

CULINARY MULTICULTURALISM FOR BIG KIDS . . .

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Myisha Bell is sitting at a table, in no less a culinary emporium than Bread & Circus in Brighton, holding court. She's talking about food from her native Trinidad, including curried goat. There's not one grimace, not one pinched nose, not one "yuk" among her fellow middle-schoolers, from the Timilty School in Roxbury. These kids know food, all kinds of food, and they like it.

Every Wednesday for five weeks, groups of middle-school children from the Boston public schools participate in a cross-cultural cooking class. Here, they learn respect for one another's native cuisines - and how to pronounce words such as "cumin," "cayenne pepper," and "cilantro." Even tofu is tolerated here.

The course is hosted by Bread & Circus - which provides the food and facilities - and sponsored by GREAT (Gang Resistance Education and Training).

The course is taught by former Rialto chef Lynne Anderson and chaperoned by Roxbury Youth Service Police Officer William Baxter, who claims, with a pat to his paunch, to have eaten some great meals in the five years he has been involved with the program.

"We're fixing West Indian roti today," says Anderson to her young charges. "It's got chicken, curry powder, chickpeas, and onions. It's delicious." She passes around a book on West Indian food, pointing out the market with its papaya, mangoes, and plantains, and the sauces.

"Ooh, that yellow sauce is nasty!" says Shenniah Smith, 12.

"We don't say 'nasty' in here," Anderson gently reminds her. There's one other rule: Everyone tries at least one bite of whatever is made.

"We don't say 'icky' or 'nasty' if we don't like it," explains seventh-grader Joe Ogando, "because this is a cultural sensitivity class."

For the most part, whatever is made is pretty much eaten, and the leftovers go home in doggy bags. There was one exception: an Ethiopian stew. "Instead of putting 1/4 teaspoon of cayenne pepper in it, the student put in 2 tablespoons," recalls Anderson. "It was almost inedible."

The kids around the table come from a constellation of places: Shenniah's parents are of African descent. Eduardo Campbell's parents are from Panama. Joe's from the Dominican Republic. They discuss their own family favorites and in class have made Mexican tamales, Middle Eastern hummus, Ethiopian flatbread, and Chinese noodles. For their Italian meal, they rolled out their own fettuccine. For Chinese, they learned how to use chopsticks. Ethiopian stew was eaten with fingers.

After giving them a bit of history about Trinidad, Anderson directs the students to the test kitchen, where they grab chicken, onions, tomatoes, potatoes, and garlic and start chopping.

Before long, the room is filled with the heady smells of frying foods. Joe, whose eyes are running, switches from onions to garlic. "I'm allergic to onions, but not to garlic, so I must not be a vampire," he quips.

Meanwhile, Myisha is washing and chopping cilantro, and Eduardo is toasting cumin seed. Soon, the garlic and curry powder is added, then the potatoes. The kids have learned well: They clean as they go. Officer Baxter helps - the price, he says, of getting a good kid-cooked meal.

The roti dough is mixed, kneaded, then rolled. "This is their favorite part," says Anderson, watching the kids wield their rolling pins. "You start in the middle," she instructs, "then go north, south, east and west. It gives the dough a uniform thickness."

Anderson explains her goals: "So many of them come in here and won't eat a vegetable. But if they help prepare and cook it, they'll usually eat it. They're amazed they can sit down and enjoy a meal without meat. They can't believe they actually like lentils or cilantro. The class helps them learn about their own and other cultures and gets them to try nutritious foods."

The roti filling is bubbling away on the stove, the dough is frying. It's finally time to eat. The table is wiped clean. Glasses of lemonade are poured.

"That looks delicious!" declares Joe as the pot of curried chicken and the "pancakes" are set out.

Joe says a prayer in Spanish, thanking God for the food, for Bread & Circus, for the class. Everyone grabs a pancake, while Anderson shows them how to fill and fold it. They eat silently, savoring each bite.

Each plate is practically licked clean. Officer Baxter pushes his chair back, wipes his mouth with a napkin and declares the meal delicious. Myisha adds the ultimate adolescent accolade. "That," she says, "was the bomb!"

ROTI

For the dough:

2 1/2 cups flour

3 tablespoons baking powder

2 teaspoons salt

1 cup water

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

In a large bowl, mix the flour, baking powder, and salt. Add the water and oil and mix until the dough forms a ball. Turn the dough out onto a floured surface and knead it for 4 to 5 minutes. Wrap the dough in a damp cloth and let it rest for 5 to 10 minutes.

Split the dough into 8 to 10 balls. Using a rolling pin, roll each on a floured surface until it is very thin. Cook the roti on a hot griddle or pan, 2 minutes per side or until slightly golden. Stack the roti in a damp cloth until ready to serve.

For vegetarian filling 1/2 teaspoon cumin seed 1 tablespoon oil 1/2 onion, finely chopped 2 cloves garlic, smashed 3 to 4 large potatoes, washed and cut into cubes (or use calabash squash) 1 1/2 cups cooked chickpeas 2 tablespoons curry powder 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper 1 teaspoon salt In a skillet over high heat, toast the cumin seed for about a minute, being careful not to let it burn. Add the oil, onion, and garlic. Cook 2 to 3 minutes, stirring. Add the potatoes, chickpeas, curry powder, cayenne pepper, and salt. Cook for 2 to 3 minutes, stirring well to combine. Add a small amount of water and cover the pan. Check in 5 minutes, stirring and adding more water if necessary. Repeat 4 or 5 times, until the potatoes are soft. Cooking time about 25 minutes. Set aside and keep warm.

For chicken filling 1/2 teaspoon cumin seed 1 tablespoon oil 1/2 cup onion, chopped fine 2 garlic cloves, smashed 1 1/2 pounds boneless chicken, cubed 1 tomato, chopped fine 2 tablespoons curry powder 1 teaspoon salt 1 teaspoon chopped cilantro, for garnish

In a skillet over high heat, toast the cumin seed for about a minute, being careful not to let it burn. Add the oil, onion, and garlic. Cook 2 to 3 minutes, stirring. Add the chicken, tomatoes, curry powder, and salt. Cook for 2 to 3 minutes, stirring well. Add a small amount of water and cover the pan. Check in 5 minutes. If the chicken is not done, stir, add more water if necessary, and cook until the chicken is done, only a few minutes. Sprinkle with cilantro.

To assemble:

Put a roti flat on a plate. Spread a spoonful of the cooked vegetable mixture over it. Spread some chicken mixture over the potatoes. Roll the roti pancake around the filling.

Repeat with the remaining roti.

Serves 8 to 10.