



# Little Chefs, Big Rewards

WOOLEN MILL KITCHEN TEACHES THERE'S MORE LESSONS IN FOOD THAN SIMPLY LEARNING TO COOK IT



It's about so much more than learning how to cook. Woolen Mill Kitchen creates an experience for youth that helps them find new skills, develop an understanding of food, and creates a level of connectivity through a shared in-person social connection.

When Claire Bell, owner of Woolen Mill Kitchen, began her initiative she wasn't entirely sure what to expect. It was a new adventure for her, combining her years of passion toward cooking and as a chef with her background of being an educator in England.

"I'm passionate about learning, I love food, and I see a real connection with kids learning basic cooking skills, exploring other cultures through food, and all the other intrinsic skills they develop," said Bell. "I'm using food as a medium, but the kids are learning so much more through it."

Prior to emigrating to Canada, Bell lived in the UK where she was a teacher, as well as worked as a private chef during extensive travels through Europe, Africa, South America, Asia, and India during elementary school breaks.

Eventually, she found herself settled in Erin, Ontario, where she began cooking at a local farm shop.

It wasn't until she began cooking for seniors during COVID and taking her nutrition degree that the idea struck about teaching kids to cook in the community.

"It got me thinking about if I could help kids work towards preventing things like diabetes when they're older, if it's not genetic, but focusing on the little things that we can do," she said. "If you do a little bit now and that can be better for when you're older, that's a good thing. It's very rewarding."

Last September, Bell began working with kids from local schools, bringing them to her home to cook in their kitchen.

"We live down a road called Woolen Mill Lane, it's a lovely little dead-end street next to a conservation area," said Bell. "We're on a river, and there used to be a mill here, so that's where we got the idea for the name of the business."

The students cooked and took home dinner for their families. There was one student with a large family that reacted incredibly well to the experience.

"It gave him so much confidence that this was his gift to his family for the night," said Bell. "It's not simply the cooking – if you come away from Woolen Mill Kitchen and you've picked up some basic skills, you've experimented with food and are willing to have a go, then that's what I'd like to achieve." »



## “THEY’RE HERE FOR A PURPOSE”

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« This summer, Bell has been running a small summer camp. One week included six kids attending for two days, then hosting a barbecue for two friends each – totaling 18 kids.

She notes that one of the most rewarding parts of running Woolen Mill Kitchen has been seeing how kids take ownership of the meals they’re preparing and the things they are learning about.

“They’re here for a purpose,” Bell said. “I think getting kids out of their comfort zones, taking risks, they are able to take that level of ownership when they’re in a safe environment where they feel comfortable, where they feel relaxed. It’s about creating that right atmosphere.”

One thing Bell focuses on is helping her students not only learn the right foods to look for, but to consider whether foods are in season and what that means when it comes to cooking them. It’s also about learning how to work with nutritional foods and how simple some of those meals can be.

“Nutrition is a big part of that jigsaw puzzle of so many things. What we’re putting in our mouths, but also how we’re interacting with it and how it can be a source of joy,” Bell said.

Bell adds that another source of joy comes from enjoying the meal together, and spending time together, something that is included not just in her lessons for youth, but in her, ‘Educate and Eat’ events for adults as well.

“Sometimes we sit together and just chat, other times we have table topics,” she said. “So much that comes out of that.”

Moving forward, Bell hopes to not only continue offering programs for adults, but to tap into working with older children who are leaving or preparing to leave high school and heading off to the next chapter of their lives.

“We’ll open the cupboard and see what we have to work with – for most in this stage, it’s going to be basic ingredients,” said Bell. “The focus will be on what we can make with it that’s nutritional.”

Bell also recently joined the local Rotary Club and will be taking on youth leadership for the chapter, with the goal of working with youth to cook for seniors in the community.

“I love the idea of finding purpose through food,” said Bell. “I always have an educational aspect to what I’m doing. I am educating people about food, teaching them basic cooking and life skills, and I’m sharing the passion I have for food with others. Hopefully, that will have a ripple effect.”

