

Cooking with kids:

Playful meets healthful in the kitchen



The kitchen is a playground for learning. Involve your kids in cooking now — and their bodies will thank them for life!



With a creamy texture children love, avocados are a green no one has to force anyone to eat.

Grab your apron and your children — it's time to teach the kids how to cook. Whether they're three or 13, showing your little ones around the kitchen now will help them reap health benefits later on.

"They're our next generation," says Nancy Henley, teacher and head chef at Tree House Kitchen Cooking School in Dundas, Ontario. "It is extremely important for kids to learn to nourish their body, mind, spirit, and ultimately support the health of whole communities and future generations."

Henley knows what she's talking about. A mother of three with more than 25 years of cooking experience in Canada and abroad, Henley has built an entire career on helping people ages nine to 90 cook well at home. She champions farm-to-table cuisine and sustainable eating. As proprietor of Tree House, she also acts as a community ambassador for food literacy and food access, and is producing a video series about children cooking with local Ontario farmers who practice sustainable agriculture.

It all starts with the integrity of the ingredients, Henley affirms. To achieve the best results in her dishes, she works with neighbourhood purveyors who are committed to what she calls "short ingredient lists." These are fresh, from-scratch recipes that use local ingredients when possible, within budget constraints. It's a cleaner, more responsible way of eating, but it tastes great, too, she says.

"You have to work with food that exists in as close to their natural state as possible," explains Henley. "If your body is your temple, why fill it with hydrogenated fats and industrial over-processing?"

Educating kids on the merits of healthy eating now will greatly increase their chances of having a healthy life later on. With a current Canadian obesity rate of 26% in children, it is never too soon to start. And with so many different dishes to learn about and make, there is no better place to begin than in the kitchen.

As co-owner of Mad Maple Inn outside of Creemore, Ontario, Miriam Streiman knows the kitchen can offer an immersive experience to kids. Jobs such as cracking eggs, rolling dough and stirring pots provide both educa-

tion and entertainment that children will request again and again.

"Food is such a means of expression and a vehicle for engagement and connection with family," Streiman says. "Memories are made around the dining room table, so take the time to appreciate this tradition. Let's sit down and enjoy the moment together, and this meal we made together, despite our busy lifestyles."

Positive reinforcement is key in expanding kids' culinary horizons, states Henley. When cooking with kids, think of the experience as "explore instead of chore." Include your child in food sourcing (including tasting) to help them develop their palates. Take the kids with you to the farmers' market or the grocery store, and ask them what looks and smells good, and is exotic, fresh or colourful.

"Sensory engagement and exploration in the market and kitchen is ultimately more fun. It also develops neural pathways, self-reliance and skill — this is beneficial long term," Henley says.

Don't know where to start? Try the avocado (or, in child's-speak, the "alligator pear," due to its bumpy skin). Right off the bat, this specimen offers a lesson in fruits versus vegetables (it's actually a berry that develops from the ovary of a flowering plant). When sliced, the emerald flesh is not only pretty to look at, but it packs more than 20 essential minerals and vitamins — all that without any cholesterol or sodium.

And that's just the start. Avocados act as "nutrient boosters" by helping increase vitamins A, D, K, and E levels in the body. In addition, a one-ounce serving contains 3.5 grams of unsaturated fat. This "good" fat can help manage blood pressure, increase absorption of essential vitamins and lower LDL cholesterol, which reduces the risk for heart disease.

With a creamy texture children love, avocados are a green no one has to force anyone to eat. They are one of the first fresh foods babies can enjoy, and they mix well with other mashed fruits and vegetables. As well, cooks appreciate its versatility in the kitchen — they go with both sweet and savoury dishes. Insider tip: look for Mexican avocados, which are



Avocado, pear and cider smoothie

Avocados play well with others — especially other flavours. This smoothie recipe, created by Mad Maple's Miriam Streiman, showcases creamy avocado and Canadian ingredients.

So get your kids scooping, grating, mixing, tasting and creating — and enjoy!

Yield: 4-6 servings

- 2 ripe avocados from Mexico, halved and pitted**
- 1 pear, peeled, cored and roughly chopped**
- ¾ cup full-fat plain yogurt**
- ¾ cup apple cider**
- ¼ cup creamed or regular honey**
- ¼ tsp ground cinnamon**
- 2 cups ice cubes**

Scoop the flesh of the avocado into a blender. Add remaining ingredients; purée until smooth. Divide in glasses and serve immediately.

available year-round.

"Avocados work double-duty as a healthy fat while their velvet texture is also very kid-friendly," Streiman says.

Henley encourages: "Explore the art and science of cooking with great curiosity; grow your essential culinary skills; nourish the mind and the body with top quality foods and connect to your inner chef, family, farmers, community and earth."

And besides, she adds, "involving

children in the process of preparing a meal greatly increases the chances they'll actually try the finished dish!"

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TIPS FOR COOKING WITH KIDS

- » Take children grocery shopping at stores or markets so they can have fun recognizing and comparing ingredients
- » Build recipes with interchangeable ingredients to give choice and ownership to kids with less adventurous taste buds
- » Encourage children to taste ingredients so they can develop their palates
- » No job is too small! From peeling and pouring to sorting and stirring, kids love to help in the kitchen
- » With proper supervision, knife skills (such as chopping herbs or mincing onion) can be learned safely
- » Don't stress the mess: Spills will go away but your memories will last a lifetime
- » Create a recipe book that you and your kids can add to over the years

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