

Teen Cuisine

By [Maria P. Gonzalez](#)

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In a Garrison Middle School classroom, rows of desks give way to kitchen stations with stoves, blenders, utensils and an assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Across one table are gathered cartons of chicken stock, butter in abundance, and the farm fresh vegetables that are the main ingredients for a lesson in French cooking.

The squashes at the table — pumpkin, butternut, banana — are fresh from Welcome Table Farm, a local organic farm, said Brent Cummings, site director of the after-school program. Among the vegetables are also carrots, apples, onions and leeks, all destined for soups made from scratch.

Monday and Wednesday afternoons at Garrison have been dedicated to the “Chop Chef” program, which started Sept. 26 and ends Halloween. The school’s Millenials after-school program, run by Cummings, worked to offer the cooking lessons as a hands-on learning opportunity for the middle school crowd. Five local chefs will have visited the students by the program’s end.

About 60 students signed up for the classes, and attended in two groups during the week. A couple of days were dedicated to smoothie making, with the goal of offering a smoothie to sell in the school’s cafeteria by the end of the year.

“The opportunity to work with food is desirable for most kids,” said Beth Thiel, Farm to School coordinator for Walla Walla Public Schools. Thiel secured the grant that helped make the Chop Chef program possible.

Brasserie Four chef and owner Hannah MacDonald was at work slicing the tough skins off the squashes when her class of about 20 students arrived.

The young chefs got right to work, simmering butter, onions, stock and their squash varieties in small groups. While the soups cooked, the students also blended blueberries, yogurt, bananas and honey for smoothies.

MacDonald encouraged the teens to trust their tastebuds, whether adding more salt to the soup pots, or chunked apple for added sweetness.

“Cooking is really about just tasting and tasting, and making things that you like,” she explained.

MacDonald left the gutting of the squash up to the students. She pointed out the rinsed seeds would make a good snack if roasted in the oven.

Lanalisa Buettner, 13, took the opportunity to bundle a handful of fresh seeds in plastic wrap.

“I’m going to take these seeds home, and make them. It sounds good,” she said.

Jordanne Fox, a sixth-grader, worked with eighth-grader Ciara Vanslyke to stir a pot of simmering butternut squash. Jordanne summed up the girls’ main reason for joining: “I signed up for eating.”

About "Chop Chef":

"Chop Chef" was funded by the Action for Healthy Kids — School Grants for Healthy Kids, in partnership with the Wal-Mart Foundation, said Beth Thiel, Farm to School coordinator for Walla Walla Public Schools. Grant money went to buying cooking equipment, and to develop marketing to target healthy eating and good food choices to middle-schoolers. The district's Farm to School program is supported by a grant from the First Fruits Fund, a component of the Blue Mountain Community Foundation.