

KIDS AND FOOD

Getting past the "yuck" reaction



by Mary Zajac

Getting kids to eat their vegetables and taste new foods is a perennial challenge for parents and other adults. But through cooking, gardening, taking kids to farms, a dedicated group of people in our area have found effective ways to get past kids' "yuck" reactions, giving them access to a world of taste otherwise closed to them. Their programs differ, but these educators, chefs, community activists, and farmers around Baltimore and Washington, DC hope to have lasting impact on kids' lifelong cooking and eating habits.

1. FOOD IS ELEMENTARY AT HAMPSTEAD HILL ACADEMY

Ariel Demas is a dynamo. Part teacher, part cheerleader, part television chef, Demas welcomes fourth graders by name into her classroom at Hampstead Hill Academy, a pre-K through 8 public charter school in the Canton neighborhood of Baltimore City. She asks them to recap what they made in their kitchen classroom last week—North African Stew. "And what did we eat with it?" she asks. "Couscous!" someone calls out. This is not your mother's Home Ec class.

Two days a week, Demas teaches classes based on the Food is Elementary curriculum written by her mother, Dr. Antonia Demas of the Food Studies Institute in Trumansburg, New York. The curriculum is designed to "integrate academic disciplines with food, nutrition, culture, and the arts [through]...experiential learning." Ariel Demas' classroom is model of this curriculum.

One day in May, Demas announces the students will make lentil soup and salad, pausing to ask if anyone remembers what a lentil is. Several voices supply the word bean, and when prompted, the students also remember that another word for bean is legume. The lesson is an amalgam of geography, tasting, hands-on cooking, and journaling. On a large, colorful world map, students find countries

where lentils are a staple food. Next, a tall, dark-haired girl named Asia reads aloud one of the day's recipes, carefully distinguishing between the small "t" abbreviation for teaspoon, and the large "T" for tablespoon. After she finishes, the class divides into two groups, one with Demas, the other under the supervision of a volunteer mom, and soon children are measuring out ingredients, peeling carrots, and showing me "the claw," a hand position that ensures no injuries when chopping vegetables. "No one ever cut themselves in my class," Demas boasts.

Funded by a grant from the Weinberg Foundation and donations from Whole Foods Market and the Home Depot, the Food for Life program at Hampstead Hill is regarded as a great success by the school's principal, Matt Hornbeck. "It's been a very, very good year." He notes several factors that make the program a good fit for his school, like the way the food principles are integrated into the curriculum, the way discussion about healthy eating translates into other conversations about "school readiness" or body image, and the way the students and parents both become involved in discussions of what's for dinner. "When kids know more about food and about making good choices," Hornbeck observes, "they take their enthusiasm home."

At the end of the year, Demas' class sponsored "A Taste of Hampstead Hill." Students prepared a huge spread of some of their favorite recipes including Tropical Fruit Salad and Red Beans and Rice. "This wasn't just a banquet," Principal Hornbeck recalls, "It was a feast." At six o'clock, students turned on some music, donned chef toques donated especially for the occasion, and opened the doors of the decorated cafeteria to their families and friends. "It was the grand culmination," Demas explains, her eyes

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sparkling, "People had huge platters of food and ate it all, and the kids were totally into it; it was their restaurant."

II. AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF WINE AND FOOD'S DAYS OF TASTE PROGRAM

The American Institute of Wine and Food's (AIWF) Days of Taste (DOT) Program has kids growing, tasting, and preparing food over a three-day period. This is a national program designed to teach children in predominantly urban environments about the food they eat, where it comes from, and how to prepare it. Although many individuals are involved in the Baltimore chapter, Ned Atwater, chef and owner of Atwater's in Belvedere Square and Riva Kahn, current Days of Taste Chairperson of the nationwide AIWF, are the prime movers behind Days of Taste.

Atwater is motivated by a reaction to the "damage" 1950s cooking had on his generation. He wants to teach kids about healthy eating before bad habits set in. Throwing down the gauntlet, Atwater says, "I am a chef; I am fighting back."

