

Kevin McCarthy Gets the Point

Catering to the upper crust at a luxe resort is no chore for this executive chef who delivers world-class haute cuisine sans the haughtiness. *By Kate Jackson*

On a wooded, 10-acre peninsula that reaches into Upper Saranac Lake in New York is a slice of heaven otherwise known as The Point, a luxurious hideaway in the protected wilderness of the Adirondack Mountains. Created as a pastoral refuge for the rich and famous urbanites of yesteryear, it's now a rustic sanctuary for those who want to lose themselves in a style of gracious living once reserved for the scions of industry in America's Gilded Age.

Constructed in 1933 of stone and hand-hewn Canadian pine for William Avery Rockefeller (nephew of John D.), the compound was one of the last of the "Great Camps" that began springing up in the 1880s as grand getaways for such equally prominent families as the Vanderbilts, Carnegies, and Whitneys. Its 11 guest rooms have lustrous, hand-waxed wooden walls, great stone fireplaces, impossibly luxurious featherbeds, and expansive views of a picture-perfect lake. Then (as now), guests gathered for lavish formal dinners in the Great Room: an opulent space with vaulted ceilings, monumental twin stone fireplaces, French doors opening onto a stunning view of the pristine mountains, and massive, impeccably set tables.

In so rarified an atmosphere, you might expect starched formality and obsequious service. Instead, you're pampered by engaging hosts who indulge rather than kowtow and quickly dispel any expectation of snobbery that The Point's daily all-inclusive price tag (beginning at \$1,250) may arouse. After being warmly greeted by Maggie, the resident Golden Retriever, you're welcomed with a glass of champagne by an equally charming human who, instead of showing you to your room, ushers you first to the kitchen, where you're likely to meet Executive Chef Kevin McCarthy and his team members who are busily prepping the evening's seven-course meal. They each extend a warm hand and are glad to drop their knives and shoot the breeze, even though they're bracing themselves to satisfy any guest's culinary desire at any time of the day or night. (If you want a gourmet pizza—or a leg of lamb—delivered to your room at 2 AM, you need only ask.)

It's not without reason that the kitchen is the point of orientation because food and hospitality are what's done best here. What brings people to The Point—and keeps them returning—is a more down-to-earth pampering that revolves as much around the food and drink as the resort activities.

While few chefs would abide interlopers in their domain, McCarthy welcomes them, acknowledging that the kitchen is "the heartbeat of The Point." His casual demeanor and lack of pretension put guests at ease and invite their curiosity. "People come back and have a glass of wine and just talk to us, and it's a real conversation, not 'Yes, sir, thank you sir, have a nice day.'"



Almost instantly, you'll feel at home in the warmth of the kitchen among these affable hosts, who make it abundantly clear that abundance is what it's all about. The culinary experience is one of the supreme pleasures of a stay at The Point. It's their mission, and no doubt one they relish.

McCarthy got his start in hospitality picking up cigarette butts at a restaurant when he was 14. He was promoted to dishwasher, and, when a line cook moved on, he filled the spot. But he wasn't yet bowled over by food. It was only because his parents nudged him that he enrolled in culinary school, where at first he demonstrated

only a half-hearted interest. But a second year at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, lit a fire under him. “You kind of catch a bug and really get absorbed by everything about food,” he recalls. “I was just hooked from then on.”

Perhaps that’s why, when the foodie guests inevitably corner him in the kitchen, he says, “You want to talk about food? Let’s talk.” He might sit them down with seven or eight different ages of balsamic vinegars, olive oils, and cheeses and stage a tasting of the vinegars. “We’ll start with a two-year-old, then an eight, then 20, 50, and go up the whole ladder to 100 years so they can see the process of how this product changes. They love it.” If a guest asks if they have foie gras in the kitchen, he says, “Sure, want to cook some?” What follows is no formal, stuffy cooking demonstration. If you want to learn to cook, says McCarthy, you’ve got to get dirty. “You want to come in the kitchen, I’ll get you an apron, give you a jacket, and put you to work.” Three hours later, they may still be in the kitchen cooking together.

A TASTEFUL TRADITION

Like everything about The Point, the food is sumptuous, with menus designed by McCarthy and prepared by a staff trained under the guidance of London-based, three-star Michelin chef Albert Roux. But sumptuous here is not synonymous with rich or unhealthy. Twenty years ago, says McCarthy, people clamored for classic “heavy duty” French cuisine—dishes loaded with butter and cream. But today, he observes, people want to eat for flavor rather than for richness.

