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NEWS

## Kids Cooking Camp Produces Some of the Sharpest Knives in the Drawer

South Bay School of Cooking's Kids Cooking Camp teaches valuable life skills and nutrition, all under the guise of making some good grub.

By [Allison Arbuthnot](#) | [Email the author](#) | July 17, 2010

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In the small, slightly retro and brightly lit room, 10 kids hovering around the ages of 12 and 13 leaned intently over a large communal table. The smell of fresh basil permeated the air and unconsciously, each of them started to inhale a little deeper as the bright green herb was sliced into elegant strips and held out for them to see. The demonstration complete, they stood upright and, grinning, each picked up a chef knife. It was time to chiffonade basil.

While the prospect of a pre-teen wielding cutlery isn't every parent's dream, the South Bay School of Cooking's Kids Cooking Camp may be one of the best summertime activities for kids the community has to offer. Located in the rear of the Neptunian Women's Club on Highland Avenue and 10th Street in downtown Manhattan Beach, the Kids Cooking Camp is in its sixth year of operation under Chef Annette Gallardo, and even if the proper chiffonade technique isn't high on your life-lessons-to-teach-your-child-this-summer list, the health and safety habits, math, science and teamwork skills taught in Chef Annette's Kids Cooking Camp ought to be.

Chef Annette is a Hollywood native and professional chef who has worked in kitchens all over the greater Los Angeles area. In 1986, Annette came to the South Bay as a pastry chef and she hasn't left the ocean's side since. Her cooking style is unstuffy and all-inclusive, and years as a restaurant reviewer have made her ability to describe food as sharp as her knife skills.

Bustling about the kitchen, not much taller than most of the kids, Chef Annette is the picture of the happy cook. Her ease in the kitchen and in front of an audience is evident. Quick to laugh and quick to engage, she is as undeniably likeable as she is skilled.

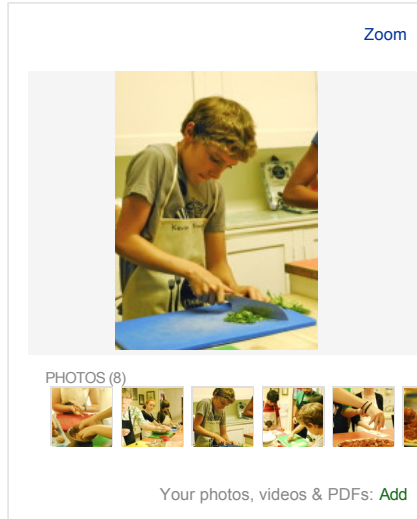
"She is just awesome," kitchen assistant Chris Morrison said to me quietly while hand cutting paper-thin homemade pasta dough that the kids will momentarily stuff into cheese ravioli. "I've learned more in the two months that I've been here than I did in culinary school."

The homemade pasta is an example of Gallardo's style of food and health education. "We always show them where food comes from," she told me as Morrison explained to the kids the simple combination of egg, flour and water that creates pasta. "It is important to understand that food doesn't come from a box."

Gallardo gets her goods for the classes from all over, primarily specialty markets. The classes are always doing something different, in the Kids Camp as well as the year-round adult cooking classes—one day may be Greek cuisine and the next is sushi. This keeps her hopping to ethnic markets throughout the South Bay and beyond. The ubiquitous Trader Joe's is also a frequent resource.

Of course, farmers markets are no stranger as well, and Gallardo is considering beginning a farmers market class for kids next summer where they will meet on Tuesdays and walk down to the Manhattan Beach Farmers Market just minutes away. Learning about produce is a huge component of the class. "We always talk about it so the kids get familiar—how to prep it, sanitation," said Denise Ellis, one of the cooking instructors.

During each day of the Kids Camp, which meets for four half-days, the kids prepare their own meal, which they eat at the end of class. Multiplying or dividing recipes hones their math skills. Understanding what the role of yeast is in the rising of bread or why salting raw vegetables dries them out for crisper cooking gives them a dash of science. The collective preparation of a meal shared family-style teaches them to work together and take turns. The focus of the class on veggies,



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produce, fruit and lean meats coaches them in nutrition.

"Last week we made a fruit salsa with cinnamon chips for dessert," said Gallardo. "We never fry anything but instead teach them to 'oven fry.' They like their little sweet thing but kids in the South Bay are way, way ahead of the curve in terms of nutrition awareness, understanding calories and sugar. It has to do with the schools, and of course parents."

After hand-rolling ground turkey and Italian chicken sausage meatballs (and vigorously washing their hands), the kids huddled around Gallardo next to a giant pot of marinara sauce simmering on the stove. "Who knows what poaching is?" asked Gallardo and instantly a few hands shoot up around her.

"It's something illegal," one boy answered confidently.

Gallardo takes just a beat to catch up before she said with a gentle chuckle, "Yes, yes, it does mean hunting an animal illegally, but I mean in cooking. Poaching means to cook something by simmering it in liquid." With that, the kids take turns dropping the meatballs in the bubbling red sauce to cook.

As lunch spends its last few minutes on the stove, the group cleans up their workspace with an efficiency and swiftness rarely seen in people their age. Knives are placed in a bin, cutting boards loaded into the sink, the table wiped clean, stools gathered and plates distributed. With looks of happy anticipation, the kids waited patiently for the meal of homemade ravioli with meatballs, garlic breadsticks and crispy "oven fried" zucchini sticks that they had prepared themselves.

"Is this the best part of the class?" I asked a young girl with a long ponytail and bright eyes named Laurel Behens, who was back at the Kids Cooking Camp for her second summer.

She immediately nodded, then stopped and looked thoughtful for a moment. "Well, it's good, but no, because I really love to cook."



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