For six years, Atwater's has worked with several city elementary schools including Govans, Northwood, Waverly, and Medfield. Funding comes primarily from an auction AIWF holds every other year to raise money specifically for Days of Taste. The program also receives \$1000 annually from the Waverly Farmer's Market.

On the first day, a chef such as Atwater, Kahn or an area Harbor Court's Galen Sampson or Classic Catering's Harriet Dopkin leads activities like "tongue mapping"—where students taste powders like salt, sugar, cocoa, and citric acid in order to identify where certain flavors hit the tongue. "It's a lot of fun," Atwater comments, "And a lot of funny faces. Kids are a little nervous. They don't know us or what they're tasting."

On the second day, the class takes a fieldtrip to One Straw Farm in White Hall, Maryland where they meet the indefatigable Joan Norman. Norman wants to show students that all food comes from a farm, whether it's the cheese on their pizza or the tomatoes that make the sauce. Students always leave the farm remembering two things, Norman reports. One is the compost heap, about which a student wrote: "We learned that dried up soil is made out of poop, and it doesn't smell." The other is Norman's two bite rule. "I ask kids to take two bites of every vegetable they meet," Norman explains, in order to give vegetables a fair chance. At the end of the day, Norman sends the kids home with whatever vegetables are in season—kale, tomatoes, lettuce, so that "they have a piece of the farm to take home with them."

On the final day, a chef visits the classroom to teach students to make a salad, because as Riva Kahn of AIWF explains, "when the kids make the salad, it makes them feel pretty important; it makes them feel like chefs."

When Galen Sampson of Harbor Court visited Dallas-Nicholas Elementary this spring, he decided to teach kids "to make something they know," in this case a honey-mustard dressing (students often cite chicken fingers with honey mustard as their favorite food). Sampson teaches that there is an order to mixing vinaigrette; all ingredients don't get mixed at once. And he teaches them to adjust flavors to their own liking, showing them that the "recipe is 90% and the rest is up to their taste."

III. AGRICULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM (AITC) IN WASHINGTON, DC

AITC is a national teacher-training program that gives grants to teachers to integrate agriculture into school lessons. For instance, teachers at St. Anthony's school, in northwest DC, developed a science unit based on George Washington Carver's work with peanuts that involved the entire school.

When the USDA established the program nationally in 1981, the District of Columbia was overlooked. "This was simply an oversight on their part, not intentional," says Barbara Evans, Coordinator of DC AITC for the past 9 years. "It happens all the time with national programs because Washington, DC does not have statehood. People forget about us, or don't know what to do with us."

Evans, who was at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) coordinating a 4-H outreach program, made sure the oversight was corrected so that Washington, DC schools got their share of the funding. Through Evans' perseverance, the USDA awarded a grant to University of DC's Cooperative Extension Service to help jumpstart AITC teacher training programs. Since then, over sixty DC teachers, most from public schools, have gone through the training.

Evans is proud of the work accomplished by the program. "Entering our ninth year," she continues, "we have 3,000 students who know that the food we eat is not grown in Safeway." Part of the reason for this success is the AITC's collaboration with the Kids Growing Food program to fund school gardens.

Kids Growing Food, explains Margaret Barker, who has worked with the program for many years, "is a hands-on extension to Ag in the Classroom." Teachers identified by AITC apply to Kids Growing Food for \$500 start-up grants for their school gardens. (The organization has funded gardens in both the District and in Baltimore.) While the typical garden has mostly vegetables, some have spring fruits like strawberries or cane fruits like blackberries. Miner Elementary in DC opted for a creative take on container gardens, planting their lettuces and other vegetables in movable wheelbarrows. Two other District schools decided to plant fall gardens to teach children about seasonal growing.

Barker points out that the garden work is "experiential education" in that it gets students outside, working the soil (often with adults or other members of the school's "garden team"), observing how vegetables and fruit are grown and "applying agricultural lessons to something that is real and genuine." As Barbara Evans notes, "Agriculture is everything. It's food, clothing, shelter. I don't know what it's not."

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