

## LIFE

### KIDS-ONLY CLASSES FOCUS ON HOW TO EAT TO LIVE



PATRICIA BECK/Detroit Free Press

Angelina Eovaldi, 4, of Macomb Township measures flour during a class at the Young Chefs Academy in Shelby Township. Parents and teachers hope the kids will learn about good eating habits and maybe change their minds about some foods.

## Cooking up healthy eaters

By CECILIA OLECK  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A hum of voices crescendos from the kitchen as 14 apron-clad cooks check out the evening's recipes.

Banana empanadas with raisins and a Caribbean-inspired mix of white rice, pineapple, red peppers, green onions and sweet potatoes are on the menu.

The chefs clip the recipes into personalized three-ring binders with sections for breakfast, lunch, dinner and snack foods.

It's just another night at the Young Chefs Academy in Shelby Township.

The cooks are pint-size, all between 4 and 8 years old. The cabinets are painted with bright shades of green, purple and pink.

And the fresh, flavorful ingredients the kids cook with on a recent Monday don't exactly get a warm welcome. "Sweet potatoes! Eeww!" a girl says.

"I don't know if I like that," another one chimes in.

Protests aside, the kids take turns measuring flour



Johnathan Stark, 6, of Macomb Township cuts shortening and flour for banana empanadas during class Monday.

#### Cooking with your kids

- At the grocery store, let children choose fruits and vegetables or other healthy foods — if they pick it, they're more likely to eat it.
- Make the work area kid-friendly by keeping a bowl or pan ready to catch spills.
- Start with simple recipes — muffins, pasta, smoothies, snacks and fun sandwiches — then move up to more difficult ones as the children gain skills and confidence.
- Have them wash fruits and vegetables, pour ingredients, stir mixtures and cut or roll dough.
- Older children can help cut up ingredients, grate cheese and stir food over a stove.
- Let kids invent their own recipes.

Source: Free Press research

See COOK, 2C

Julia Meisel, 7, of Shelby Township chops a banana for the empanadas.



■ Go to [www.freep.com](http://www.freep.com) for recipes for Banana Empanadas and Caribbean Rice.

# COOK | Kids-only classes teach kids how to eat to live

From Page 1C

and salt, chopping bananas with a large green plastic knife and cutting up the peppers and onions with smaller plastic knives.

Such is cooking at the Young Chefs Academy — a kids-only school where children learn their way around the kitchen, make recipes together, then go home and test them out.

It's just one of the places in metro Detroit where kids are being taught to cook in hopes that it will help them lead healthier lives.

With an estimated 30% of children in the United States ages 6-11 overweight and 15% considered obese, nutrition educators, parents and teachers are encouraging children to learn how to cook as one way to stem the obesity epidemic.

Parents and teachers hope the young chefs will learn about nutrition, good eating habits and maybe even change their minds about some foods — like sweet potatoes — that are not always kid-embraced.

They reason that the more children learn about and begin to eat healthy foods, the less likely they are to fill up on fatty fare.

The thinking behind teaching children to cook: When kids are involved in preparing their own food, they're more likely to make better food choices and try different things.

"In the nutrition education world, there has been a big emphasis on having kids cook their own foods," says Julie Lumeng, an assistant professor in the pediatrics department at C.S. Mott's Children Hospital in Ann Arbor and a research scientist at the Center for Human Growth and Development at the University of Michigan. "So much of what we're eating today is at restaurants or store-bought, having children handle and cook the food would theoretically help them understand what is going into their bodies."

While the idea makes sense, Lumeng — who specializes in research into children's eating behaviors and childhood obesity — says that there haven't been enough studies done to determine if teaching kids to cook helps to prevent obesity.

"This is one of those cases where the idea makes a lot of sense and I think the data will catch up to it," she says.

**FOR 15-YEAR-OLD MARTIN SINGLETON** of Rochester, learning to cook helped him to lose about 100 pounds two years ago.

As a 13-year-old, Martin says he weighed more than 200 pounds — weight he gained mostly from eating a steady diet of candy bars, doughnuts and other junk food. He used to sneak treats from the kitchen so that his mother, Teri Singleton, wouldn't know how much he was eating.

It wasn't until Martin started having chest pains and also experienced the death of his grandfather from cancer that he decided to lose weight.



Photos by PATRICIA SECK/Detroit Free Press

**MOMENT OF TRUTH:** McKenna Meyer, left, 7, of Utica; Nicolette Monacelli, 7, of Shelby Township, and Kendal Masters, 8, of Washington Township taste the banana empanadas and Caribbean rice they made.

