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## **For Immediate Release: Students at The Children's Institute Enjoy Culinary Program**



Natalie Milter of Livingston shows off the eggplant dish she made in a recent culinary class at The Children's Institute. *Credits: TCI*



Chef Michael Matthews and Seby Clement of Upper Montclair, a student at the Children's Institute in Livingston, puts a touch of basil on the eggplant dish he created in the newly expanded culinary program at the school. *Credits: TCI*

LIVINGSTON, NJ - High School and young adult students at The Children's Institute (TCI) in Livingston are learning all about food preparation, nutrition, cooking and baking with an expanded culinary program and new chef. The classes are offered in TCI's new state-of-the-art instructional kitchen, which was made possible by a donation from the Olson family.

The culinary program is one of many special programs for students at TCI, which has schools in Livingston and Verona for children and young adults ages 3-21 on the autism spectrum and with related disabilities. The Livingston campus is also home to The Center for Independence, a program for adults ages 21 and up on the spectrum.

Chef Michael Matthews, who joined the staff of TCI as a new culinary arts instructor in January, is a former restaurant owner/chef who has also worked as a chef at Whole Foods and ShopRite. A 1993 graduate from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY, he also hosts foster children. He said that when he saw how much they enjoyed what he cooked for them when they came to his home, he decided he wanted to become a teacher.

“I decided I wanted to help and make a difference in a child’s life by teaching them about healthy cooking as well as a life skill.”

“We are a building block program,” he noted of the TCI culinary program. “We are building a foundation of strong culinary principles with food and kitchen safety mixed in each and every day as well as healthy meal planning.”

The chef and students cook and bake everything from scratch with all fresh ingredients.

“We do not use any boxes or mixes,” he said. “These children make everything from risotto to soup to Asian dumplings to cookies and Italian pastries and everything in between.”

Recently, the TCI students learned to make eggplant Provençale. They learned to properly wash and slice eggplant, bread it and then bake it with tomato sauce and fresh buffalo mozzarella. They then chopped basil for a chiffonade garnish. Chef Matthews also warned them about parasites and taught them how to wash all fresh vegetables, fruit and herbs before using. In the end, the students got to try their creations.

And, the students also bake muffins, quiches, focaccia bread and coffee cakes for a Friday Coffee Cart offered weekly to students and staff. The cart runs out quickly and teachers say the offerings are much better than the store-bought snacks which the cart used to sell.

“I think the kids truly love what they are doing,” Chef Matthews said.

High School Principal Lynn Muir said Chef Matthews has been a wonderful addition to the school staff. “Mike’s culinary background and training, along with his passion for education, compliment the culinary program,” Muir said. “He has blended into our community nicely; both students and staff have welcomed him openly.

“I truly appreciate that Mike sees the ability our students have in the kitchen,” Muir added. “He works to enhance the program by providing culinary knowledge and skills to all his ‘chefs in training.’ I look forward to developing a comprehensive program over the years with Chef Matthews that will influence our students’ food choices, vocational and independence skills.”

TCI has always had a culinary arts program for its older students. In fact, several chefs have taught culinary classes at TCI including Alma Schneider, who is known for her work with special needs children; Buddy “The Cake Boss;” and Joel Scheinzeit, former owner of “Joel’s Malibu Kitchen,” a restaurant in Ridgewood. Prior to this, teachers have always incorporated culinary arts lessons into their classrooms.

Soon, Chef Matthews will also be providing culinary lessons to adults in The Center for Independence, he said.

In addition, TCI’s film students made a cooking show for special needs individuals filming Chef Schneider cooking different recipes. Many of the shows are available on YouTube.