



Community Kitchens

PROGRAM REPORT

2010 – 11

The Stop's Community Kitchens use the power of food to build strong community ties. Participants learn about nutrition and cooking techniques, share their own knowledge and experiences in cooking, and further develop their skills in the kitchen. By cooking and enjoying meals together, social isolation is reduced and participants bring back food, confidence gained in the kitchen and knowledge to share with their friends and families.

The Community Kitchens program spans both of The Stop's site, serving both the Green Barn and Davenport West neighbourhoods. Currently, there are six community kitchens running at The Stop:

- *Happy Meals*: a healthy eating, cooking, and nutrition workshop series
- *Sabor Latino*: a Spanish-speaking cooking group
- *Positive Parenting with Food*: a cooking series for pregnant women, new mothers and caregivers of small children
- *Kidz in the Kitchen*: a partnership with the Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre's after-school program that brings children into the kitchen to cook healthy snacks and meals with our Community Chef
- *Bake Oven*: weekly summer sessions where community members make their own personal pizzas in our bake ovens
- *Seniors' Community Cooking Group*: our newest community kitchen for seniors



Towards the end of this year, two new community kitchens were launched, including a yet-to-be-named drop-in community kitchen and a cooking group for men, both based at our 1884 Davenport Road location. With only a couple of sessions of each community kitchen under our belt, the facilitators have been pleased with the high participation and gratified by the positive response from participants.

After cooking together in the Community Kitchen programs, participants enjoy a delicious meal together and have lively discussions about the meal. During this time, participants also have the opportunity to make joint decisions in planning the next session's menu.

Seasonality, nutrition, taste, culture, special diets, and preparation time are all considered when choosing recipes and developing menus. Additional activities such as berry picking field trips, preserving workshops, training sessions on how to properly run the bake oven, and cooking for special community events, have also been offered to community kitchen participants.

Community Kitchens are safe and supportive environments for community members to access healthy food while developing their knowledge and skills regarding healthy food preparation. While some participants learn new skills, other participants have an opportunity to showcase and share their own talents and techniques during the community cooking sessions. Some community members have shown great initiative in bringing in their own recipes and special dishes to share with the group, celebrating their unique cultures, food philosophies and individuality. Through the sessions, participants develop a sense of empowerment and confidence in the kitchen which fuels healthy changes in their lives.



The cooking programs also allow participants to build connections with each other and the community at large, thus reducing a sense of isolation. Many participants in the Community Kitchen programs become or already are actively involved in various other Stop programs, such as Urban Agriculture programs or the Advocacy Project, and many go on to take leadership roles as volunteers, supporting others at The Stop.

Year in Review

The 2010-2011 year has been a busy one for The Stop's Community Kitchens program. With the addition of a Seniors Community Cooking group, the resurrection of Happy Meals and the exploding success of Sabor Latino, The Stop is able to serve a larger and more diverse population.

Some highlights from the past year include:

- Community Holiday Party at the Green Barn for participants and volunteers held in December had a great turnout of approximately 50 people. Volunteers and staff also made a lot of food for the event! About 200 potato latkes, 200 vegetarian samosas, 100 foccacia, 100 cilantro chutney cucumber sandwiches were made over 3 days in the Green Barn's kitchen.
- Food Handlers Training with Toronto Public Health saw nine Green Barn and nine 1884 participants and volunteers become trained and certified as Certified Safe Food Handlers who have gone through a Food Skills Training course.

- During our Holiday Baking session in Happy Meals, one participant taught a group to make Middle Eastern date cookies. We made 120 shortbread cookies, 96 ginger cookies, and 60 pieces of biscotti, along with 48 date cookies, in just the one session!
- A new Seniors' Community Kitchen at the Green Barn began in January 2011! The group originally met once a month, but due to increasing demand, the program has expanded to two sessions per month. Participants enjoyed additional activities, such as seniors' yoga, salsa dancing, meditation, artwork and nutritional workshops, along with communal cooking and feasting.
- With more interest in cooking workshops and more participants feeling empowered in the kitchen, a new twice-monthly community cooking group was created at our 1884 Davenport site. In these sessions, participants play more of a leadership role by selecting recipes, facilitating sessions and sharing their knowledge.
- A men's cooking group was launched in July 2011. Participation has been great so far and we were happy to see long-time participants of our old Meals Made Easy program returning enthusiastically to the kitchen!

- Sabor Latino consistently broke attendance records for a Stop community kitchen, with an average of 50 adults and 11 children participating in each session! Ensuring the active involvement of so many people in preparing a meal has been an extraordinary feat of cooking facilitation. Other organisations, such as Working Women and the Newcomer's Action Centre, as well as community musical groups and dancing troupes, have attended some sessions to provide both access to services and wonderful entertainment.



- The facilitator of Sabor Latino has also provided advocacy support to participants looking for guidance dealing with problems or connections with community services. Both the demand for this type of additional support and the successful advocacy work of the facilitator has raised the idea of occasionally attaching Community Advocates, trained community members who staff the Advocacy Office located in our Food Bank, to community kitchens to offer support to those participants who might be experiencing further challenges in their lives.
- Positive Parenting with Food has continually adapted the modules and format of the program to better meet the needs and availability of the participants. To encourage consistent attendance (and recognise that long-term commitments are difficult for people looking after small children) the program has moved from a 10-week module of set themes to a 4-week module that responds to the ideas requested by the participants themselves. Every week there are activities for kids and during the session participants decide on their own menus for the final potluck cook-off. The "winner" gets a Stop cookbook!