## Find cooking classes for kids:

**Junior League of Ann Arbor Kids in the Kitchen:** Nutrition, cooking and fitness expo for girls ages 8-13. Noon to 5 p.m. Monday at Tappan Middle School, 2251 E. Stadium Boulevard, Ann Arbor, [www.jlaa.org](http://www.jlaa.org). Free.

**Young Chefs Academy:** Locations in Shelby Township and Kalamazoo, with a Northville site scheduled to open in March, [www.youngchefsacademy.com](http://www.youngchefsacademy.com). \$225 for 13 weeks; \$30 drop-in class fee.

**Zingerman's Bakehouse Bake! School:** 3711 Plaza Drive, Ann Arbor, [www.zingermansbakehouse.com](http://www.zingermansbakehouse.com). \$40-\$120.

**Macomb County Michigan State University Extension:** 21885 Dunham Road, Suite 12, Clinton Township. Class series are for parents and children to learn cooking and communication skills. Upcoming session begins March 10 for dads and their children. Call 586-469-5180 for more information. \$10 for a 4-week series.

**Nanny's Kitchen:** 304 East Street, Rochester, 248-651-1622, [www.nannyskitchen.com](http://www.nannyskitchen.com). \$45 per class.

**Kids Cooking Rocks! at St. Joseph Mercy Health System:** Cooking for 9-13 year olds. From 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. Feb. 27 at the Ellen Thompson Women's Health Center, 5320 Elliott Drive, Ypsilanti. Call 734-712-5800 or go to [www.sjmercyhealth.org](http://www.sjmercyhealth.org). \$30. (Other children's classes also offered.)

He did it in six months by learning to cook healthy recipes based on research he did on the Internet. Fish, grains and vegetables became staples.

"Cooking for myself helped me to know what I really needed and what I didn't want," says Martin.

While Martin never took a cooking class — learning instead from his mom and grandmother — he hopes his success will encourage other kids to learn to cook. He's planning to write a cookbook.

"I like to cook for myself. It's a learning process," says Martin.

Even children who aren't overweight or obese can benefit from learning to cook, parents say.

**PLACES LIKE YOUNG CHEFS ACADEMY,** a Texas company with three franchises in Michigan (Shelby Township, Northville and Kalamazoo), cater exclusively to children, offering weekly cooking classes, as well as birthday parties and other special events.

Other groups, like Junior League International and Macomb County Michigan State University Extension also offer programs that teach kids how to make meals, snacks and

healthy nutritional choices.

In cooking classes, children prepare and then taste meals with fresh ingredients, including some — like broccoli — that many normally would balk at eating. They're also taught how to look for fresh vegetables at the grocery store, understand nutrition labels and encouraged to help mom and dad with the shopping.

While parents and teachers laud the health benefits of such classes, kids enjoy the fun aspects.

"I like to crack eggs," says Johnathan Stark, 6, of Macomb Township. He and brother Alex, 7, attend cooking lessons at Young Chefs Academy.

"They love cooking at home," says Carla Stark, 35, the boys' mother. "But they would throw things together and waste my food... My husband and I thought this would be a great way for them to explore different foods."

That cooking currently has cachet with kids is helpful.

"It's a national trend right now," says Christy Hoban, an organizer for the Junior League International of Ann Arbor's Kids in the Kitchen event, which is Monday. It's designed to help children develop healthy lifestyles. "Six-year-

olds today know who Rachael Ray is or who Emeril is. Kids are picking up on that, on how cool it is to be a chef or a cook."

The Detroit chapter of Junior League International hosted a Kids in the Kitchen event last week at Hope Community Church in Detroit that drew 65 children.

Parents are benefiting, too. Cooking instructors say that many parents either don't know how to cook or don't have the time. When their kids start cooking, it prompts them to spend more time in the kitchen.

Tony Guido, a 46-year-old from Clinton Township, says that since he and his 10-year-old daughter Angela took a four-week cooking and communication course last month at Macomb County MSU Extension, they've cut down on eating at fast food restaurants.

Armed with the lessons they learned at the course, the pair is trying to spend more time in the kitchen together.

"It's great quality time," says Guido. "This is going to make it simpler and ultimately more healthy."

By the time the recent cooking session at Young Chefs Academy ends, there are still a few mild protests from the young cooks, some of whom must be prodded to taste the mix of rice, veggies and fruit on their plates and the Banana Empanadas.

But most of them pick up their forks and dig in to sample their work.

Eight-year-old Kendal Masters' face screws up as she tastes the meal.

"Eeww!" she says.

But others find the palate more pleasing.

"Mmm, I like the sweet potatoes!" says 7-year-old McKenna Meyer, of Utica. "I like trying the different things that we make."

And that's exactly the point.

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