

ENTERTAINMENT

Entertainment

Luminato Festival Food Program: Teaching kids the art of cooking

Chefs paired with schools to educate kids in the hope they can share knowledge with their family



CARLOS OSORIO / TORONTO STAR

Chef Cory Vitiello, from The Harbord Room restaurant, helps kids from Dovercourt Public School prepare the ingredients for what will become braised chicken tacos with tomatillo sauce. As part of Luminato, chefs will be teaching locals kids a bit about cooking.

By: [Heather Greenwood Davis](#) Special to the Star, Published on Thu Jun 13 2013

Chef Cory Vitiello has plenty of reasons to be nervous. His sous chefs are chopping cabbage with huge knives, slicing radishes on razor-sharp mandolins and making the call on the amount of cilantro that should go into his signature salsa . . . and not one of them is over the age of 10.

The Harbord Room chef has taken over the stove in the staff room at Dovercourt Junior Public School to teach a Grade 3 and 4 class how to cook. It's all part of this year's Luminato Festival Food Program. The annual event is the trademark kickoff to the 10-day celebration of arts in the city. Thanks to an impressive combination of neighbourhood forces that include artists, chefs, teachers, volunteers and donations from Loblaws, this class is one of six ranging from Grade 3 to Grade 8 in five schools across the city, where children are spending time in the kitchen with Toronto's best chefs.

And despite the fact that he's clearly outnumbered, Vitiello is grinning the entire time. That may change on the Festival's opening weekend, June 15-16. Armed with insider knowledge on how the chef's dishes are prepared, the kids will sit at the "Kids' Table," an interactive setting in the middle of the Distillery District, and tell festival attendees all they need to know about the dishes and the chef that cooked them. Hugo, 9, is ready.

"His favourite colour is blue. His favourite thing to do is go to other restaurants and get inspired and he takes the bus to work . . ." says Hugo before he pauses to consider this last fact. "Actually, almost all the chefs I know take buses."

Thanks to the program, he now knows at least four.

"So many events at the Luminato Festival are about getting the audience involved in the arts in a different way," explains Jessica Dargo Caplan, Luminato's director of outreach and community education, who adds that the "Future Tastes of Toronto" program allows for a creative exchange between the chefs, students and attendees. "This fits really beautifully."

During the Luminato's Food Lab Challenge, the kids will be the ones suggesting the "secret ingredient," as two chefs at a time participate in a cook-off reminiscent of TV's *Iron Chef* show, in which top cooks compete against the clock to prepare dishes from scratch featuring an ingredient given to them at the start.

The kids have been busy. They designed crests that will hang at the food stations at the festival, helped to create the information booklets that attendees receive and came up with a cheer they can chant to raise support for their chef.

A partnership with both the Madeleine Collective, a group of artists in the city who are creating an Alice-in-Wonderland-like backdrop for the event, and the Mammalian Diving Reflex, a theatric performance company committed to helping children and adults find common spaces where they can learn from each other, adds to the program.

Vitiello, the son of two teachers, says working with the kids has been a pleasure and he's grateful for the chance to be a part of the event.

“It's a time commitment, but it's important to stay connected to the community. We rely heavily on the community for our restaurant and it's important to pay that forward.”

The fact that he's here, racing around the table offering tips, not at work, isn't lost on teacher Fiona Brougham. She's wearing a grin.

“I love the level of energy, enthusiasm and engagement this brings to the classroom,” she says. “It's putting the kids in charge. So often in life, they have no control over things, so, for them, this is definitely empowering.”

The program has enriched the classroom in ways that weren't predicted, adds Brougham, who is volunteering her time on opening weekend, too. Kids in the class have found themselves discussing sustainable foods and the importance of buying locally thanks to information from the chefs who've visited. The hope is both to inspire would-be chefs such as Katelyn, 9, who found her calling while she squeezed limes, and also to inspire them to help teach their parents what they've learned.

“It only takes a little bit of exposure for them to want to introduce mom and dad to new things and say, “Hey, I had that when Cory was here! Let's try that in a salad,” says Vitiello.

The information is definitely making it home.

“My sister might be a little jealous,” confides Nora, 8. “I'm not sure, but if she is, I understand why, because this is pretty cool.”

• **For more information** on Luminato's food program visit luminatofestival.com.

Heather Greenwood Davis is a freelance writer. Reach her at globetrottingmama.com.