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Kids in Harlem Savor Food That Isn't Fast

By SOPHIE MENIN

"NASTY!" said 9-year-old Naja Haynes after tasting a square of Scharffen Berger bittersweet chocolate I gave her to try. "Nasty and what?" asked Liz Solms, who was, like me, a school volunteer. Naja puckered her mouth, chewed and thought about the vocabulary words on her tasting sheet. Was it nasty bitter? Nasty earthy? Nasty nutty? She decided it was all three.

The scene was the cafeteria of the Children's Storefront School, an independent tuition-free school in Harlem for children of varied academic strengths. Their chocolate curriculum was courtesy of Harvest Time in Harlem, an education program run by Slow Food USA.

Naja and her classmates had just seen a two-hour presentation developed for them by Scharffen Berger Chocolate Makers. In the course of the program the children traced chocolate from the ancient Mayas of Central America to their classroom, where they later prepared truffles to take home.

Each month this school year 16 third and fourth graders from the Storefront School gather in the cafeteria for these workshops, which stress the joy that comes from preparing and sharing a meal and the importance of knowing where your food comes from. The goal is to offer an appealing and wholesome alternative to fast food. This month's program will be about beans, with students tasting edamame, black-eyed peas, lentils and string beans and preparing hummus and chili.

Jasmine Aghimien, 8, said she signed up for the program because her mother told her, "After you go to college and get married, you are going to have to know how to cook." Her reasoning might make you cringe, but the end result is all we could have hoped for.

Jasmine said she had no idea that besides learning how to dice onions and cut tomatoes she would also meet a nutritionist, an organic farmer, a famous chef and a chocolate maker.

In October, Debbie Kavakos, the owner of Stoneledge Farm in South Cairo, N.Y., talked to the class about winter squash and brought in a 10-foot vine with thistles and big fuzzy leaves. When she told the class that it produced only one pumpkin, Jasmine said, "I was amazed that it took such a big vine to produce only one." She said it made her appreciate what it took to make the pumpkin muffins she and her classmates baked later.

Now she sees cooking as a way to express herself. "If you want to try something different, you just make a different kind of food," she said with the full conviction of an adventurous chef in training.

The star of the November program was Marcus Samuelsson of Aquavit and Riingo's. His story left the students in awe. He stood in front of a map and recounted how he was born in Ethiopia, lost his parents to tuberculosis and subsequently was adopted by a couple in Sweden. He spoke lovingly about learning to cook from his new grandmother and traveling throughout Europe, Asia and the Americas to study and

work until he became the chef at Aquavit in New York. He later prepared a traditional smorgasbord for the children and taught them how to make chocolate pancakes.

Mr. Samuelsson was Elmony Johnson's favorite guest teacher. "I like the way he put juice on his meatballs and how he makes everything on the plate look beautiful," she said about his lingonberry sauce. "You never forget when you meet somebody who is really good at something."

Elmony paused before adding, "We never had a special guest who was an orphan before, but I know he is O.K. now because he has two restaurants."

Jade Little appreciates how Harvest Time in Harlem has given her a chance to cook with her friends.

"I get to know them better by being in a different setting," Jade, 9, said. When asked what she meant, she giggled and named those who like to eat a lot and those who don't. She grew serious and said, "I have one friend who likes to argue a lot, but in cooking class she just dances around and around because she gets to wear an apron, use a knife and experience all different kinds of food."

Nutritionists say that when children are involved in preparing a meal they are far more likely at least to taste it.

Naja is a case in point. She told me, "I love McDonald's and eat there a lot."

Yet when I asked what she enjoyed most about the class she said, "Discovering new ingredients like nutmeg and learning how to cook nutritious meals."

Score another point for the pumpkin muffins.

She was very proud to let me know she has learned how to make some dishes with less sugar.

Judy Joo Allen helped organize Harvest Time in Harlem. When she told me about it, I leapt at the chance to be a volunteer cooking instructor. I am a recent graduate of a culinary school. Before that for two years I ran the Gift of New York, a nonprofit attempt to help the families of those who died in the World Trade Center attacks through the arts and entertainment and sports events.

Each month at the Storefront School we see children having a great time preparing and sharing a real meal while getting the message that fast food is not the only food.

When the weather turns warm, Naja, Jasmine, Jade and their classmates look forward to planting a garden behind the cafeteria. There will not be any giant pumpkins, and they have to worry about what rats and cats might eat. Despite such challenges they are discovering that knowing where food comes from can change the way you relate to the world, to your friends and to yourself.

And it can also result in a mighty good muffin.