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Turning A New Leaf: Helene Harvey Shares the Joy of Cooking with Nashville's Youngest Chefs

By Stephen Ornes



At nine o'clock in the morning, four chefs report to a kitchen in West Nashville to prepare for the lunch rush.

Each one selects a toque and puts it on; with the help of the master chef they tie aprons around their waists. They're chatty, and their words tumble over each other as they talk about hobbies and friends, then move on to the tasks at hand. Two of them start scrubbing potatoes, and the other two pull broccoli crowns apart.

The meals they are preparing are vegetarian, made with mostly organic and/or local ingredients. Today's menu includes broccoli, fried rice, oven-roasted potatoes, and egg drop soup.

Like other eateries around Nashville, this one quickly gets busy. Diners show up hungry, and they get grumpy if they have to wait too long to eat. Unlike nearby restaurants, this dining room isn't open to the public. Most unusual of all, these chefs haven't trained at the finest culinary institutes, and they're not exactly well-seasoned. The youngest is two years old, and the oldest is four.

"Did you make a decision about whether you want to steam or stir fry the broccoli?" asks H el ene Harvey, adult and master chef. By now, three of the children are too busy to answer, chopping potatoes with six-inch-wide metal pastry scrapers. A little chef in a purple shirt and orange apron hops with her strong opinion as she struggles to find the right words. She's barely two. After a few tries, she makes herself understood.

*"Stir fry!" Chef Purple says firmly.
"Stir fry it is!" says Miss H el ene.*

These chefs are students at A New Leaf, a preschool that occupies half of Harvey's house and her entire backyard. Every day, four students become "little chefs" and spend two hours or more preparing the meal for their classmates. I am familiar with



the ritual—my son is a “little chef” on Thursdays—but until a recent day in January I had never watched from beginning to end.

As a parent, I’m heartened to see four kids completely engrossed in the careful preparation of food. They chop vegetables and herbs, brush oil on potatoes, and crack eggs into a bowl (from which shell fragments are easily removed). Their techniques are impressive, and Harvey tells me she spends a lot of time on training.

The chefs cook the food at a custom-built hot table with three holes—two for bowls and one with an electric skillet mounted beneath. They sauté with ease, and without burns. Attention wanes occasionally; at one point in the morning, a chef in pink declares her work finished and wanders away. She bounces back into the kitchen when Harvey invites her to stir the fried rice. And when she asks to sample her dish, she’s allowed.

“It’s really good for them to see and taste the food while they’re preparing it,” Harvey says. “That’s what it’s really about, to get them to enjoy food.” She encourages them to taste their creations, but after they do, they have to pause to wash their hands, after which they can return to the fray.

Today, a four-year-old chef in orange—who had earlier had a disagreement about a scrubbing brush—stir-fries broccoli to perfection in a mixture of soy sauce and sesame oil. He leans toward the skillet, gently wafts the steam toward his face, and inhales deeply with his eyes closed.

“Miss Nicole! Miss Nicole! Smell the broccoli!” he calls out to a teacher who is walking by the kitchen.

“I can smell it over here, and it smells just delicious,” says Nicole Hubbell, who teaches and helps with administrative work at the school. “I can’t wait to eat lunch today. I’m so excited.”

“I can’t wait to taste the broccoli!” he says.

The ingredients come from farms, farmers’ markets, and grocery stores that sell organic foods, and their own garden, and Harvey enjoys taking the students to farms to see where the food is grown. During one school year much of the produce came from Bramble Hill Farm, near Goodlettsville. The farm was run by a part-time teacher at the school, Stephanie Roberts, and her fiancé, Bret Morris, who were featured in Local Table’s 2009 article, “Growing Young Farmers.” In the spring, the students plant a garden, filling the beds with tomatoes, peppers, and kale (or “king kale,” as it’s known at A New Leaf). Harvey also sets up a wooden tepee, which quickly disappears beneath vines carrying peas and beans.

Before she started a school, Harvey trained as an ecologist and biologist. Not surprisingly, lunchtime preparations seamlessly morph into science lessons. As the children cook, Harvey explains which parts of plants are represented in their menus. Potatoes are stems; broccoli crowns are flower buds; a grain of rice is a seed. She writes out the scientific names for the different plants and talks about how they grow.

She says cooking has been integral part of A New Leaf since she started the school in 2005. “From the start, the children were very involved in preparing the food,” she says. “I’ve done so much outreach education with science projects that it was easy to transfer that experience to cooking. We’ve developed strategies over the years, but it’s always an improvisation to some extent.”

Cooking naturally lends itself to learning a wide variety of academic skills, Harvey says. Her students count, sort, and organize. They may not be able to add fractions, but they know that a half-teaspoon is more than a quarter-teaspoon. They measure and mix; some can tell the difference between smoke and steam.

Nicole Hubbell says being a little chef is important to the children. “The kids really look forward to their days as chefs, and it helps them enjoy what they’re eating at lunchtime.” Plus, she says, the benefits go home with the students, who become more comfortable cooking and eating healthy food at home.

Once the kitchen is tidied and the food prepared, the children sprawl out on a rug and use crayons and colored pencils to draw the menu. When lunchtime arrives, the rest of the students file into the room and watch as the little chefs present the menu, course by course, using their visual guides to whet their classmates’ appetites. The other students can ask questions; Harvey gently prompts the chefs to discuss the process of preparing the food.

The students congregate around long, low tables set with napkins in napkin rings and mugs for milk. But they don’t dig in without a note of gratitude to the little chefs of the day.

“We are thankful for the food prepared for us,” they say—first in French, then in English. (Much of A New Leaf’s curriculum is taught in both French and English.) The expression of gratitude continues, “We thank you for being good friends. We are thankful for the love among us.”

And finally, fittingly, “Bon appétit!”

Stephen Ornes writes from an office shed in his backyard in Nashville, Tennessee. Visit him online and read more articles at stephenornes.com.