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PREMIER ISSUE 2010



TEEN IRON CHEF

Empowering Today's Youth

By: Sheryl Crutchfield

Adolescence and food seem to go together like two peas in a pod. Unfortunately, studies have shown as teens begin making more autonomous choices regarding nutrition, often poor dietary habits ensue. Increased fast food consumption, meal skipping and inappropriate dieting can quickly become the norm. But what if our youth became more knowledgeable, skilled and enthusiastic about cooking and

making healthy food decisions instead?

The Teen Iron Chef program, developed by FamilyCook Productions in New York City, is a youth culinary and nutrition skill-building program that opens new horizons for adolescents and food. During seven weeks of two-hour, after-school sessions, teens learn about garden-to-table food preparation and how to educate their peers as well.

“Young teens are a pivotal age group in the community, with the ability to act as messengers and role models to inspire younger children, peers and elders,” – Lynn Fredericks

According to author Lynn Fredericks, the founder of FamilyCook Productions, the sessions are a refreshing departure from classroom style learning. Each week, two teams explore a specific culture's food through preparing a recipe and competing against each other in food presentation, and the culture and nutritional significance of their assigned recipe.

“Teen Iron Chef is a youth development program that's really about teamwork, youth empowerment, transforming one's knowledge about food and cooking, finding out more about who you are, and celebrating enjoyment of good food,” says Fredericks.

Participants and their mentors describe an impressive array of newfound skills and abilities such as working as a team, following directions and sharing responsibility. The teens also gain self-confidence, public speaking and problem-solving skills, health literacy and experience testing their creativity through trying new foods.

A rewarding and perhaps somewhat surprising outcome of Teen Iron Chef is the leadership role that students gravitate toward in their communities as activists and educators. Much of this enthusiasm is directed toward promoting good nutrition, sustainable food systems, healthy food choices and local food production.

Teen Iron Chefs become community ambassadors on changing attitudes toward healthy eating. “They are bursting with enthusiasm to share with others and become catalysts for change. They really want to do something powerful and set an example,” adds Fredericks.

Giovanni Edwards, one of the founders of the youth farmer's market program in New York City, loves when the Teen Iron Chefs come to do cooking demos. “With youth working at the market, we can get more knowledge to schools, friends and parents,” says Edwards. “Friends can tell friends and hopefully change the way they eat. It can start a chain reaction and hopefully there will be a domino effect which will change the health of our neighbors, our community and one day even our nation!”

In fact, the youth leadership potential of the Teen Iron Chef program has attracted the attention of author and cardiac surgeon Dr. Mehmet Oz, well known from “The Oprah Winfrey Show.” In cooperation with FamilyCook Productions, he is incorporating the Teen Iron Chef curriculum as part of his Health Corps organization — a national network of high school peer mentoring programs that aims to engage and educate America's youth and families in making healthy lifestyle choices. ©



The Teen Iron Chef program will be implemented in 50 Health Corps-designated high schools in nine states during the 2009-2010 school years.

For more information, visit familycookproductions.com and healthcorps.org.

Goals of the TEEN IRON CHEF curriculum



Develop confidence in meal preparation and planning.

Develop an adventurous nature about trying new foods with friends and family.

Absorb nutrition fundamentals that are fun and easy to understand.

Experience conviviality sharing a meal with friends and family.

Practice cultural awareness and tolerance.

Practice teamwork toward a common goal.

Learn and practice basic cooking skills using fresh, healthful ingredients.

Become peer educators and promote cooking and healthy eating to others.

Practice public speaking and presentation skills.

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Spices pg. 38: ©iStockphoto.com/Synergee
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Photos from Top:

1. Cooking up a seasonal meal at the 47th street Greenmarket in Manhattan.
2. Dr. Mehmet Oz taking time to congratulate the popular Teen Iron Chefs at his "Highway to Health"
3. Teen Iron Chefs whip up quesadillas to order at HealthCorps "Highway to Health" in Brooklyn.
4. Youth market Manager Giovanni Edwards helping Teen Iron Chefs spice things up in the Bronx.
5. The Chefs prepare for a celebration by leading cooking activity with younger peers in the school garden.
6. FCP Founder Lynn Fredericks with veteran Iron Chef Camilla.
7. Teen Iron Chefs present African dish for youth delegates of the United Nations Committee on Sustainable Development.

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