

## **FARM: Cooking Academy offered at the Imperial County office of the University of California Cooperative Extension**

By Karysse Acuña, Special to this Newspaper | Posted: Thursday, October 12, 2017 12:10 am

This summer the University of California Cooperative Extension west of Holtville developed and offered a 4-H Cooking 101 course for Imperial Valley youth ages 9 through 13. The cooking academy is a partnership between 4-H and the University of California CalFresh Nutrition Education programs. The cooking academy started with a basic introduction to both programs, providing information about opportunities available for students within 4-H and CalFresh.

The 4-H Cooking 101 project was developed for young people who are just learning to cook and bake. The project covers kitchen and food safety, basic food preparation and nutrition. Learning by doing is the best way to learn food preparation skills.

Young people learned important life skills that they will use as they grow and become independent, responsible adults.

This cooking course provided local youth the opportunity to learn the basics of cooking, baking, and in general, to help them improve their culinary skills. The coursework included instructions on safe food handling, reading and understanding recipes, as well as measuring ingredient amounts. It also taught students basic knowledge of nutrition. They learned which food groups should be included in their everyday meals for maximum nutritional value. This course presented challenges as well as opportunities for each individual to grow.

As an Imperial Valley native, I was very excited to be invited to lend a hand and welcomed the opportunity and challenge to oversee this program as project helper. My long-term goal is to become a registered dietitian, and any experience in the field, especially helping and working with others as a team, was most welcomed. As part of the team, and with the help of the staff of the



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University of California Cooperative Extension, I was assigned the role of planning, overseeing and executing each lesson.

One of the first things that was covered during the cooking academy was “MyPlate.” Many children were unfamiliar with “MyPlate,” so an explanation was in order. As the staff member in charge, I made time to explain the idea to the group, and to help each student evaluate their own meals. To make sure they caught onto the idea, they were then asked to break down each meal and determine which food item from which food group went into the specific portion of “MyPlate.”

Most of the students caught on and presented plates that fully encompassed the “MyPlate” guidelines. Those who lacked an item from a food group were then asked how they would include, for example, a dairy product in their meal.

It was important for them to really focus and come up with solutions to provide themselves with better nutrition. After the “MyPlate” unit of instruction, food and kitchen safety was discussed, which included the proper and safe manner of handling and using knives, the method of thoroughly washing fruits and vegetables and proper attire, to name a few.

Every week the staff introduced a new recipe for the children to prepare. These ranged from simple recipes such as putting together a nutritional trail mix to more complex recipes such as preparing skillet lasagna and baking peanut butter oatmeal cookies from scratch.

Before and during each lesson, it was important to review the kitchen and food safety guidelines. It was also important to let each student execute the recipes on their own with minimal help from the staff. We wanted each student to understand that cooking is not simply throwing ingredients together and hoping for the best, but that it takes patience, precise measuring and organization in order for a successful outcome from the recipe.

At program’s end, the students left with a binder full of the recipes that they had prepared in class, a set of measuring cups, a vegetable/fruit cleaning brush and their own apron. The growth that the children showed from the first week of the course to the last in terms of confidence and understanding was more than I could have hoped. During the term of the course, many of the students learned to eat foods and food items they had never tried before. Some even had become mindful of what they were putting into their bodies such as high sugar sodas and shared how they were trying to limit their intake of such “junk” food products.

This summer was the first 4-H Cooking 101 project offered by the University of California Cooperative Extension. It was fun and challenging, not only for the children, but for myself as well, as I tried to provide an educational environment that they could enjoy. I hope in the future that this program continues to grow and provide children with more opportunities to excel.