“Our philosophy here in the kitchen is simplicity,” insists McCarthy, “And the easiest way to achieve that is to buy the best quality products that you can and then try not to screw them up.” He recalls a time some years back when food became unnecessarily complicated. “People would take a piece of meat and crust it, wrap it, and sauce it,” which only served to overpower the flavor. Vegetables, he recalls, got similar treatment. “Asparagus should taste like asparagus, not all the other mumbo jumbo going on.”

He dictates simplicity out of awareness that too many tastes confuse the palate. “If you give people five or six different extreme flavors, it’s going to be like a stew in their mouths, and they won’t taste the pristine, original product you’re trying to serve.” He pairs that guiding principle with an emphasis on the point of origin of the foods served at the resort. McCarthy has developed an impressive network of regional food producers that provide a ready supply of foods specifically to meet his needs. He marvels that here, “in the mountains and in the middle of nowhere,” he’s able to get some 70% of the produce and proteins he cooks with from local farms.

He gets goat cheese made exclusively for him by a retired couple with 20 goats, and he gets beef tenderloin and strip loins locally. He’s gone so far as to develop a unique relationship with a “farmer down the road,” Steve Tucker, who provides beautiful produce grown specifically to allow McCarthy to create the dishes he envisions. “Every winter, we’ll sit down and go through a seed catalog, and Tucker will grow probably 90 to 95 different vegetables specifically for us.”



For McCarthy, it’s not merely a way to get the best product but also an endeavor that pays social and economic dividends. It’s a matter, he says, of trying to be part of the community and support it financially. Equally important, he says, “You now have a relationship with the people producing your food and you know where it’s coming from,” he says. “It’s great to have the guys in the kitchen meet this person and see, for example, the face behind the beets and know that he puts a lot of time and effort into growing that beautiful product.” In return, he says, they’re going to show respect to the product when they’re preparing it.

The style of dining at The Point is a carryover of the Gilded Age camp traditions enjoyed by the original residents. But, surely no Rockefeller enjoyed a better meal than one of McCarthy’s lavish and inspired seven-course dinners, each course served with a different wine from The Point’s own cellar. The guests gather at 8 each evening after a get-acquainted cocktail hour in the pub for the dinner served “en famille,” or family style, in the Great Room—a setting virtually unchanged since the Rockefellers’ time. (For the shy or antisocial, the staff is all too happy to serve a meal in-room by the fireside.) There’s no menu, and the dishes are never the same from one day to the next.

After dinner, guests sink into the sofas in the Great Room for port and cognac, take a stroll in the woods, or carry their drinks to the terrace overlooking the lake where they can listen to the loons and the water lapping the shore. Each Wednesday and Saturday night, for

example, dinners are black-tie affairs and, depending on the season, some will trade their party attire for something more cozy and take an after-dinner moonlit cruise or pull an Adirondack chair beside a roaring bonfire on the point and sip brandy. In fall and winter, they can wrap themselves in blankets or snuggle into a lean-to near the fire.

A COOKOUT LIKE NO OTHER

Lunches at The Point are equally delicious, but perhaps the most memorable feast is spread at the weekly barbecue on the rocky point that juts out over the lake and from which the resort gets its name. Each Saturday, McCarthy orchestrates a cookout of monumental proportions. By 11:30 AM, two huge charcoal fires are set in great stone grills that will be sprinkled with aromatic chips from the trees that grow on the property, and by noon, great quantities of food have been hauled up from the kitchen. For the next hour, McCarthy holds court as he and his staff grill an extraordinary al fresco feast and talk with guests fascinated by their process.

