and catering staff to create tailored menus to meet the nutritional requirements of specific clients across segments that range from healthcare and industrial to corporate and educational facilities. But, most importantly, they strive to put good, healthy, tasty, and beautifully presented food back on the agenda for everyone to enjoy.

“We are a versatile group with strong managerial skills and business acumen but with an underlying love for nutrition. We want people to realise that dietetic food doesn’t have to be boiled chicken and boiled potatoes. No one should eat like that because food is there to be appreciated. I don’t want boiled up anything. There is a new generation of dietitians who are looking at healthy eating in a completely different way and making it enjoyable and easy to follow,” says Zeelie.

To achieve this as a division, Zeelie works together with Culinary Director, Chef Nick Madhura, when devising new concepts or tailoring menus for a specific segment. “Chef Nick has such amazing vision. We will consider the concept and depending on the energy requirements of the industry, I might say, “there’s too little protein so add a smear of hummus” or “we need to include more orange-coloured vegetables. It is a team effort and difficult to distinguish where the one begins and the other ends,” says Zeelie.

Health and safety first

Having started her career at Tsebo as a dietitian and catering manager for Fedics’ retirement segment 17 years ago, Zeelie learned the ropes by doing everything from piping cupcakes to managing staff and everything in-between. “It has been a real school of life experience that gave me insight into the challenges faced by catering managers. I couldn’t do what I do now if I hadn’t had that experience, she says speaking of her relatively new role as Divisional Dietitian, Tsebo Catering Solutions.



An important aspect of this for a dietitian working in large-volume catering is the expertise she has gained in health and safety, with HACCP Expert (NFQ 5) and ISO 22000 Auditor and Lead Auditor accreditation, which helps her to ensure that Tsebo complies with robust food safety standards. But the challenge Zeelie is most passionate about is educating her clients and their customers on good nutrition and making this easy for everyone to achieve – even if it means ‘sneaking’ healthy ingredients into everyday meals that people are familiar with and like to eat.

“Nowadays, many claim to be an expert when it comes to food because of Google, so sometimes you must force your way in with scientific evidence. It’s not always the most popular answer but nutrition needs to be backed by proof and literature. But in general, times have changed, and people are more open to things like lower-fat options or plant-based meals, and we see this when we do our visits. When we start a new contract, people are excited to see us and can’t wait to find out what’s on the menu, because we are sending out the right message about health. We speak a language that people understand,” says Zeelie.

For those who are more reluctant to change, Zeelie is enthusiastic about introducing healthier cooking methods and substituting ingredients that add nutrition but don’t deviate from familiar meal options that people love. “Take a cottage pie, it’s a meal that everyone loves but you can make it healthier by adding lentils and vegetables to the mince and butterbeans to the mash. Or in an industrial setting, instead of ‘pap’ and meat with vegetables five times a week, we’ll serve it three times a week and replace the carbohydrate with mielie rice or crushed wheat on alternative days. It’s still a traditional offering, but all that goodness is in there and people don’t even notice.”

Good nutrition starts with good quality ingredients

COVID-19 has changed the way people view health and wellbeing. The pandemic spurred a return to many people’s roots with the popularisation of things like baking sourdough bread or fermenting and making preserves. People are realising the importance of selfcare, whether it’s through nutrition, taking a break, or exercising.

“Previously ‘being on a diet’ was something you did in isolation, and it was a case of ‘I am going to kill myself to lose this weight’, but people are becoming more lifestyle oriented so exercise might mean something like going for a walk with a friend. Mental health and our moods are also affected by the food we eat, and people are starting to see that taking a pill isn’t going to solve all their problems, but it’s also not about taking herbs to cure everything. It’s about a balanced approach. As a dietitian, I won’t counsel you on your psychological problems, but I can tell you what to avoid and what to eat to assist your mental state,” says Zeelie.

On the flip side, people are concerned about the rising cost of food, but this, says Zeelie, does not need to be at the expense of nutrition. “You can eat healthily on a tight budget. Unprocessed butternut comes with the skin on, it doesn’t grow in expensive cubes or in a plastic bag. A kilogram of broccoli is always going to be cheaper than a kilogram of meat. Ingredients are always going to be healthier and cheaper if you look for unprocessed foods and buy them from as close to home as possible or grow your own,” Zeelie advises.

And this principle applies to catering too. Good meals are the result of good ingredients and Tsebo believes in sourcing fresh ingredients from local suppliers in the communities it operates in. “Why should a cabbage that is grown in Klerksdorp travel to Johannesburg to be packed only to return to Klerksdorp because that’s where we are cooking?” asks Zeelie. But essentially, it’s all these elements combined that set Tsebo apart as a catering company.

“We are a food company,” says Zeelie. “But what does that really mean? It’s about inspiring confidence in our clients that we are not just slapping some food onto a plate. We’ve put a lot of thought into the kind of fat we use, the fibre we add and that the fish we cook comes from sustainable stock. From this our Nutrition Manifesto was born, ten nutrition missions that we teach to all our chefs, cooks, and catering managers to incorporate as the cornerstones of every menu cycle and recipe.

“That is really the cornerstone of our brands, that we consider every detail and look at things from every level to ensure that the food we serve looks good, tastes great and considers the different nutritional requirements of the people we are serving,” Zeelie concludes.