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# Cooking Up Community

*Community kitchens nourish body, mind and spirit.*

BY JODI HELMER

**W**hen Daniela Geleva arrives in the industrial kitchen on the campus of Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, Wash., the stainless steel countertops are piled high with boxes of apples and bunches of rhubarb. Within hours, a small group wearing green aprons and wielding kitchen knives has chopped the fruit and greens and mixed a topping of brown sugar, cinnamon and lemon zest. The aroma of fresh rhubarb-apple cobbler fills the air.

With dessert in the oven, the group begins noshing on salad and made-from-scratch asparagus-leek-and-potato soup. "To see the transformation from raw produce to a fulfilling meal is very empowering," Geleva says.

Though it looks like a home-economics classroom, the cooks in this kitchen are not students earning credit for their efforts. Instead, this group of Seattle residents has come together as members of a community kitchen to cook, share a meal and connect over their commitment to fresh, local foods.

## **BREAKING BREAD, BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS**

Community kitchens unite foodies who want to cook, share meals and support local farmers with their neighbors. Members often meet at local farmers

markets or food co-ops to shop for fresh produce before heading to kitchens in schools, church basements and community centers to prepare and share meals.

"A community kitchen is a place for people to get together to share skills and cook from scratch," explains Diane Collis, program manager for Fresh Choice Kitchens, a nonprofit organization in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, that provides resources and support to community kitchens throughout Canada and the United States.

Fresh Choice Kitchens, arguably the largest community-kitchen resource in North America, is aware of 335 community kitchens operating in British Columbia alone; Collis estimates that the actual number of kitchens in the province easily triples that.

"The political food agenda and desire to 'go green' are pushing the community-kitchen movement forward," she says.

The modern community kitchen got its start in Lima, Peru, in the late 1970s, after drastic cuts to public food subsidies, according to a United Nations Research Institute for Social Development paper, *Gender and Urban Social Movements* (Lind and Farmelo, 1996).

Currently, the movement has spread to Canada and the U.S. Pacific Northwest. Elsewhere in the

*Community kitchens can work in small spaces by using some creative solutions. Here, a table near the kitchen is being used to prepare apple crisps.*



*Fresh Choice Kitchens offers "Train-the-Trainer" Canning Workshops. Recently, community facilitators did a workshop that provided hands-on experience about how to teach tomato canning.*

United States, the term often refers to soup kitchens or other community food programs that serve the poor. Overcoming the perception that community kitchens offer handouts to those in need has been a struggle, according to Collis.

"It's not a program for the poor; community kitchens are for anyone interested in food, sustainability and good health," she says. "Even though the focus is on cooking, community kitchens are about building community."

Engaging with the community was one of the reasons Geleva started participating in community kitchens in 2010. "I love to cook, but it's a lot more enjoyable to cook in community," she says.

Stocking the refrigerator with healthy dishes that she cooked in the community kitchen was an added benefit for Geleva. "You can go and cook for a few hours and have food for an entire week," she says, noting that most groups prepare enough food

## Get Cookin' Yourself

If you are interested in starting a community kitchen in your neighborhood, Diane Collis, program manager of Fresh Choice Kitchens, a Canadian nonprofit organization providing resources and support to community kitchens throughout North America, offers these suggestions:

**SPREAD THE WORD:** Hang posters in cafés, recreation centers, food co-ops and other neighborhood gathering spots describing community kitchens and encouraging residents to participate. Facebook and Twitter also offer opportunities to spread the word without spending big bucks.

**CALL A FIRST MEETING:** Explain the purpose of a community kitchen, and solicit feedback from prospective members about their interests. Will it be a vegetarian kitchen? A kitchen focused on raw foods? The first meeting is also the time to brainstorm where to hold your community kitchen (community centers, churches and high-school home-economics classrooms are good choices) and decide the best dates and times for meetings.

**DECIDE ON RECIPES AND GROCERIES:** Scheduling a second meeting to prep for the first community kitchen will give the group time to choose recipes, prepare grocery lists and plan shopping trips. Be sure to choose recipes that meet the needs of the entire group and are simple enough to prepare without expensive ingredients or special kitchen equipment. When choosing recipes, keep cooking times in mind, and remember not to overbook the stovetop or oven!

**CREATE A FINANCIAL PLAN:** The group needs to decide how to handle community-kitchen finances. Some groups will agree to bring a set amount of grocery money each time they plan recipes and grocery lists (keeping in mind the budgets of their members). The designated grocery shopper(s) collects the money in good faith to purchase supplies. If money is leftover, it can be put into a kitty to offset the cost of more expensive recipes or used to purchase supplies, such as knives and cutting boards.

**START COOKING:** After you've secured a space, decided on recipes and completed the shopping, it's time to come together to prepare a meal. Divvy up the tasks (it's a good idea to assign a small group to each recipe), review the recipes and dive in!

**EVALUATE:** After a few cooking sessions, ask participants for feedback about the process and tweak as necessary.



*Many hands make a main course of tofu meatballs — a quick and easy recipe that is suitable and adaptable for gluten-free diets.*

*The finished products (below) from a community kitchen leadership workshop included tofu meatballs, a mighty grain salad, tzatziki, pita and bulgur pilaf.*

to allow members to take leftovers home. “That was appealing to me.”

In fact, the entire community-kitchen model appealed to Geleva. After participating in several community kitchens, she decided to start one at SPU, where she is an associate professor of food and nutrition.

Like most community kitchens, the SPU kitchen, which launched in April 2011, focuses its monthly sessions on preparing dishes made from seasonal, locally sourced produce; ingredients are chosen with cost in mind — there is no truffle oil or *foie gras* on the menu — and the dishes can be easily recreated at home with basic kitchen equipment. While the group, which ranges from four to 22 participants, slices, dices, stirs and simmers, relationships form across stovetops.

