

SPOONS FED

LEARNING LAURA STANLEY REPORTS HOW A CROSS-COUNTRY ALLIANCE OF CULINARY EDUCATORS AND CHARISMATIC CHEFS ARE WAKING YOUNGSTERS' HOSPITALITY TALENTS. PHOTOS BY EILEEN MILLER.

It was one of those moments that I knew, even as it was happening, that I would remember for years to come. Standing in the 12th floor lobby of New York City's Institute of Culinary Education, I waited with eight jittery middle-schoolers—my students—for the swish of elevator doors and the entrance, at long last, of dinner guests they'd been preparing a month to receive. The kids craned their necks. They jiggled trays of icy basil lemonade in wineglasses. "Is it five o'clock yet?" demanded 12 year old Jean Paul, for the third time. "When are they coming?"

Our first group stepped into the room at five on the dot: parents, merely parents. The children rushed forward, greeting them like rock stars. "Welcome to the Dinner Party Project." "Would you like some lemonade?" "Mom, Daddy, I'd like you to meet..." As they proudly showed off their freshly minted hospitality skills, the other half of the group (there were 17 kids total), clad in chefs' aprons and paper toques, plated thin-crust bacon/crème fraîche pizza, under the supervision of chef **Bill Yosses**. For the next two hours, the youngsters (all students from The Child School on Roosevelt Island) cooked, served, and mingled with studied poise. Naturally their families were delighted. More important, guests absorbed the evening's primary message: your kids can do this, and they will love doing it with *you*.

The Dinner Party Project (DPP), offered through nonprofit Manhattan-based Spoons Across America (subtitled "The Source for Children's Culinary Education"), was a grand adventure for Yosses and me—an opportunity to share what we love with the most appreciative and receptive audience we'd ever had. The program, which promotes healthy pleasure at the table and the art of socializing around good food, was a hit with these children, who clamored for a chance to do everything—even flower arrangement, the surprise favorite of two of our biggest boys.

Spoons established DPP five years ago as a way of linking chefs and other food professionals with local junior high and high schools. The program has taken place more than 50 times already, in cities all over the nation. It's a very personal kind of business-community partnership, much more intimate than the charity catering that restaurants are so frequently called upon to do. Chefs, in collaboration with a classroom teacher and a "party planner" assigned to them by Spoons, follow a simple, five week curriculum in meal planning, nutrition, and hospitality as they work toward a grand finale dinner party for parents, which the children prepare and serve themselves. The party usually takes place at school, but it can also be held at the chef's restaurant or another venue. Funding comes from various outside sources—past sup-



The Child School students show off their hosting skills at The Institute of Culinary Education.

porters include the California Table Grape Commission and La Brea Bakery. Many DPP chefs also donate food and staff help.

Spoons is already well-known in New York, where it administers The American Institute of Wine & Food's Days of Taste in 65 elementary classrooms every fall. That program, which has long involved some of the city's most celebrated chefs and restaurateurs (**Waldy Malouf**, **Sirio Maccioni**, and **Cesare Casella**, among many others), emphasizes the components of taste and appreciation of seasonal farm-fresh foods. Each class finishes the course with a formal luncheon at the participating chef's restaurant, a first-time experience for most of the students involved.

The DPP is the logical next step for Spoons. Designed primarily for older children, it asks more of them. "The most important thing is the teamwork," says Pedro, a former student at PS 163 in Manhattan, whose class threw a Latin-style graduation fiesta with Gracie Mansion (the mayor's official residence) executive chef **Feliberto Estevez** in spring 2005. The experience stressed the importance of family mealtime, a once-sacrosanct ritual that is now endangered in the majority of American

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Attractive presentation (top) and gracious service (above) are key Dinner Party Project lessons.

homes—much to the detriment, research suggests, of children's health, academic performance, and emotional well-being.

"The easiest way to get our point across is to have a party," says Spoons founder and president Julia Jordan. "It's an occasion that everybody can understand." And the best way to make the idea stick, she adds, is to involve a real chef. "To kids, that uniform identifies him as a celebrity. There's a real opportunity here to impact the way kids relate to eating."

At The Child School, I saw this happen with "Chef Bill." The children idolized him. When he talked to them about his recent Food Network appearance, shot in Hawaii, they were rapt. "You really cook on TV?" demanded 13 year old Ashley, incredulous.

Tim Love (*The Lonesome Dove Western Bistro*, Fort Worth and New York City), father of three, emerged as one of the program's biggest boosters last year when he led a horse-drawn "trail drive" of dinner benefits, from Fort Worth to Los Angeles, to raise money for the program. His first DPP, which he completed last spring at the inner-city North Side Elementary School of Fort Worth, opened with quesadillas, grilled quail, and watercress salad; the lemonade was spiked with strawberries and muddled mint. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, **Robert Merrifield** (*Polo Grill*) guided ninth graders through a menu of tomato bisque, bone-in chicken breast stuffed with sage and goat cheese, and berry bread pudding. Students, supported by the restaurant's enthusiastic staff, learned everything from basic knife cuts to how to sear meat, deglaze a pan, and mount a sauce with butter. "They gave up a month of Sunday afternoons to do this," says Merrifield. "Parents were amazed by their focus."

"Kids are looking for stuff to do," says Jordan, "and we just send them to passive things—the computer, the television." Jordan, who has spent a lifetime educating young people (she is a professor of hospitality management at New York City College of Technology/CUNY) has seen over and over again how powerfully children respond when they're invited to "take ownership" of the grownup business of cooking and hosting. "It's life-changing," she insists.

For the students, perhaps. For the rest of us, definitely. "This was so much more fun than looking into the eyes of satisfied guests," says Merrifield. "I'm at a point in my career where this is what I really want to be doing."

Laura Stanley writes about food and dining from her home in Brooklyn, New York.