Students learn to cook healthy

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A group of 12 local students are discovering eating healthier can still be easy and tasty.

The group of Kalkaska Middle School students continue to learn proper nutrition and cooking techniques through the “Cooking Matters” program under the national organization Share Our Strength, a nonprofit working to end childhood hunger in the United States.

Cooking Matters, which began Nov. 28 and continues through mid-January, is facilitated locally through SEEDS After School and Goodwill Industries.

“With our first session, we talked about using knives and food safety, then we practiced those techniques,” said Jana Lanning, Kalkaska County Outreach Coordinator for SEEDS After School. “We have an executive chef that shows (students) how to properly cut onions, green peppers and that kind of thing.”

Executive Chef Sheryl Layton of Kalkaska Memorial Health Center, and Lori Eccles, a nutritionist from the Antrim County Michigan State University Extension, helped students improve their cooking skills and nutrition since the program began.

As the program began, participating students received a book with recipes and different cooking skills. They were then placed into groups of three and each group selected a favorite food to be cooked in a more nutritious fashion, Layton said.

Several different nutritious meals have been taught thus far.

“The kids are constantly chopping and cooking and, at the end of the session, we sit down and we eat what they’ve prepared and give them a bag of groceries that has some of the ingredients or things that we talked about that night,” Layton said.

Students also had the opportunity to try fruits and vegetables, with which many explained they were unfamiliar, during a discussion focusing on the significance of fruits and vegetable colors, Layton said.

“I sent them home with fruits and vegetables they probably would have never eaten before,” she said. “We had a taste test where they tried eggplant, a pear and a mango.”

Last week, the students discussed the importance of whole grains and were sent home with a grocery bag of food such as oatmeal and whole grain pita bread.

The program also involves many hands-on activities.

In a recent session, the students were given four common drinks, an energy drink and chocolate milk drink, then asked to use the nutritional information to calculate the amount of sugar in each drink. It was an exercise to understand how much sugar the students actually consume from each drink.

“You think it’s one serving, but it’s actually 2.5 (servings),” Layton said. “After that, we had them make a healthy drink with seltzer water, fruit juice and slices of orange, lime and lemon.”

In a “Top Chef”-style competition to conclude the program, students will be asked to make a modified, nutritive version of their favorite food. They will then be judged on nutrition, taste, creativity and presentation.

The team with the most points leading to the final competition will consult with both Layton and Eccles, for each 10 minutes. The second-place team will consult with either Layton or Eccles, and the third-place team will be given five extra minutes to work on their final meal.

The program has been a positive experience for everyone involved, Layton said.

“It’s really incredible to see (students) empowered about what they’re eating, cooking their own food and actually (having) their own conversations about what they’re consuming,” she said.

Several other cooking programs are offered through Cooking Matters, for all ages. An adult program and another teen program are being considered for next year, to be held at Forest Area Schools.