

Future Chefs aims to broaden horizons of students

BY REBECCA BAKKEN
Special to CityLife

KALAMAZOO — Local chefs, farmers and food experts came together to teach Kalamazoo teens about the benefits of eating local, organic food and cooking their own meals in a class called Future Chefs.

The class is one of many Youth Development Center Programs put on by the Kalamazoo Department of Parks and Recreation during the summer, and it takes place at the Oakwood Neighborhood Center for 13- to 18-year-olds.

The instructor is produce manager at the People's Food Co-op, Rosie Florian. The class began with Florian asking the six students to name their favorite foods.

Responses ranged from bacon cheese fries with onions and ranch dressing, to gourmet steak to "anything that's fun to throw."

After giving the students a brief overview of what is in store, the first presenter, Dennis Wilcox, owner of Blue Dog Greens organic farm in Bangor, came in to talk to the young chefs about the benefits of buying local and organic.

Wilcox began by telling the students that organic food is "the real thing." He explained that organic farming does not use synthetic pesticides and told them about some organic methods of pest control.



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Students Ayanna Gray, from right, DeRon Adler, Joshua Gonzales and Tyler Kuiper cut potatoes during the Future Chefs class at the Oakwood Neighborhood Center for 13- to 18-year-olds.

"If you're organic, you look at things with a holistic approach," Wilcox said.

He said buying local is important because it supports the local economy and produce grown locally is fresher.

"When you buy those groceries, you support those farmers in Mexico, Texas or Califor-

nia. You're supporting those who aren't living here, they're not shopping here or paying taxes here," Wilcox said.

Wilcox supplies produce to restaurants like Food Dance Cafe and Sprout and also to the People's Food Co-op. He brought in kale, onions, garlic, turnips, herbs, potatoes and

beets from his farm for the students to cook with.

Owner and head chef at Sprout, Rob Hammond, was there to give the students a lesson in cooking. He also explained the concept of his restaurant, which involves as much local food as possible.

Hammond said produce

brought in from warmer climates is often picked before it has ripened, then blasted with ethylene gas to give it color, but the gas does not actually ripen the fruit.

"If I get a tomato from Dennis (Wilcox), it's ripe then. It might only last three or four days. (Ethylene blasted tomatoes) are not ripe, they're chalky on the inside," Hammond said. "My customers aren't paying for cheap, they're paying for good taste."

"There's nothing you need that the Earth won't give you," he said while peeling potatoes with a paring knife.

After the lecture, Hammond taught the students about kitchen safety, how to hold their knives and the importance of hand-washing. He then decided they would be making potato-kale soup.

Hammond gave each student a peeled potato and taught them how to turn a whole potato into a baton and then how to turn the potato batons into diced potatoes. The potatoes were dumped into boiling water.

Then, the kale: Wilcox brought in both dark kale and curly kale, which the students de-stemmed and chopped to go into a saute pan with garlic, fresh oregano, lemon, thyme and oil.

Hammond pureed the cooked potatoes with their cooking liquid and the kale in a food processor. To finish, he added salt and

Parmesan cheese just before the students and teachers dug in to the communal bowl with spoons, savoring the finished product.

The future chefs were pleased with the experience they had during the first class, and eager to learn more.

"We actually got to do stuff. Anything that can teach me about cooking is what I want to learn," said Lyndsey Ritchie, 16.

"It was good because I don't really dice well, and I got to learn that," said Ayanna Gray, 16, who aspires to be a pastry chef. "We have a big family, so I do a lot of cooking at home."

Instructor Rosie Florian said she hopes to broaden the horizons of the students, in terms of food. She plans on introducing concepts like slow food and fair trade in upcoming classes.

"I want it to be all-encompassing, not just slicing tomatoes," Florian said.

Future Chefs is a partner with Fair Food Matters, an educational food resource, which helped bring different chefs and presenters to the program.

Classes are every Wednesday until July 30, not including field trips. They will be accepting new students until the class has reached capacity. For information, go to www.kalamazoo-city.org and type "future chefs" into their search engine or call (269) 337-8009.

EFE students showcase skills at national competition

Two students from the Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency's Education for Employment (EFE) program competed at the recent Health Occupation Students of Amer-

ica (HOSA) National Leadership Conference in Dallas.

Maggie Fish, a recent graduate of Hackett Catholic Central High School, and Caitlyn Tunnecliffe, a graduate of Gull Lake High

School, competed against students from across the United States in the veterinary assisting skill category. Fish placed third in the nation at the event.

Both students participated in

the EFE veterinary science program before graduating from high school this spring. They said the national conference was a valuable opportunity to apply the practical skills they

learned in the classroom.

Tunnecliffe plans to attend Western Michigan University and Fish will continue her education at Michigan State University.

EFE, a division of KRESA, is a

nationally recognized career preparation program that provides students with work experience and hands-on training. The veterinary science program is taught by Christopher Rohwer.