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TOWN TOPICS®

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Healthy “Cafe” Food and Cooking Instruction Offered at Mission of Terra Learning Kitchen



HEALTHY EATING: “We want Terra Learning Kitchen to be an eye opener. Our message is about eating healthy and eating seasonally. We saw an opportunity to offer healthy food at affordable prices at this central location.” Shown left to right is the Terra Learning Kitchen team: kitchen manager Margo Allen, Raoul and Carlo Momo of Terra Momo Restaurant Group, Dorothy Mullen of the Suppers Program, and pastry chef Natalie Russano.

Reinforcing attitudes about the importance of home-cooked food and educating consumers about the negative consequences of processed foods is the goal of Terra Learning Kitchen.

Indeed, it is a “Kitchen with a Mission!”

“Our shared mission is to promote health by providing tasty whole food for a reasonable cost and educating our community about cooking nutritious food deliciously,” says Raoul Momo, co-owner of Terra Momo Restaurant Group and a founder of Terra Learning Kitchen (TLK).

“Terra Learning Kitchen is dedicated to educating the public about wholesome food and cooking, and how to make healthy food and delicious food the same thing. It offers a variety of cooking classes as well as healthy grab 'n' go lunches and take-out dinners,” adds TLK kitchen manager Margo Allen.

Combined Venture

Located inside the Program Building of the Princeton Family Y, TLK is a combined venture of the YMCA, The Suppers Program, and the Terra Momo Restaurant Group.

Started in January of 2014, TLK has continued to evolve, and now offers breakfast, lunch, and dinner to go. Eat-in or take-out selections are available five days a week, as well as cooking classes and events focusing on cooking instruction, preparing the meals, and then enjoying the culinary results.

Parties of all kinds, celebrations, and corporate team building events are all popular options.

Delicious and nutritious is the key, point out Raoul Momo and Dorothy Mullen, who are supporters of TLK. Mr. Momo and his brother Carlo Momo are the owners of Terra Momo Restaurant Group, which includes such popular eating establishments as Mediterra, Teresa's Caffè, Eno Terra, and Terra Momo Bread Company.

Ms. Mullen is the founder of The Suppers Program, a non-profit organization dedicated to furthering healthy nutrition and emphasizing its importance in reducing a variety of illnesses and addictions.

Supper meetings are held in central New Jersey, when people gather to “cook together, eat together, learn together, and taste and feel their way to vibrant health using whole food,” reports Ms. Mullen.

Four Principles

“Four principles guide us to our mission,” she adds. “(1) the active practice of non-judgment, (2) whole food preparation, (3) no commercial messages, and (4) restoration of the family table.”

Much of this philosophy is evident at TLK, where the focus is on education about healthy eating as well as providing nutritious dishes.

“There is great need and growing interest for programs that help people understand how to eat better and more nutritiously,” says Mr. Momo. “We share a mutual goal of enhancing people’s well-being and healthy eating. We are very pleased to be adding another dimension to that experience through culinary education. We hear it all the time — people are eager to learn how to eat better and make choices that improve their health, as individuals and as families, without compromising taste.”

But how to do this when everyone is so rushed, trying to balance numerous obligations and tasks, and where budget is a never-ending consideration?

Easy accessibility to nutritious food at affordable prices is the key, believes the TLK team, and they want people to understand the consequences of fast food, processed food, and the health consequences that can result.

“At TLK, we prepare healthy food, all made from scratch, and we make it accessible and convenient for people,” says Ms. Mullen. “We are value-driven. I really come at this from the health angle of preventing disease and unnecessary suffering. Unhealthy eating can be a factor in obesity, diabetes, and other health problems, including addictions, especially in connection with processed food.”

Best Outcome

In the best outcome, healthy eating can ultimately help to prevent illness and reduce medical expenses.

TLK cooking classes include the basics, such as knife skills, soup-making, seasonal cooking, etc., notes Ms. Mullen. “Mini Chef” school is available for children, and it is never too soon for the youngest among us to discover the pleasures of preparing and then eating their culinary creations.

Food and kitchen accessibility — not just from vending machines, microwave ovens, and fast food establishments — is a major concern of the TLK partners. They believe there has been a growing “disconnect” between people and their food, and this has been apparent in the design and use of buildings.

