

Students learn how to cook tasty and nutritious meals



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Eating healthy tastes good.



That was the lesson elementary and middle school students learned from a Miami Beach chef this week.

Frank Jeannetti, executive chef of Essensia Restaurant at the Palms Hotel & Spa, taught 17 students from Mater Academy East Charter School in East Little Havana how to make a scrumptious -- and healthy -- meal using locally grown and seasonal ingredients.

The 12-week program is a partnership between Miami Dade College's Wolfson campus, where the class took place, and Common Threads, a nonprofit organization that teaches children about food, nutrition and healthy eating. Amigos for Kids, an organization that raises awareness about child abuse, also pitched in.

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Every week, the budding chefs learn a new recipe from a different country. This week's menu took them to Southeast Asia: stir-fried chicken and vegetables, breaded tilapia, coconut rice pilaf and asparagus.

"What I'm teaching them is almost gourmet style of food but in an easier way to make it," he said.

Most of the students came from Hialeah and Little Havana. Many were introduced to asparagus and scallions for the first time and the coconut rice tasted far different from the rice and beans to which they're accustomed.

Jaycob Segura, a fourth-grader, liked the new dish: "It's a different taste; it's crunchy," he said. "It's because of the way flavors blend."

The pint-sized chefs learned how to chop and dice carrots, onions, mushrooms and snow peas and whip up a sweet and sour sauce. They then watched Jeannetti stir-fry the food on an iron griddle.

"I learned about cilantro and different types of vegetables," said Julieta Benitez, a fourth-grader. "I like it."

The program is aimed at low-income students who qualify for free or reduced lunches at their schools.

The majority of the students who attended the class were Hispanic, the ethnic group with the highest rates of obesity among American children, according to a 2008 study by the Johns Hopkins Children's Center.

"The Hispanic community has a high rate of cholesterol and obesity," said Rosa Maria Plasencia, executive director of Amigos for Kids. "We don't usually cook using green and healthy ingredients. I thought this was a great opportunity to introduce healthier habits and understand other cultures."

Common Threads encourages healthier eating by educating both children -- and their parents.

"We go through the whole process as a family so they are participating in it and eating what's on the table," said Mimi Chacin, city program manager of Common Threads. "They understand where it comes from and walk away with a new appreciation for food."

Jeannetti also dispelled the notion that cooking healthy was more expensive.

"That is totally wrong," he said. "What I'm finding now are more groceries stores catering organic fresh locally grown products. Tilapia is one of the cheapest fish you can buy off the side of the road."

The total price of the meal the students prepared: around \$6 per person, he said.

This was the first time Jeannetti and Essensia participated in the program. Every Friday and Saturday, the restaurant hosts Jeannetti's Indulgent Journeys, a four-course menu that uses seasonal and organic ingredients. It donates 10 percent of the revenues to Common Threads.

