Kids in the Kitchen

By Chef Bette Fraser

With our hectic family and work lives, it is a wonder that we have time for ourselves, let alone time to cook a healthy and delicious meal each and every day. As a professional chef, I have the same problem. When you add cooking with kids to the mix, your task snowballs!

We continually read that we should feed our children (and ourselves) healthier and more nutritious food. But, how exactly do you go about do that? Countless articles are written and they make it all seem so simple, assuming that you have nothing more to do than get your nails done or wait for the housekeeper to tidy up. Reality is dirty laundry and a hungry family.

One of the ways you can eat a healthier meal, spend some quality time with your kids AND cook dinner is to get the kids involved in the process of making dinner. While cooking will feed your stomach (and your soul) it will also teach your kids a variety of other valuable lessons. Organization, creativity, nutrition, kitchen safety, math, reading, art, time management, making mistakes and most importantly, healthy eating habits are just some of the life skills that your child will learn after each time in the kitchen.

When I taught an after school cooking class for 2-5 graders, we spent time discussing the ingredients, tasting, smelling and understanding the food. Some of the kids thought lettuce came in bags, because that is how their Moms brought it home from the supermarket. One day, I brought in 5 heads of different lettuces. They were amazed that there were that many kinds (as were some of the Moms that were in attendance). One boy in particular, said he had no plans on eating anything green and leafy. We made Caesar salad that day. I had the kids smell the Worcestershire sauce (a big yuck!) and the anchovy paste (yummy). Who would have thought? (Interestingly, Worcestershire sauce has anchovies as an ingredient.) Of course, they had no idea what anchovy paste was, but it is an essential ingredient in Caesar salad dressing. Anchovy paste is a bit milder than anchovy filets (packed in oil or salt) and available at most markets, so I believe this a good way to introduce most people to a good homemade Caesar dressing. Note: if you are allergic to certain shellfish, you may want to avoid anchovies.

Well, after we made the salad, dressing, croutons and grated the Parmesan cheese, the same boy who refused to eat the leafy greens, ate 5 bowls of the salad, to the complete astonishment of his mother. She said he had never eaten a salad before in his life and he was 9 years old. Sometimes, you just have to get them into the kitchen and let them cook.

Here is my recipe for Caesar Salad:

For the dressing:
½ cup mayonnaise
1 teaspoon lemon juice
½ tablespoon red wine vinegar
½ tablespoon Dijon mustard
5 drops Worcestershire sauce
½ tablespoon anchovy paste
½ tablespoon garlic clove, smashed
Salt and pepper, to taste

For the salad:
1 head romaine lettuce, torn or chopped
Croutons
¼ cup Parmesan cheese, grated



In a small bowl, whisk together the mayonnaise, lemon juice, red wine vinegar, mustard, Dijon mustard, anchovy and garlic. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Can be made ahead and set aside, covered, in the refrigerator.

Chop or tear the romaine lettuce into bite size pieces and place in a salad or serving bowl. Toss with the prepared salad dressing and top with croutons and the grated Parmesan cheese.

Come and join us at NorthWest Crossing on October 16 from 10-3PM at the old Riley's Market location. We are going to have a fun day of Halloween cupcake and pumpkin decorating. The event is $5 per child and parents are welcome.

Chef Bette Fraser is the owner/proprietor of The Well Traveled Fork in Bend, Oregon. Visit their web site at www.welltraveledfork.com, find them on Facebook or call 541 312-0097 for more information.

Here are some tips for success in the kitchen with your child:

First, let them smell and taste each of the ingredients for the salad dressing. They can either measure the ingredients themselves, or you can help them measure. FYI, a ½ tablespoon is 1 ½ teaspoons.

Second, they can chop or tear the lettuce for the salad. There are wonderful hard plastic knives available that are kid friendly. They are perfect for cutting lettuce and other vegetables. This will develop their hand and motor skills and make them realize just exactly what size lettuce should be in a salad. Just keep on eye on them while they are using the hard plastic knives.

Third, have them grate the Parmesan cheese. Parmesan cheese (as it is called in the United States) or Parmigiano Reggiano (in Italy) is one of the most easily digestible foods; in fact youngsters in Italy are given Parmesan cheese to eat as it is a mild cheese and full of protein, calcium and nutrients.

Once you and your kids make this salad dressing, there won't be a need to buy the salad dressings at the market. The salad dressings at the market are full of ingredients we can't spell and pronounce and they are expensive. You can also make your own croutons with leftover bread, sprinkled with a bit of olive oil, fresh or dried herbs and baked in a 350° oven for about 10 minutes or until crispy.

A head of fresh romaine lettuce from the farmers' market or the produce stand is big and beautiful, with dark outer leaves and light colored inner leaves or heart. Usually, the supermarket will only sell the bags of "romaine hearts" for a pretty penny or the bags of "Caesar Salad" that end up tasting artificial and bland compared to the real thing. Try it this weekend with your children and see the difference that 15 minutes can make in their lives and yours.

Hopefully it will become a mainstay in your household.

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