

Project breaks eggs and barriers

Youth learn teamwork and cooking skills in program that boasts 80 per cent success rate

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It's almost time for lunch and the crew in the kitchen is putting final touches on the meal for about 30 hungry guests.

Robert, 18, has just finished chopping fresh garlic for his dressing. The salad maestro adds a touch of honey, raspberry jam, Dijon mustard and red-wine vinegar to the oil. The dressing's so good, you could eat it by the spoonful.

On the other side of the room, Alex Irwin, 18, brushes oil on thin sheets of phyllo pastry, piling one on top of the next before laying down a banana and gingerly sprinkling with sugar, nutmeg and cinnamon. He rolls the pastry around the fruit. "Badda boom, badda bing, it's done," he says with a smile.

Across the stainless steel table, Brent George, 29, is also working his magic on spring rolls that smell divine. They taste even better.

He's focused, stopping only to talk about what he's learned since joining the Focus on Food Youth Intern Project at FoodShare. That includes kitchen basics such as the proper use of a knife, how to cut vegetables and teamwork.

His specialty is rice. "They call me Uncle Ben," he says referring to the rice brand. George kicks up the lowly grain several notches with turmeric, coconut milk, "and love, of course."

It's the secret ingredient in all the dishes prepared in the FoodShare kitchen, where interns 15 to 30 years old gather each day to prepare meals for the agency's staff while learning marketable skills.

Tawnya Zaino, 20, loves to bake. It's a science and she's mastered it. Just try her lemon yogurt pound cake. But Zaino says she's learned something even more important. "To be successful in the kitchen requires teamwork. We each play a role."



MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR

Focus on Food interns Brent George, front left, and, clockwise, Tawnya Zaino and Alex Irwin take instruction on how to make banana wraps from Chef Jesús Gomez, middle right, and program co-ordinator Morris Komakech, front right. The interns cook at FoodShare and learn marketable skills.

Daniel Campbell, 22, nods in agreement. An artist, he brings his creative talents to the kitchen table. His presentations turn even the most humble vegetable into a thing of beauty that looks too good to eat.

Before becoming interns, Campbell and the others had never worked in a kitchen. Today, they're considering careers as chefs.

Focus on Food is among several FoodShare programs helping young people facing barriers to employment. Some are newcomers and need to improve their language skills. Others have learning disabilities, mental health issues or live in transitional housing. And there are those who've grown up being told

they can't do this or that, says Morris Komakech, the program's co-ordinator.

"Here, all barriers are broken," he says adding respect — for food, for the tools and for each other is as important as following a recipe.

The result is a program with an 80 per cent success rate. At the end of the six-month internships — other programs include working in the FoodShare warehouse, office or urban garden — participants are out working or are back in school. While they're interns, Resource Development Canada pays minimum wage. United Way of Toronto helps support FoodShare programs.

Jesús Gomez is among the success stories.

He was an intern about three years ago, working in the FoodShare kitchen when he couldn't find a job after graduating from culinary management at George Brown College. Today, the master chef is intern supervisor in the Focus on Food program and kitchen, which runs like a finely tuned machine under his watchful eye.

"The best part about the job is making a difference in the lives of young people," he said adding his role is to guide as well as learn from the interns. "We open doors for them and they walk through."

And unlike the nightmarish kitch-

ens of foul-mouthed celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay, "the only time there are tears here is when we cut onions," Gomez added with pride.

Established in 1985, FoodShare is a front-line agency working to improve access to affordable and healthy food from field to table and is among 200 United Way health and social service agencies.

UNITED WAY

2008 campaign goal:
\$110 million

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