



Hannah Connolly, 8 (left); Addy Hernberg, 8; and Tessa Connolly, 6. (Aram Boghosian for The Boston Globe)

Recipe for a fun kids party: chefs, exotic food, and cooking lessons

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By Kate M. Jackson, Globe Correspondent | September 19, 2007

HINGHAM - Brady Connolly just found out he's crazy about kiwi. The 4-year-old is plucking chunks of melon and strawberry off a fruit skewer, working his way toward the kiwi the way most kids dig for the prize at the bottom of a cereal box. He pops the juicy green fruit into his mouth, licks his fingers, and runs across the kitchen to his mother. "Mom, please add kiwi to the shopping list."

Brady might never have known of his proclivity were it not for his sister Hannah's 8th birthday party. Her parents invited Chefs at Play to come to their house here to teach a lesson to budding cooks. A venture started earlier this year by Katie Norton, a manager at the Catered Affair in Hingham, and Peter Ingargiola, a former chef at the Bristol Lounge at the Four Seasons, Chefs at Play goes on the road to private homes to host cooking parties. But this isn't all English muffin pizzas and chicken fingers. The entrepreneurs offer epicurean adventures.

Today's theme is a Hawaiian luau, and the children have leis around their necks, chefs' hats with their names perched on their heads, and an ambitious menu of unusual items (at least what some adults would think are uncommon ingredients for their kids). The menu includes grilled pineapple salsa with root vegetable chips, macadamia nut chicken and mango ketchup, and fruit skewers with exotic fruits like mango, pineapple, and the fast-disappearing kiwi.

This bill of fare may be acceptable because it's introduced during a festive afternoon. At least that's the case with the host family, where the three children are usually dining on what you'd expect. "They're not very adventurous eaters," says Kerry Connolly of Hannah; Tessa, 6; and the kiwi-chomping Brady. "It's usually the same things over and over again - chicken, pizza, etc. But at these parties, they're always open to trying new things, and sometimes after the party ends too."

Sure enough, the kids devour the meals they've prepared, and before the party's over, they're burgeoning foodies.

At an age when their tastes are often limited - and parents relent to dispense with a scene - children can expand their horizons by eating what their parents do, going to restaurants, and being introduced to new foods in a class. Anyway, a tot with a sophisticated palate gives the parent bragging rights. Imagine your 4-year-old shunning nuggets for calamari.

"Kids are more likely to try something if they made it themselves, if it's the fruits of their labor," says Ingargiola. "They express themselves through the way they prepare and decorate their food, and as a result, they become more aware of different tastes and flavors, not to mention have a better idea of what's healthy."

Ingargiola, who does the cooking for the classes, discusses healthy food preparation with the children and leads by example, washing his hands continuously throughout the lesson. The children seem enthralled as he explains the difference between a regular mango and a champagne mango. Meanwhile, the parents - watching in fascination - say they've never seen their kids so quiet at a birthday party.

"Kids don't even know they're learning something new because they're having so much fun," says Norton, who manages the events. "Before long, they're eating the same foods as their parents, or at least are willing to try them."

For many, this could mean finally going out to dinner at a place without a children's menu.

Addy Hernberg loves going to dinner with her parents at the Black Rock Country Club on the South Shore. Having attended cooking parties and been encouraged by her family to try different foods, the 9-year-old says, "I usually wouldn't try something if I didn't like the way it looked." That's changed. "So now if I don't like the way something looks, I'll just pretend I'm wearing a blindfold. It usually tastes better than it looks."

Hannah, the birthday girl, has also become more adventurous. "I love sesame chicken now," she says.

Other companies have caught on to the potential of teaching kids to cook - and how to dine. This is one of the tenets of The Learning Gourmet, a Winthrop-based company that started hosting lessons and cooking parties for kids at the Winthrop Senior Center in January. "The focus is primarily on the cooking, whether we're making homemade marinara sauce or quesadillas," says Kristine Dassau, who started the company with her two sisters, Kelli Conway and Jennifer Shea. "But another big part is the nutritional segment. They're learning about what's healthy. They're also learning how to measure things properly and about proper table etiquette - something the parents love."

Dassau and her sisters teach how to set a table and proper manners - napkins on laps, sitting up straight without elbows on the table.

If you're looking to raise a mini-epicure, says Tanya Steel, editor in chief of epicurious.com, start them as young as 3, 4, or 5 years old. "At these ages, they don't know the food they're trying is ethnic or exotic," says Steel, the author of the forthcoming "Real Food for Healthy Kids." "You have to be a food salesman and eat what you preach. For instance, 'Sugar snap peas are the most delicious things I've ever tasted.' Don't just sell the food, oversell it."

This may not go as smoothly as you like, she says. Steel thinks it takes kids 12 to 14 tries to accept a new flavor or texture. She also has a comeback to the familiar "I won't like it."

Her rejoinder: "Just ask them, 'Well, how did you know that you liked brownies?'"

Chefs at Play offers several packages for children and adults. A party for 10 children costs \$450 plus 15 percent gratuity. Call 781-987-4836 or go to chefsatplay.com. ■