

The Courier-Journal

Features

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Wednesday, March 29, 2000

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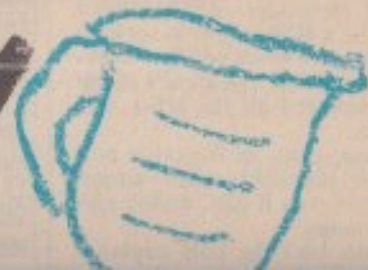
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Devon McShane, left, and Madison Campbell concentrated on slicing and dicing, and helped Antonia Demas prepare a dish at EarthSave Louisville's Taste of Health last Sunday. PHOTOS BY TRAVIS DOSTER, SPECIAL TO THE COURIER-JOURNAL

FOOD
is
elementary



Kids learn about culture and cooking while learning math and science – and having fun

By SARAH FRITSCHNER
Courier-Journal Food Editor

Black-eyed peas and collard greens, okra and tomatoes, molasses and Tabasco — these are the kinds of foods that bring choruses of “Yuck” from average American elementary-school kids.

But not the 15 kids who cooked with Antonia (pronounced An-toe-NEE-ah) Demas last Sunday at Earth-Save Louisville’s Taste of Health. Those kids were chopping, mincing, measuring, stirring and scarfing down all of those ingredients, and more, as they made Demas’ recipe for “soul stew.”

“I try to get kids to accept foods that they aren’t supposed to like,” she said. If they are educated about food, they accept it, she said. It’s a simple formula that works to teach kids how to eat nutritiously now, so they’ll protect their health later.

Soul stew is part of a two-semester

Soul stew and other kid-friendly recipes, Page 5.

curriculum that Demas wrote to educate students and teachers on how to integrate core educational goals with lessons in cooking and culture. When the students learn about foods in the classroom, they are more likely to eat them in the lunchroom.

All of Demas’ recipes meet U.S. Department of Agriculture criteria for school lunch menus, and her research shows that children who cook with tofu, bulgur, eggplant and lentils are up to 20 times more likely to eat those foods at school than kids who haven’t learned about them.

Demas’ soul stew punctuates a lesson on Africa and the American South, designed to be taught during January as the children study Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Students learn about native African foods (okra and black-eyed peas),

along with Southern greens and American Indian corn. They listen to music, make journal entries and learn a little about nutrition. Throughout the course, they learn math, social studies and science, they learn to think and write critically, and they expand their vocabularies.


But most of all they have fun, said Demas, whose curriculum guide, “Food Is Elementary” (Food Studies Institute, 1999), has had success with thousands of children from New York City to New Mexico.

There are two keys to success, she said. First, make it fun. Second, adults must eliminate their preconceptions about what children will and won’t eat, what they can and can’t do.

For example, children who use the curriculum do all their own chopping and slicing.

“I insist that kids learn to properly use a knife,” said Demas, whose les-

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Antonia Demas shows a “soul stew” she made with the help of children at Taste of Health last Sunday.

Kids have fun learning about culture, cooking

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sons are designed for pre-kindergarten and elementary-school-age children. They are taught never to use a knife without supervision and never to walk while holding a knife. "We've never had any mishaps," she said.

And the students can tackle any project — kneading dough for bread and pizza, making pasta dough and noodles, rolling sushi, stir-frying vegetables, grinding spices with a mortar and pestle.

"If the adult says you're capable, and this is a skill you'll need as an adult," said Demas, "there isn't anything a kid's not capable of doing. The key is the attitude of the adults."

Teaching a child about new foods at home sometimes isn't as care-free as it is in a classroom setting. Adults

are often too inhibited. "Most people don't realize how tied up emotionally they are with food," said Demas.

Parents cooking at home with their children can avoid some of the emotional traps by letting the child decide (with gentle guidance) what to cook.

"Children love fun activities where you're going to create something artistic," she said.

That doesn't mean little bunnies made from canned pear halves. Demas suggests heaping vegetables in bowls for use as pizza toppings. Have them arrange beautiful salads, build gingerbread houses and so on. Most important, "make it as enjoyable as possible," she advised.

Get their senses involved even before cooking. Let them smell, taste and feel some of the raw ingredients.

Where to get it

For more information on the "Food Is Elementary" book, write the Food Studies Institute, 60 Cayuga St., Trumansburg, N.Y. 14886.

Or call (607) 387-6884 and leave your name, address (please spell both) and phone number.

Or e-mail at antoniad8@yahoo.com.

If you're making waffles, keep the conversation going by describing different kinds of wheat (whole and white). If you're making applesauce, have the kids observe and taste different kinds of apples.

During the lessons she is now teaching in Miami, Demas has the children close their eyes as they taste the ingredients to block out other sensory inputs.

"It's really adorable," she said. "There's this spontaneous 'Mmmmmmmmm.'"