“The food is a big draw, but people come back to community kitchens for the relationships,” says Rachel Duboff, who began participating at Wallingford Community Kitchen in Seattle in 2009. “While soup is simmering, people are getting to know one another. Community kitchens are social events.”

As one of the larger community kitchens in Seattle, the Wallingford Community Kitchen, which is held at the Wallingford Community Senior Center at the Good Shepherd Center, draws an average of 20 participants to its monthly sessions — though Duboff has seen upward of 45 people.

While the focus is on cooking with seasonal produce and sharing a communal meal, the kitchen often hosts special events or plans themed menus, such as Dumplings from Around the World and a “canning kitchen,” which focused on food preservation. Duboff believes that adding an educational component to some of the kitchens helps keep participants engaged.



The cooking component of the workshop gives facilitators firsthand experience on what it's like for their participants, who must cook with someone they don't know in an unfamiliar kitchen.



“Everyone has a different reason for being there,” she explains. “Some people want to escape the isolation of eating alone; others want to learn new recipes and skills. Some members have a lot of experience in the kitchen, and others are new to cooking.”

### NO EXPERIENCE REQUIRED

Montie Bannick joined the community kitchen at the Little Mountain Neighbourhood House Society in Vancouver out of necessity. After a relationship ended, Bannick realized that his lack of experience in the kitchen made it difficult to prepare healthy meals for his 4-year-old son. “I needed to learn how to cook,” he says.

Over the past year, Bannick has learned to make several simple dishes, including Chinese food, a cuisine he used to think required ordering takeout. Reading recipes, sautéing vegetables and learning about cooking oils has helped Bannick build his confidence in the kitchen.

“I learned that, if I’m not familiar with something, all I have to do is ask, and someone will explain,” he says. “Everyone learns from each other.

*Fresh Choice Kitchens’ Community Kitchen Leadership Workshop consists of theoretical and cooking components. In the latter, participants are divided into groups that make a different recipe for lunch.*

It's a great place to connect with people and connect with food."

"In a community kitchen, individual contributions are honored," Collis adds. "Everybody gets a chance to learn; everybody gets a chance to teach."

As a culinary school grad, Ryan Miller knows his way around a kitchen. He agreed to lead the community kitchen at Pike Place Market in Seattle, hoping to inspire members to cook healthy meals while learning new skills.

During the monthly community kitchens, a handful of members with varying levels of experience come together to cook everything from lentil stew to caramelized-onion hummus. While less-experienced members are always invited to take an active role, most prefer to stick with washing produce, setting the table or packaging leftovers, so it surprised Miller when one of the less-confident members of the Pike Market Community Kitchen volunteered to take ownership of a roasted vegetable dish.

"By the end of the night, she was calling herself 'The Roasting Master' because she was so proud of her dish," Miller recalls. "A lot of people are really surprised by the results because they're not used to eating fresh foods they cooked themselves."

At their next gathering, The Roasting Master proudly told other members that her accomplishment in the community kitchen inspired her to try roasting vegetables at home, where she experienced similar success.

Even Geleva, an experienced cook who often prepares meals from scratch, admits that she has



learned a lot from participating in community kitchens. Cooking with a diverse group of members has allowed her to expand her recipe repertoire, attempting dishes like eggplant Parmesan, which she often ordered in restaurants but never attempted in her own kitchen. "Cooking is a very transformational experience," she says.

### SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY

Collis believes that community kitchens help communities reclaim the lost art of food preparation

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*During the cooking component of the workshop, the kitchen is divided into work stations. Each station is set up with the necessary kitchen equipment, tools and ingredients to make a particular recipe for lunch.*

*After cooking together — and just before eating, the community kitchen leaders reconvene to discuss their cooking experiences and how they could apply their new-found knowledge to their community kitchens.*



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COURTESY ROCKINGHAM COMMUNITY KITCHEN

*The Rockingham County (North Carolina) Business and Technology Center partnered with the Rockingham County Cooperative Extension for a grant that funded a certified community kitchen for local farmers, caterers and chefs-in-training in Madison, N.C.*

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and preservation in a culture that has traded home-cooked meals for the convenience of packaged dinners. With the goal of helping members build skills and increase their confidence in the kitchen while inspiring them to recreate the recipes (and experiment with other healthy dishes) at home, community kitchens also support local agriculture, including urban farms.

“Community kitchens and urban agriculture are mutually supportive — a beautiful marriage,” Collis says, noting that some kitchens partner with community gardens or orchards to provide fresh produce for communal meals.

The popularity of community kitchens in North America has increased as more people show interest in cooking from scratch, shop at farmers markets and grow their own food. Over the next few years, Collis expects to see even stronger connections between urban farmers, farmers markets and community kitchens.

“You can’t encourage people to grow their own food without giving them

information about how to prepare and preserve it,” she says.

Most community kitchen leaders develop relationships with local farmers and food co-ops and choose recipes that emphasize seasonal ingredients to ensure their kitchens support the local economy and promote sustainability.

“I believe in having a local food system,” Geleva says. “If we source our foods [locally] and eat them here, we’re supporting our community.”

Duboff agrees. “Food is an important part of sustainability,” she says. “Community kitchens are not going to save the world, but we try to have an impact with a single meal.” **uf**

Jodi Helmer is the author of *The Green Year: 365 Small Things You Can Do to Make a Big Difference* (Alpha, 2008). Visit her online at [www.jodihelmer.com](http://www.jodihelmer.com).

**weblink**

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**Fresh Choice Kitchens** at  
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