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Cooking school at Dallas Central Market

photo by Chris Fritchie

Kids Cooking It Up!

By Wendy Crooks

IN THE LATE 1800s, Laura Ingalls, also known as “Frontier Girl,” was often found in the family’s primitive Northwestern kitchen helping “Ma” prepare the meal. From planting the seeds and harvesting to making the entire meal, the Ingalls girls had a huge part in the meal preparation for their family. Those days are long gone, though, right? Many of us recall a much different family dining experience. In more recent generations, most kids were told to “set the table” or “clear the table” but never to “help prepare the food for the table.”

Nowadays, many families eat on the run having only the help of a fast food employee who prepares prepackaged food. Wouldn’t it be easier if families could adapt a more Pioneer Day approach where the whole family chipped in? In some families, they appear to be doing just that. A recent Google search on kids and cooking resulted in almost 30 million links. When did this interest in moms

and dads sharing the kitchen with their kids come into play? Or are the kids more interested in taking over mom and dad’s kitchen? Are kids really interested in cooking or is it purely out of necessity that children are learning to cook?

Between the food network and shows like Rachael Ray and Top Chef, kids are exposed to cooking a lot more than they have been in the past.

According to Michelle Rodarte of HEB’s Dallas Central Market, “there has been a real awakening with regard to food.” Ms.

Rodarte believes the increase in food programming on television has helped. “Between the *food network* and shows like *Rachael Ray*, *Martha Stewart* and *Top Chef*, kids are exposed to cooking a lot more than they have been in the past.”

This increased awareness and exposure has left many children with a desire to learn how to cook. Hence a children’s cooking school niche has been established.

HEB’s Central Market opened its Dallas and Plano locations complete with a cooking school and the children’s classes have grown tremendously since 2002. Their children’s classes now range from age five to 13. The original kid’s cooking camp was started due to the demand for different kid camp experiences. Ms. Rodarte said, “The camps became very popular so we expanded. Now we do classes during spring break, after school and most other school holidays.” Central Market also offers classes parents and



children take together. They recently teamed up with Medical City to offer a Heart Healthy Cooking class for mothers and daughters.

The variety of classes offered is a result of each age group learning differently. "For the five-year-olds, the class is all about discovery. The 8-10 year olds question why things are the way they are. The older kids can connect the dots; they see the whole picture," Ms. Rodarte explains. Regardless of their age, one thing is the same: they all want to share what they've made with family members. In the Central Market classes, the children will learn the basics of cooking plus how to utilize their time in the kitchen. Classes average \$40 for two hours.

While some businesses are catering to the needs of parents and children, others are focusing specifically on the children. The Young Chef's Academy in Plano is a colorful and fun place for kids to learn the art of cooking. Should you arrive early for class, the waiting area is complete with cookbooks and cooking magazines to browse through until class

time. After opening in September 2006, the franchise is on its second set of owners. But don't let that fool you into thinking that the business isn't thriving. The original owner sold the franchise to Amy DeCarlo and Denise Banta only because her family had to move from the area. Ms. DeCarlo and Ms. Banta felt certain that the business would be a success purely from the parties and are astounded at how well the classes alone are doing. Some might also be surprised to learn that boys attend 65 to 70 percent of their current classes. Both women attribute that to famous male chefs such as Wolfgang Puck, Bobby Flay, George Duran and Warren Brown found on the *food network*.

In addition to cooking classes, the school offers parties, field trips for home school groups, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and other children's organizations. They also feature specialty events and workshops.

Ms. DeCarlo and Ms. Banta had worked together previously, formed a friendship and talked about doing something together as a business. Since

they both love cooking and children, the Young Chef's Academy was the perfect fit for their business venture.

The classes are a great way to reinforce the skills that are used at school such as math, science and reading. The student chefs prepare, make and taste the recipes. Then they go home with the recipes and are encouraged to make them for their families. The instructor also teaches table manners, clean up and proper table place settings. They teach them to follow proven recipes but also encourage creativity. If they want to do something different, they have to prepare it following the recipe first and then make changes or additions the second time they make the dish. The classes range in price from \$30-\$90 for individual or weekly sessions.

"Parents really miss sitting at the dinner table together. They really want to bring that concept home," says Ms. Banta. "Both the kids and the parents are happy with the program. The kids are fired up about taking what they've learned home and sharing it with their family."

Cooking school at Dallas Central Market (left);
Students at Young Chef's Academy (right)
photos by Chris Frichie

The children offer a variety of personal reasons for taking the classes. One student, Benjamin, said, "I take the classes because I like cooking and I want to be like Bobby Flay." As another student chef Jack was taking a bite of his stove top/no bake chocolate cookies he offered, "I like to eat the food we make!" Another child added, "I watch the cooking channel all of the time and want to learn how to do that stuff." Regardless of their reasons for attending, the children all seem to enjoy taking the classes and really participate in this hands-on learning experience.

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Other local businesses providing children's classes include Kids Cooking Company in Dallas with classes for children as young as 2½ (accompanied by an adult). Their nine-week cooking series runs \$270. Cook Ease Catering, also located in Dallas, offers kids classes and cooking birthday parties. Even Williams-Sonoma is looking at adding kids classes to their course offering as well. Children's cooking schools and classes may be a growing trend but as we look at the media, television line-ups and families, it is a trend that is probably here to stay – for a long time.

Look out Bobby Flay, Emeril and Rachael Ray; there'll soon be some new kids using the chopping block!

Wendy Crooks is a freelance writer living in Plano.

The logo for Frisco Style Magazine features a red square on the left containing the stylized white letters 'FSM'. To the right of the square, the word 'frisco' is written in a white script font, and 'STYLE MAGAZINE' is written in a white, all-caps, serif font.

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