

Cooking teacher whips up kids' interest in food

[Edward Guthmann, Special to The Chronicle](#)

Monday, September 21, 2009

If you give kids junk food, they go for it. But if you give them healthy, fresh, organic food, says Michael Bauce, they eventually learn to like it. Especially if they have a hand in the preparation.

At Thousand Oaks Elementary School in Berkeley, Bauce (rhymes with "ouch") teaches basic cooking and nutrition to 438 students. He advocates whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and says even the most skeptical young eater can learn to like hummus, nori seaweed and miso soup.

Bauce, 54, is widowed and lives in Berkeley. He has two sons, 24 and 19, and a steady girlfriend.

When we started this program in 1999, the children in the school district were very hesitant to try anything. I cooked vegetables, I cooked soup - things I thought they would be interested in. And I would get maybe a third of the class to try it.

Ten years later, things have really changed. We get almost 100 percent participation in every class, no matter what I make. It could be Three Sisters Stew with pinto beans, corn and squash. Or sautéed broccoli and cauliflower with garlic and olive oil and salt. And they will be very enthusiastic about trying. It's amazing to see.

This is the place where many of them get exposed to real food for the first time. A lot of kids just eat junk food. They don't even have dinner with their family. It's shocking. If I ask, "How many of you eat dinner with your family at home at night?" less than half the hands go up.

There are 21 classes at Thousand Oaks and each class comes in every two weeks. We go through an entire recipe. The first thing the kids do is wash their hands. They put on an apron. They all sit down, and I get up and tell them about the harvest of the month.

This month it's tomatoes and we're making tomato salsa. I talk about the other fruits and vegetables we're using in the recipe, give a little nutritional information. We twist the little greens off the cherry tomatoes. Dice them. We cut the cucumbers, keeping the skins on because that's where a lot of the fiber is.

We mix it together and the kids get in line with spoons to stir the ingredients. Then they wash their cutting boards. We set the table with bowls and utensils. We sit down. Everyone has to be quiet. No one eats until we say the magic words, "Bon appetit, let's eat."

Some of the things I've introduced were a hard sell. Curried chickpea vegetables. Hummus. But in cooking class we have the Three Bite Rule. If someone doesn't like the sound of something, they have to try three bites.

The kids who say "I don't want to try this" are the same ones who, once they try a bite, want seconds and thirds.

How I got into this was, my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer almost 20 years ago. So we changed the way that we lived: I quit my work as a keyboardist in reggae, soca and calypso bands, and we started eating macrobiotically. It actually gave her 10 years of good, quality life. Then one day she got this lump that got bigger and bigger, and nothing really addressed it. She died in 1998.



We'd been doing a macrobiotic meal-delivery service out of my home. When my wife passed away I got a phone call from Yolanda Huang, the woman who wrote the grant for this program, asking if I was interested in teaching cooking classes in Berkeley. It was perfect because I was so into my kitchen and preparing meals that I wasn't really connecting with people in the community.

It's hard for a lot of kids to sit down and relax and be quiet and listen. I tell them that food doesn't affect just your health; it also affects your emotions, your behavior, your appearance. Some kids have kind of a hard life, a bad diet. There's a big economic gap among these kids in Berkeley: some from poor families, some that are well-to-do.

I've never had a parent say, "Don't tell me how to feed my child." In fact, I get the opposite. I get mothers who come up to me and say, "My son wants to go shopping with me now. I can't buy canned food; I have to buy fresh vegetables." Or, "My husband just lost 30 pounds. This diet has improved our lives."

Do you or someone you know have a work story to share? E-mail Edward Guthmann at datebookletters@sfgate.com. This article has been corrected since it appeared in print editions.

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This article appeared on page C - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle