



Photos: Gerrit Weatherheer

# Teens in the Kitchen

Inspiring your kids  
to become  
confident cooks.

by Donald Fraser

By the sizzling sounds and sumptuous smells wafting from Karen August's kitchen, you can tell that there is serious cooking going on. Not by Karen, however. She's got her feet up in the living room, and is sipping a glass of wine and enjoying some after work downtime.

"Apparently, it's 'Taco Tuesday'" she smiles. "It is the boys' night to cook, and they've decided on Mexican."

"The boys" are Liam, 18, and Kieran, 15, two hungry teens that have grown up to be enthusiastic and quite competent cooks. They're busy making tacos and fajitas from scratch. Peppers are being sliced and sautéed; beef is searing on the stove.

Now that's a situation most parents would be thrilled about. After all, by having teens active in the kitchen, parents are ensuring that their kids will have the integral life skills needed to healthily feed themselves when they leave home. They'll also pick up some practical applications for simple math skills, help free up time for the entire family, and maybe even find new career options in the culinary sector.

Oh, and along the way, they'll spend a bit more quality time with mom and dad.

## Start with good eating

How did Liam and Kieran become so adept at making healthy meals?

"My first step in getting them to cook was getting them to eat good, proper, nutritious foods," explains Karen. "Food that was also fun for them. I would alternate some of their favourite foods with new tastes for their palates."

For Karen, smart eating starts with smart shopping. So she began taking her sons shopping at an early age, showing them where their food comes from, explaining the importance of budgeting, and insisting that they try new foods – even when they were more interested in shopping for their favourites. She also took them to places where the healthiest foods could be found – including farmers' markets and local fruit and vegetable stands.

These types of early shopping excursions with kids are essential, says Elaine McCarthy, who runs a President's Choice Cooking School. Teenagers make up a significant portion of her clientele.

"Fast foods, instant foods, convenience

foods, are all products that children and teens will gravitate towards," she says. "It's important to introduce shopping and eating habits that are more nutritious, more economical, while at the same time tasty and kid-friendly. The earlier you start this, the better."

Once your kids grow into their teens and are starting to think about leaving for college or university, you can change focus and teach them about shopping for themselves.

"Lead them to foods that are rich in iron and proteins – affordable and versatile foods that will make tasty meals," advises Elaine. "Explain how just a few ingredients can turn something like a can of chickpeas into an incredibly tasty, but frugal, dish. Try doing a few shopping trips on a student budget and help them understand how to balance cost-savings, nutrition, and taste."

Even kids who start out as picky eaters can become kitchen savvy teens who prepare healthy foods. Terri Elvald's daughter, Rhianna, was one of those kids who wouldn't eat much of anything. But once she started preparing food herself, her attitudes – and tastes – began to change.

"I honestly think that when kids start cooking for themselves and for their family, they learn to appreciate different foods more," says Terri. "They start to see that certain dishes contain ingredients that they like. Also, some of the mystery goes out of food when it is being prepared."



“Your teen can taste the different ingredients as they go in, and adapt the flavours a bit more to their liking. Food is more approachable when you are making decisions about how it is being prepared.”

## From assistant to chef

For Elaine, the best way to ensure that your teen is comfortable in the kitchen is to have them help with food prep from an early age.

“Peeling vegetables, cutting soft fruits such as bananas (with kid-friendly utensils), getting things from the cupboard or the fridge – there are no shortage of ways for children to help out. My 8 and 10 year olds are responsible for cutting a week’s worth of peppers and celery and storing them in the fridge.

“Really, as long as you keep safety in mind, there is no reason your children shouldn’t help with all aspects of food preparation, from chopping to measuring to stirring, to tasting – particularly tasting.”

And if your teen hasn’t spent much time in the kitchen?

“Give them some simple tasks to start out with,” says Elaine. “Get them used to cutting, measuring, figuring out the difference between teaspoons and tablespoons. Have them use their math skills to convert a recipe to serve a different number of people. Make them feel part of the process. And let them taste your dishes as you go so that they can start forming opinions on what flavours, herbs, and spices are needed, and in what quantity.”

Karen made sure her boys were on hand for most of the dinnertime cooking.

“If they weren’t helping me, then they were at least present,” she recalls. “I’d have them do their homework in the kitchen so they could watch, taste, and learn from what I was doing.”



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Terri also kept her kids in the kitchen as much as possible. But, with Rhianna, she went a step further, encouraging her to take high school cooking and culinary courses.

“It’s an essential life skill, like driving, or swimming,” she explains. “Teens need to learn to cook in order to eat nutritiously when they leave home. And, as much as they want to believe it, they sure won’t be able to afford take-out or pre-packaged convenience foods.”

And it has certainly paid off. Not only is Rhianna comfortable cooking for herself and her family, she is currently contemplating taking culinary arts in college next year.

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## A recipe for success

The best way to get teens cooking is to have really great recipes – recipes for meals that they are going to enjoy.

Elaine suggests starting with simple soups, stews, and pastas. “For the most part, they’re one-pot recipes with a high rate of success for beginning cooks. Plus, they are nutritious and teen-friendly in taste.”

Stress the importance of following recipes to start. “Teens lives are very structured,” says Elaine. “Their schoolwork is based on detailed instructions. They won’t have the ability to improvise, so once they have some elementary chopping and measuring skills, set them loose on some tried and true recipes that they have seen you make before.

## Tips for Parents

Elaine McCarthy of President’s Choice Cooking School has these suggestions to help your teens be a success in the kitchen.

**Give them the foundation.** In other words, teach them how to read recipes and measure ingredients. It’s all second nature to you, but remember your teen hasn’t done this before. “Be sure to walk them through the recipe beforehand,” says Elaine. “Introduce them to the ingredient list and the instructions. Have them gather the ingredients and tools. Explain any difficult steps.”

**Be sensitive to their sensitivities.** “If your teen is a vegetarian and hates handling meat, then give him an alternate dish to make, like a caesar salad. Or help him find healthy vegetarian recipes online or in cook books.”

**Don’t set them up for disaster.** “Don’t ask them to make Beef Wellington, or some other complicated dish, to begin with. If it doesn’t turn out, it will discourage them. Start with the something simple. After they’ve made a dish a few times, show them how they can change it up by adding different spices or different ingredients.”

**Take a hands off approach, but be present.** “When your teen is making his or her first few dishes, be close by to answer questions, or to help, if asked. But don’t hover. Give them the responsibility of doing things for themselves. And keep criticisms to yourself. You don’t want to suck the fun out of it.”

**Build a sense of responsibility.** “Your teenage cook has to learn that having dinner on time is of major importance. Let them know that if dinner is not ready in time for hockey or dance practice, then they’re not going. Trust me, that will go a long way in building responsibility.”

**Respect their decisions.** “Teens are people. They know what they like, and what they want. If they want to try to make something spicier or sweeter, let them. Let them experiment and be creative. Once they start taking ownership over their decisions in the kitchen, they will have moved a long way towards becoming a confident cook.”

“By having detailed instructions, they’ll be more comfortable taking on the task. (See additional tips from Elaine in the sidebar.)

By helping your teens become skilled in the kitchen, you’re ensuring that they will eat better, spend less, and be more independent when they finally leave home for the first time. You might even start them off on a career as a chef.

At the very least, you can enjoy the odd evening to put your feet up while your kids take the lead on dinner. Sure, it might not happen every night, but when it does, you’ll be one thankful parent. And dinner will never taste so good.

*Donald Fraser is a food writer and owner of Farm to Table local food consulting. He specializes in food tourism and local/seasonal food options.*



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