

Hogtown HomeGrown

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Can your children cook?

Letting children loose in the kitchen can be a scary proposition—and I am not just talking about the possibilities of injury—who knows what they might create and whether or not we will have to taste it.

As someone who has cooked with lots of kids, I have found early guidance and a strict “eat what you create” mandate has eliminated all but the most innocent of kitchen blunders. But you have to get them interested early—before age 2 in our home.

What can they do at age two? Not much admittedly. Toddlers will half-heartedly stir, but they will be there for you when it's time to lick the spoon. They can help design a recipe though—choosing between two different flavors is a good way to train those oh-so-tender taste buds. Spend time letting them sniff the different herbs and spices you use in your cooking.

By age four, pouring, mixing and egg cracking should be easy enough for most children with experience. Use of a butter knife to cut and spread is very age appropriate, as is supervised stirring and beating. At this age they can also learn about the science of baking and the power of leavening agents—baking powder, baking soda and yeast.

Early grade school children can do many jobs without supervision, such as snapping beans or tearing lettuce. They can also make their own breakfast, pack a lunch and create healthy snacks if both food and tools are readily accessible for them in the kitchen.

Older children can learn to use the burners, oven and microwave (use some caution with the microwave; since the food isn't as obviously hot, kids tend to burn themselves with microwaved food). Baking is very popular at this age.

Cook with your children as much as possible. Teach them where their food comes from and how the seasonal foods progress throughout the year. Teach them to look forward to the new seasons while savoring what is available now. Teach respect, competence and focus in the kitchen as a way to avoid accidents.

Anyone can cook. I was lucky enough to have good role models who were brave enough to let me loose in their kitchens. At age five, I was making soft-boiled eggs—my dad lit the burner, but I turned the stove off and rinsed the timed eggs in cool water. I was baking cookies and making simple meals by the time I was ten. When I was thirteen, I was confident and skilled enough to make a complete dinner and even made a seven course meal (including a rudimentary paella) for Father's Day.

At that age I was also daring enough to try new recipes. Ask me about the Floating Island dessert I made at age 11; it looked really awful, but it tasted good! Accepting failure, yet trying again, might be one of the most valuable lessons to be learned in the kitchen—and that life lesson goes way beyond food!



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What's Fresh Right Now?

Beans—green
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Melon—cantaloupe, watermelon
Microgreens—arugula, radish
Mushrooms—shiitake, oyster, chanterelle
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Onions—green scallions, dry yellow
Peas—white acre, butterbeans, pink-eye
Peppers—green/red sweet bell, hot varieties
Potatoes—red, sweet
Radish—microgreens
Shoots—pea, sunflower, corn
Sprouts—alfalfa, clover, quinoa, wheat, sunflower, garbanzo, mung bean, french lentil, green lentil, radish
Squash—zucchini, delicata, acorn, butternut
Tomatoes—red beefsteak, grape

The Summer Slowdown

It seems that all across the country people are reveling in the bounties their farmers markets have to offer this time of year. All except for here in North Central Florida.

Due to the extreme heat and high humidity, very few crops thrive in our area between late July and late September. I often joke that if you want to eat local, you better like eggplant, okra and hot peppers.

Hang in there—cooler temperatures are right around the corner and those fall crops will be filling our plates before long!

Local and Fresh— Sunflower Shoots

Sturdier than a sprout, packed with vitamin E, crunchy and fresh for three weeks—in this corner, measuring in at a whopping 10 centimeters, I give you the sunflower shoot!

Talk about a powerhouse in a little bundle! We had never eaten sunflower shoots until this year and now we can't get enough of them.

Sure, you can find them in all the places a bean sprout could be found, but these little babies are far superior. Because they are grown from sunflower seeds, they are packed with vitamin E, in addition to being 20% protein.

But where they really win is in the taste and crunch departments. Because they are larger, you can savor more of the fresh green taste. The sturdier stem retains its moisture and stays crunchy if stored in a closed, refrigerated container.

Use shoots in a salad, sandwich or stir-fry for extra flavor, vitamins and crunch. Try them as the base of a summer salad when salad greens just can't be grown due to the high heat. Top soups with a few for fun or use as edible decoration on a casserole or serving platter.