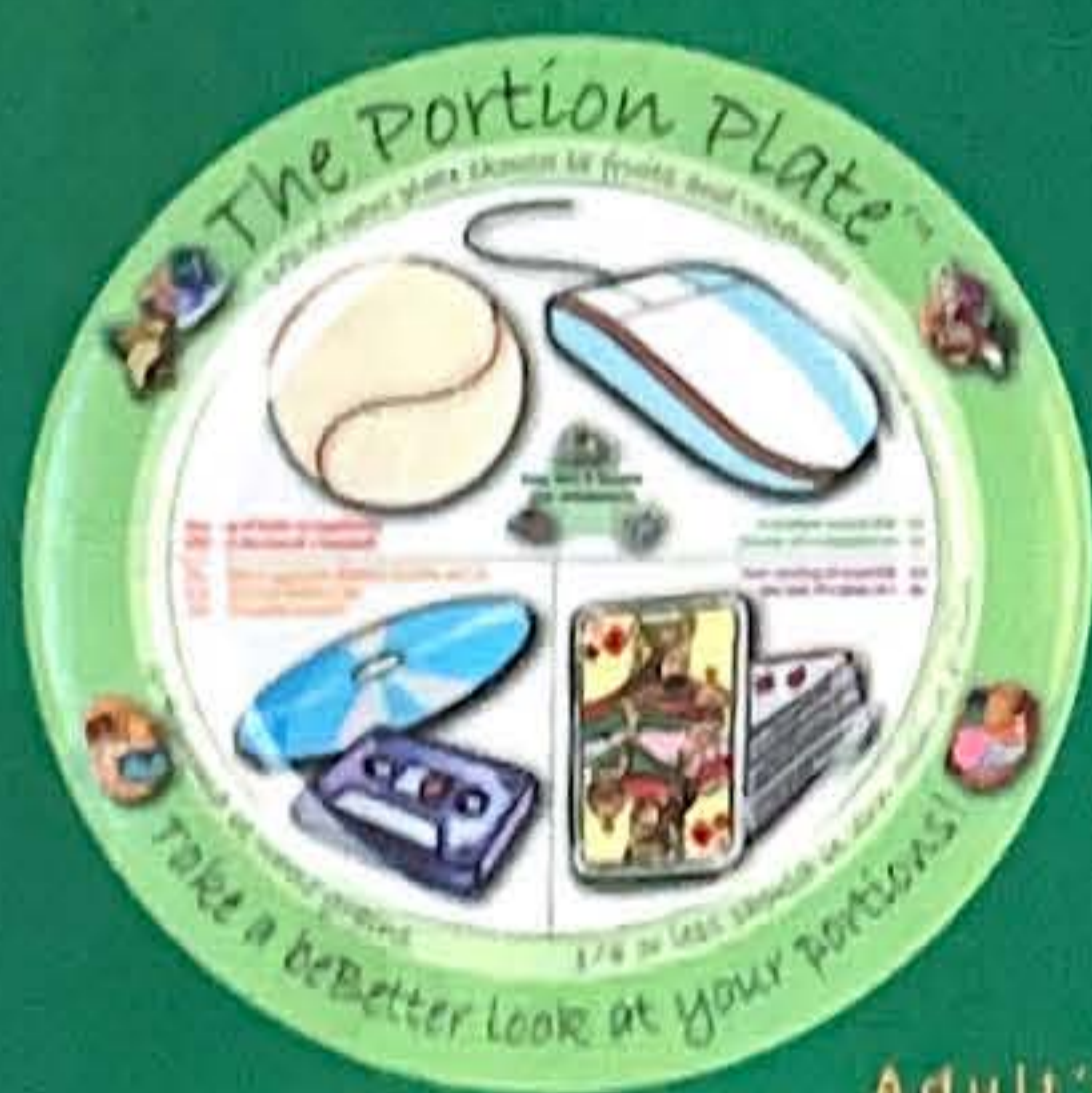
At 1 PM, when everything is ready, they'll ring a dinner bell. "It's a signal to everybody wherever they are on the property that the barbecue is about to begin, so let's get up there," he says. "When everyone arrives, they have a cocktail and look at the spread in front of them and say, 'Holy cow! Look at all that food.'" It's a ritual that takes place even in the coldest days of winter, as hardy guests wrapped in woolen blankets brave subfreezing temperatures and huddle around the table, looking down on skaters gliding across the frozen lake with the Adirondacks looming behind them. Guests will graze on turkey,

chicken, legs of lamb, assorted game sausages, and fine fish such as escolar, tuna, and shrimp. "We do steamed clams, mussels, oysters, beef stew, chili, roasted carrots, and parsnips, all sorts of warm salads and homemade macaroni and cheese." Comforting warm desserts and hot chocolate help guests shake off the chill.

