

Library program builds confidence through cooking

By Philadelphia Inquirer, adapted by Newsela staff

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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. He then gave them a wise piece of advice.

“Here’s what I want you to do,” the famous chef said in a serious voice. “Don’t cut yourself.”

Vetri joked as he demonstrated knife skills and food preparation. He also taught them how to make a delicious Italian summer salad. The crowd included different kinds of people. There were restaurant workers who spoke little English and kids finding their way around the kitchen for the first time. There were also parents and grandparents.

Vetri gave the cooking demonstration at the opening event of the new Culinary Literacy Center of Philadelphia’s public library system. The new center specializes in the culinary arts—or cooking. It opened Monday.

The program is the first of its kind. It mixes cooking and nutrition training with literacy, math and science education. It is run out of Philadelphia’s Central Library.

Getting More From A Recipe Than Eating

Siobhan Reardon helps run the library. She said that the idea came out of talks about what to do with an unused space on the library's fourth floor. It once held a cafeteria.

She saw an opportunity to build a new program, while addressing a startling fact. At least half of Philadelphia adults—half a million people—are “low literate.” A “low- literate” person has trouble reading. They would have a hard time applying for a job or following written directions.

Cooking is “science, it’s math, it’s literacy—and it’s fun,” Reardon said. She said many people who don’t know how to read don’t visit the library. “So this is a way to say, You are welcome here.”’

In the library, there is a kitchen. It also has a video system. With video, students can get a close-up view of food preparation and cooking.

The space will host events and cooking classes open to the public. It will reach very different audiences.

There will be grandparents who are responsible for caring for grandchildren. Center for Literacy adult students will use a special reading program focusing on food. Philadelphia schoolchildren and Spanish-speaking restaurant workers will also sign up for food programs.

Cooking Equals Confidence

Jose Garces, another well-known Philadelphia chef, was at the opening event. He unrolled his knives. He then shuffled a set of flash cards for cooks from several local restaurants. He helped the audience with their English, as well as their knife skills.

Garces said the benefit of such lessons “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 charge of the English for the Restaurant program. The program helps restaurant workers learn English. She said the location will make a big difference. She hopes the workers will start using the library.

Liz Fitzgerald is the library’s new food literacy expert. She hopes that’s the case. But she’s thinking even bigger than that.

She wants every person in the city to cook a meal from scratch.

Quiz

1. The program aims to teach all of the following EXCEPT:

- (a) math
- (b) science
- (c) cooking skills
- (d) parenting skills

2. The program is run out of a:

- (a) kitchen
- (b) library
- (c) restaurant
- (d) school

3. Read the sentence from the article.

Vetri joked as he demonstrated knife skills and food-preparation.

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

- (a) confirmed
- (b) showed
- (c) proved
- (d) tested

4. Read the sentence from the article.

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

- (a) advantage
- (b) profit
- (c) result
- (d) success

Answer Key

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