“There was a time when public buildings like schools, libraries, and YMCAs all had proper kitchens. The cafeterias actually cooked food. These days public buildings are being built just with snack bars, warmers, and microwave ovens.

This loss of kitchens from public spaces reinforces the sick idea in our culture that good food doesn't matter, that cooking isn't necessary," notes the TLK team.

"What we stand up for by collaborating on TLK is the idea that there's no separating the health of the people from cooking delicious food. Once you lose a couple of generations of people who know how to cook, it takes a big effort to reverse the mistake. There aren't enough mothers and grandmothers — and fathers too — passing along skills and traditions, standards, and food values. What used to happen naturally and simply in families now requires complex solutions, including instruction.

"We did a very big experiment. The results are in. You can't erase local food traditions and cooking from a culture without really bad consequences like diabetes and obesity and all these food-driven diagnoses."

Back on Track

"Therefore, kitchens in public spaces have to be about more than just getting some food out wherever people gather. The culture needs them to be teaching and learning kitchens too because somehow we have to get our derailed train back on the tracks."

"That's why Terra Momo is collaborating with the YMCA and Suppers," adds Mr. Momo. "The Y and Suppers have health missions, and Terra Momo prizes high standards for quality and sourcing of food. They come together in TLK, which is creating a higher bar and a model of what has to happen with kitchens in public spaces in order to turn around this massive, destructive trend."

Menu choices at TLK include a variety of tempting dishes. The very popular Breakfast Burrito consists of scrambled eggs, turkey bacon, and cheddar cheese; Frittata of the Day features seasonal vegetables and crustless egg quiche; the Smoothie of the Day offers fresh fruit and vegetables, and there is also Greek yogurt, homemade granola, and seasonal fruit compote.

Soup and chili are very much in demand, including turkey chili with ground turkey, kidney beans, bell peppers, onions, and tomatoes; spicy vegetarian chili is another option and includes white beans, black beans, red and green bell peppers, and eggplant spiced with chipotle peppers.

Chicken and kale soup offers chicken breast with carrots, celery, onions, and Tuscan kale, and brown rice (optional).

Salads include Tuscan Kale with tossed almonds, feta cheese, sun-dried tomatoes in a white balsamic vinaigrette; also Chop Salad featuring local greens, feta cheese, radish, red onion, cauliflower, and crispy garbanzo beans, served with a choice of dressing; and Goat Cheese & Apricot, served over mixed greens with toasted almonds, and choice of dressing.

Noodle-less Lasagna

Tacos and enchiladas round out the menu, and include coconut and chili chicken or pulled pork carnitas on corn tortilla with such toppings as shredded local lettuce, pickled jalapenos, cheddar cheese, queso fresco, Mexican crema, and salsa verde.

Vegetarian enchiladas include corn tortillas filled with quinoa, kale, black beans, and mozzarella cheese, served with tomato sofrito sauce. Other choices are Chicken Cacciatore, Noodle-less Lasagna, including layered roasted zucchini, eggplant, red pepper, house marinara, mozzarella, ricotta, and kale. Turkey meatballs with marinara are another choice, among many others.

Prices range from \$3 for the Frittata of the Day, \$5 for chili, soup, salads, and tacos, to \$8 for Chicken Cacciatore and Lasagna.

“We use only the freshest ingredients, focusing on locally-sourced and seasonally available produce,” says Mr. Momo. “We have a brand new kitchen space, which has been completely renovated. We are open to all the Y members and to the general public. We really want to be involved in the community. I enjoy serving the community. I live here, my kids go to the Y, and I’m really involved on a personal level.

“There is really nothing else like TLK in the area. We plan to have more cooking classes and more events in the All-Purpose Room. We’re excited, and we look forward to seeing our concept and vision grow.”

Terra Learning Kitchen seats 18 inside, and also offers outdoor seating and a picnic table in the garden in warm weather. Parking is free and convenient, and TLK is open Monday and Friday 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday 8 to 5. (609) 580-1664. Website: www.terramomo.com. It is also possible to order online.

Written by: Jean Stratton