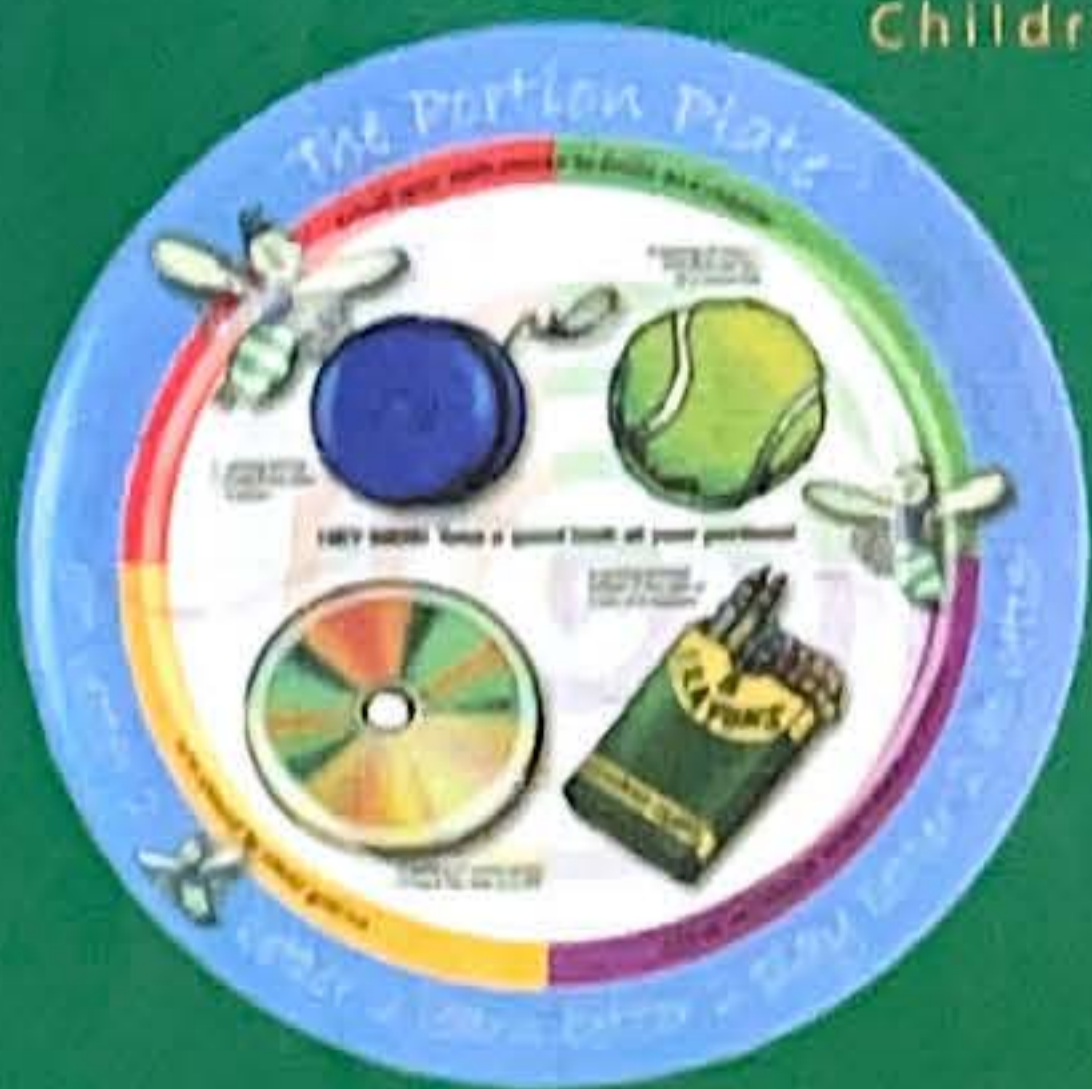
But now, in summer, under the bough of the birch trees, the elegant table is laden with beautiful heirloom tomatoes and fresh, locally produced mozzarella; cold soups such as chilled melon with gazpacho; mixed greens with Easter egg radishes or citrus salad with fennel; smoked trout and smoked salmon that are indigenous to the area; lighter versions of the winter meats, fish, and seafood that are now seasonably prepared with just a little olive oil and fresh herbs; cold potato or pasta salads; and pitchers of lemonade and iced tea. After enjoying a cool dessert, such as mixed berry tarts, fruit salads, and fruit kabobs, the guests—having been once more drawn together in conversation through The Point's family style of dining—may wander together down to the lake and set off in canoes, rowboats, kayaks, or speedboats. Later, at dusk, they're likely to be sipping champagne and watching the changing colors of the lake from The Point's own classic 33-foot mahogany Hackercraft before joining once more for another dinner in the Great Hall.

