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Veggie burgers pass students' taste test

(<http://www.pioneerlocal.com/evanston/news/2048940,evanston-dawescook-021810-s1.article>)

February 18, 2010

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Students at Dawes Elementary School in Evanston have had a running start on the healthy eating agenda that First Lady Michelle Obama is elevating to a matter of national urgency and prominence.

For several years now, Dawes pupils have been growing fresh food in the Garden of Eatin' on school grounds.

Earlier this month, healthful-cooking expert Elizabeth Thomas visited every classroom from kindergarten through fifth grade to show the youngsters how to whip up a healthy veggie "burger" from zucchini and black beans.

In one fifth-grade classroom, students at one table grated the zucchini and mashed a can of drained, black beans, while classmates at another table mixed up a binding base of ground oats, beaten egg, garlic powder and cumin -- adding just a touch of salt and pepper.

At a third table, meanwhile, parent volunteer Leonard English showed youngsters how to make a corn-mango salsa as a slightly sweet side dish. The salsa included tomatoes, cilantro, a touch of red wine vinegar and lime.

"Do you remember why we are using ground oats as a substitute for bread crumbs?" asked Thomas as the first batch of patties were placed in the electric fry pan.

"Because bread crumbs have sugar and no fiber," replied 11-year-old Seth Reynolds.

Before the taste test, Thomas met with a few sighs when she suggested they first do some yoga exercises.

"Sometimes we think we are so tired we can't exercise," said Thomas, of Nurture, a non-profit that conducts nutrition workshops. "But that's when we should exercise because it gives us energy. It also keep us focused."

Though only one hand shot up when Thomas asked students if this was the best burger they'd ever eaten, nearly every student conceded it tasted better than they expected.

"That's why you should try new things," Thomas said, adding that it's worth giving disliked foods a second chance because tastes change with time.

"Something you didn't like 10 years ago," she said, "you may like now."

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