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TEEN IRON CHEF
Role models for healthy eating

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Bono, the Boy, and the Broker

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Adolescence and food seem to go together like two peas in a pod. Unfortunately, studies have shown as teens begin making more autonomous choices regarding nutrition, often poor dietary habits ensue. Increased fast food consumption, meal skipping and inappropriate dieting can quickly become the norm. But what if our youth became more knowledgeable, skilled and enthusiastic about cooking and making healthy food decisions instead?

The Teen Iron Chef program, developed by FamilyCook Productions in New York City, is a youth culinary and nutrition skill-building program that opens new horizons for adolescents and food. During seven weeks of two-hour, after-school sessions, teens learn about garden-to-table food preparation and how to educate their peers as well.
"Young teens are a pivotal age group in the community, with the ability to act as messengers and role models to inspire younger children, peers and elders," — Lynn Fredericks

According to author Lynn Fredericks, the founder of FamilyCook Productions, the sessions are a refreshing departure from classroom style learning. Each week, two teams explore a specific culture’s food through preparing a recipe and competing against each other in food presentation, and the culture and nutritional significance of their assigned recipe.

"Teen Iron Chef is a youth development program that’s really about teamwork, youth empowerment, transforming one’s knowledge about food and cooking, finding out more about who you are, and celebrating enjoyment of good food," says Fredericks.

Participants and their mentors describe an impressive array of newfound skills and abilities such as working as a team, following directions and sharing responsibility. The teens also gain self-confidence, public speaking and problem-solving skills, health literacy and experience testing their creativity through trying new foods.

A rewarding and perhaps somewhat surprising outcome of Teen Iron Chef is the leadership role that students gravitate toward in their communities as activists and educators. Much of this enthusiasm is directed toward promoting good nutrition, sustainable food systems, healthy food choices and local food production.

Teen Iron Chefs become community ambassadors on changing attitudes toward healthy eating. "They are bursting with enthusiasm to share with others and become catalysts for change. They really want to do something powerful and set an example," adds Fredericks.

Giovanni Edwards, one of the founders of the youth farmer’s market program in New York City, loves when the Teen Iron Chefs come to do cooking demos. “With youth working at the market, we can get more knowledge to schools, friends and parents,” says Edwards. "Friends can tell friends and hopefully change the way they eat. It can start a chain reaction and hopefully there will be a domino effect which will change the health of our neighbors, our community and one day even our nation.”

In fact, the youth leadership potential of the Teen Iron Chef program has attracted the attention of author and cardiac surgeon Dr. Mehmet Oz, well known from "The Oprah Winfrey Show." In cooperation with FamilyCook Productions, he is incorporating the Teen Iron Chef curriculum as part of his Health Corps organization — a national network of high school peer mentoring programs that aims to engage and educate America’s youth and families in making healthy lifestyle choices.
Goals of the TEEN IRON CHEF curriculum

- Develop confidence in meal preparation and planning.
- Develop an adventurous nature about trying new foods with friends and family.
- Absorb nutrition fundamentals that are fun and easy to understand.
- Practice cultural awareness and tolerance.
- Experience culinary literacy sharing a meal with friends and family.
- Practice teamwork toward a common goal.
- Learn and practice basic cooking skills using fresh, healthful ingredients.
- Foster peer educators and promote cooking and healthy eating to others.