At The Point, food, suggests McCarthy, is the unifying element in the social experience. It's his mission to offer not only great food but also a slice of the community's values. "People who come here have plenty of money, but there are two things they can't buy: knowledge and a sense of community or family." And that, here, is the point. ♣

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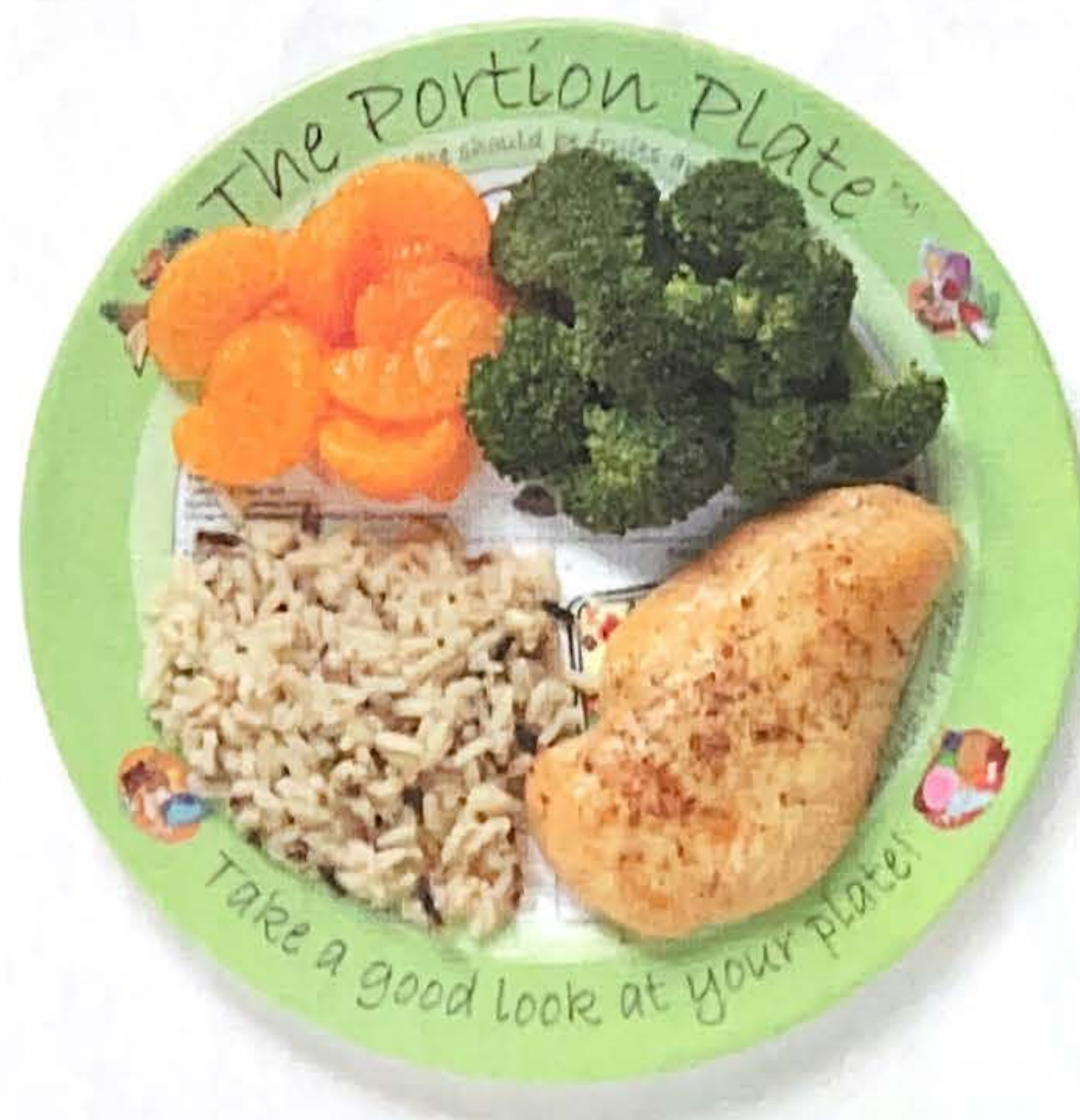


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