Program by Numbers

From our program records, we know that:

- We made 35 litres of strawberry jam from 50 lbs. of strawberries in the Happy Meals Strawberry Preserving Workshop
- An average of 8 participants attended 34 weeks of Positive Parenting with Food with an emphasis on family meals, seasonal, inexpensive, and increasing intake of fruits and vegetables.
- Happy Meals - 16 sessions ranging from Gluten Free Cooking to Holiday Baking
 - Average of 15 participants per session
 - 246 meals eaten
 - 73 new recipes learned
 - 14 volunteers dedicated 140 hours of their time
 - 4 students dedicated 80 hours to help run programs
- Seniors' Community Kitchen - 8 sessions have been held since Jan 2011
 - Average number of participants per session: 16
 - 42 hours were spent by 3 students helping to facilitate sessions
 - 7 volunteers gave up 48 hours of total time assisting in the program
 - 32 new recipes were learned
- Sabor Latino has had exceptional participation over its 20 sessions last year:
 - An average of 50 adults and 11 children attend each session
 - The highest number of participants was 89!



Happy Meals participants made 350 vegetarian and meat dumplings from scratch (dough and all!) to celebrate the Chinese New Year.

From our annual program survey, we have learned that:

- 100% of community kitchen participants surveyed had tried a new food in the program
- 92% had learned new things about choosing healthy foods
- 92% had made friends with other participants
- 100% felt they knew more about preparing healthy meals since attending community kitchens programs
- 78% reported feeling more confident in the kitchen due to participating in the program

Stories from Community Kitchens

One Happy Meals participant heard about cooking programs at The Stop through a partnering organization, the Canadian Mental Health Association, and began attending

programs regularly in January 2011. Bussing all the way from north of Yonge and Steeles, this participant is always eager to help, has a wealth of knowledge about nutrition, loves being the “assistant teacher” and is always coming up with great food jokes:

“Would you like to take some cookies for the road?”

“Yes please, because the road also loves cookies!”

In a community kitchen session we made a “Green Monster”. A green monster is a green smoothie made by blending together leafy green vegetables and fruit. It’s a great way to add more fruits and vegetables to one’s diet. At first, the participants did not know what the secret ingredient was and were very surprised when they learned it was romaine lettuce! The smoothie tasted fantastic and many said they would try it at home. During the heat wave in July, one participant eagerly let me know that the “Green Monster” had helped her get through the scorching heat! She wanted to avoid sugary drinks and ice cream, and found the green smoothies to be a great solution.

A participant from Wychwood Open Door has now become a regular participant in our Seniors’ Community Kitchen and Happy Meals workshops. He has become increasingly involved in the sessions and has developed more confidence, sharing his ideas and thoughts with the group. He has expressed his gratitude for the cooking programs, and remarked that he has never been to a program where everyone is so friendly and welcoming, and has such lively conversations throughout the sessions.

In their own words

- Many of our Happy Meal participants have been coming to the program regularly this year. One participant expressed that she has “an increase in self-esteem because every time I have a sense of accomplishment” and another said the program has helped reduce social isolation by “getting me out of the house.”
- Positive Parenting participants feel that the program “gives me something to do, helps me connect with nature (gardening) and other people in the community” as well as providing women “autonomy” because “there is an extra hand to hold the kid and allows me to do something in a focused manner.”
- A senior reported that the program has allowed him to “meet people” “make friends” and another reported that the program “has enriched my wellness” is a “way to keep active” and that they have “encourage[d] others in the building to get involved.”
- “[Participating in the community kitchen] makes my life much more complete. It makes me focus on what is important instead of all the bad stuff in the world - which is not good for anybody.”

The year ahead

- A new drop-in style community kitchen open to all community members began during the summer of 2011 and will continue to engage participants in leadership roles in the kitchen. The plan is to support participants to lead cooking sessions to further develop their confidence in the kitchen, as well as their skills related to teamwork, facilitation and communication.

- The Seniors' Community Cooking will continue to explore ways to reach out to more isolated seniors, as well as to support seniors with special needs in the kitchen.
- The new community kitchen for men will continue to outreach to community members and bring new participants into the program.
- We will work on developing a Community Kitchens Handbook and establishing more communications and shared programming between all community kitchens at The Stop.
- We will explore further ways of integrating cooking into the activities and workshops offered by the Urban Agriculture Program. For example, the Community Kitchens Program could offer a "Cooking with Edible Weeds" workshop after the Urban Agriculture Program's "Edible Weeds Tour".
- We will continue to explore creative ways of addressing the on-going challenge of participant punctuality and consistent attendance in all community kitchens. For example, we will look at ways of creating incentives for participants to arrive on time and, thus, finish on time. Strategies may include adopting a practice such as that employed in Positive Parenting with Food: participants who attend regularly are offered a voucher to purchase produce at The Stop's Good Food Market.