Sunflower Shoot Summer Salad

INGREDIENTS

1 cup sunflower shoots
1 zucchini or summer squash, julienned
1 red pepper, sliced into very thin strips
2 green onions, sliced into thin strips
2 ounces swiss cheese, julienned
1/4 cup sunflower seeds, toasted
Satchel's Salad Dressing or balsamic vinaigrette

DIRECTIONS

Mix together shoots, squash, red pepper and green onions in a serving bowl.

Arrange cheese on the salad. Top with sunflower seeds. Serve dressing on the side.

Lily's Mac and Cheese

INGREDIENTS

1 pound elbow macaroni
1 teaspoon salt
3 Tablespoons unsalted butter
scant 1/2 cup all purpose flour
1 can evaporated milk
2 1/2 cups milk
1/8 teaspoon salt
a pinch of nutmeg
freshly ground black pepper
12 ounces sharp cheddar, diced, divided
3 ounces cream cheese

DIRECTIONS

Lightly butter a 2 quart baking dish. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

Bring a large pot of water to boil, stir in elbow macaroni and salt. Cook according to package directions. Drain pasta, rinse quickly with cold water and drain well. Set aside.

In a large pot with a cover, melt butter over medium heat. Add flour to butter and stir to form a paste or roux. Stir and cook for 2-3 minutes until the roux turns just a little cream-colored. Whisk in milk and cook until thickened and bubbly. Season with salt, nutmeg and pepper. Turn heat to low and stir in 1/3 of the diced cheese. When cheese is almost completely melted, stir in cream cheese, cover and remove from heat.

Layer cooled macaroni in the baking dish with remaining diced cheese, distributing the cheese as evenly as possible. Stir cheese sauce and pour over layered macaroni. Use a spoon to wiggle some sauce down into the corners and through the layers, without stirring.

Place baking dish on a cookie sheet in the preheated oven. Bake approximately 45 minutes, until top is golden and edges are browned and a little crispy. Cool five minutes before serving. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Yellow Squash with Sun-dried Tomatoes

INGREDIENTS

3 cups yellow squash, chopped into large cubes
1/2 sweet onion, chopped finely
1/2 cup oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes with the oil
1 teaspoon each dried basil, thyme and parsley

DIRECTIONS

Combine ingredients in a large covered saucepan. Cook covered over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until squash is cooked to desired consistency. Serve hot or at room temperature.

Tips and Tricks

I already have six recipes for macaroni and cheese—why a new one? Our sweet granddaughter had historically rejected all but the “blue box” so the challenge was to create a mac and cheese Lily would eat. The boxed variety is sort of creamy, so I knew Lily's version had to have a white sauce. The “cheese” powder is generally mild, so I used a little cream cheese and a little less cheddar than usual. The proportion of sauce to macaroni had to be creamy, but not drippy—baking it would take care of that. At dinnertime, I served her plate so it could cool. We sat down to eat and she started eating it immediately. Her mom and I shared a glance—success!

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Tricks and Tips

Drizzling icing sounds so simple, doesn't it? If the icing is the right consistency, it can be dripped off the tines of a fork. A pastry bag with very fine tip is also an option. The easiest method is to spoon the icing into a small plastic zipper bag, snip a very tiny tip off one corner to create a small stream.

You can control the flow enough to drizzle designs with the icing.

Liam's Cookies

INGREDIENTS

- 1 stick unsalted butter, melted
- 1 1/3 cups raw sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 eggs
- 2 cups whole wheat flour
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 Tablespoon orange zest
- 1 cup pecans, broken into small pieces
- 1 cup confectioner's sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon each vanilla extract, orange extract, orange blossom water
- 1-2 Tablespoons orange juice, strained to remove pulp

DIRECTIONS

- Lightly butter a 9 x 12 baking dish. Preheat the oven to 325 degrees.
- Mix sugar into melted butter, stir in vanilla, then beat in eggs one at a time.
- In a separate bowl mix flour, baking powder and salt. Stir into butter mixture until completely combined. Stir in zest and pecans.
- Press into baking dish. Bake 25-30 minutes until center is firm. Let cool.
- In a separate bowl, mix together confectioner's sugar, flavorings and juice. Stir until icing is smooth. Drizzle a thin stream over the top of the cooled cookies.

While he is only 4 1/2, Liam (Leah's brother) has been cooking with me for three years. He can squeeze his own orange juice, pour milk, measure by spoon or cup, crack eggs, and stir batters "all the way to the bottom." He picked the ingredients and style for this cookie, but I surprised him with the icing.