

# A recipe for literacy calls for a dash of math, science - and knife skills

By Philadelphia Inquirer, adapted by Newsela staff

Jun. 16, 2014 4:00 AM



Chef Jose Garces (left) offers knife skill tips to future culinary students (from left) Juventino Martinez, Javier Aguilar and Jeronimo Cabrera as they slice red onions at the new Culinary Literacy Center at the Free Library of Philadelphia, June 2, 2014.

PHILADELPHIA—Chef Marc Vetri positioned Max Kane, 12, and his brother Grant, 9, in front of a cutting board.

“Here’s what I want you to do,” the chef behind two famous Philadelphia restaurants began somberly. “Don’t cut yourself.”

In between swigs of olive oil and wisecracks, he imparted knife skills and food-preparation techniques. He also taught a killer panzanella recipe—an Italian summer salad—to a crowd that included restaurant workers with limited English, kids finding their way around the kitchen for the first time, and parents and grandparents.

They are the target audience that will be served by the new Culinary Literacy Center of the Free Library, Philadelphia’s public library system. The center opened Monday with demonstrations from Vetri and fellow chef Jose Garces.

## **Cooking Up A Good Use Of Space**

The first-of-its-kind program merges cooking and nutrition training with literacy, math and science education. Its home is in a sparkling new demonstration kitchen in the Central Library.

Siobhan Reardon is the library's executive director. She said that the idea was born out of discussions about what to do with an unused space on the fourth floor, which had once housed a cafeteria.

She saw an opportunity to create new programming, while addressing a startling statistic. At least half of Philadelphia adults—half a million people—are “low literate,” according to a 2009 report by the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corp. A person who is “low literate” would have trouble filling out a job application or following written directions.

Cooking is “science, it’s math, it’s literacy—and it’s fun,” Reardon said. “A lot of people who are low literacy don’t typically come to the library, because they’re concerned about their literacy level. So this is a way to say, You are welcome here.”

## **Everyone Is Welcome**

That welcome mat comes in the form of a demonstration island facing nine stainless-steel food preparation tables. It’s rigged up to a video system that allows students to get a close-up view, via TV screens, of the food-prep and cooking process.

There’s also a grill top, 16 burners, three ovens, a walk-in fridge. Plus, the space contains an outdoor patio and herb garden to supply flavor throughout the summer.

The space will host events, a variety of cooking classes open to the public and, it is hoped, talks by cookbook authors. A schedule is online at [www.freelibrary.org/cook](http://www.freelibrary.org/cook).

The center will also reach many different audiences brought in by nonprofit organizations.

There will be grandparents responsible for caring for grandchildren, who will be brought in through the Supportive Older Women’s Network and Drexel University’s cooking program. There will be Center for Literacy adult students who will use a reading curriculum developed with Penn State Extension Nutrition Links. Philadelphia schoolchildren working with the Vetri Foundation and Spanish-speaking restaurant workers from the Garces Foundation’s English for the Restaurant program will also use the center.

## It All Starts With A Basic Recipe

At the opening event, Garces—who runs several Philadelphia restaurants—unrolled his knives. He then shuffled a set of flash cards for cooks. He was there to help people hone their English, as well as their knife skills.

Garces said the impact of such lessons on restaurant workers “is pretty instant. It’s not just the English: It’s the confidence it gives them in the workplace, and they take that out into the community as well.”

Mallory Fix-Lopez is the English for the Restaurant program coordinator. She said the library space will make a big difference.

“Even though there are many restaurants throughout the city, they’re extremely busy. So finding locations sometimes to do the demos is a little tricky. This is a great central hub ... to come in and experience working in the kitchen without the pressure,” she said.

And once workers start spending time in the library, she said, they may connect with its other resources.

Liz Fitzgerald, the library’s new food literacy specialist, hopes that’s the case. But she’s thinking even bigger than that.

“I have the lofty goal of having every resident of the city be able to cook a meal from scratch,” she said.

## Quiz

1. Select the paragraph from the section “Cooking Up A Good Use Of Space” that is LEAST important in supporting the central idea of the article.
2. Which of the following BEST summarizes the central idea of the article?
  - (a) The city of Philadelphia is putting kitchen in libraries to train its citizens on nutrition and home cooking skills.
  - (b) Philadelphia restaurants are using a library to train people about cooking because their own kitchens are too busy.
  - (c) A Philadelphia library is using cooking as a means to help all kinds of people improve their job skills and literacy levels.
  - (d) A Philadelphia library is creating a cooking demonstration space to attract more cook-book authors and get more patrons to visit the library.

3. Read the sentence from the article.

He also taught a killer panzanella recipe - an Italian summer salad - to a crowd that included restaurant workers with limited English, kids finding their way around the kitchen for the first time, and parents and grandparents.

What is the closest meaning of the word “killer” as used in the above sentence?

- (a) difficult
- (b) healthy
- (c) impressive
- (d) unusual

4. Read the sentence from the article.

“I have the lofty goal of having every resident of the city be able to cook a meal from scratch.”

What figure of speech is used in the above sentence?

- (a) alliteration
- (b) hyperbole
- (c) idiom
- (d) metaphor

## Answer Key

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