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Budget-conscious cooks learn how to prepare healthy meals

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By Luci Weldon

Quick Chef participants help instructor Michael Ring slice vegetables for a ratatouille the class prepared last

week.

By Luci Weldon

About a dozen Warren County residents are learning that it is possible to prepare easy, nutritious meals on a budget through Quick Chef classes that began in late July at Warren Foodworks on Warrenton's Main Street.

The classes, which will continue each Tuesday through Sept. 4, are part of the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle's Cooking Matters, a program of the Share Our Strength initiative, and are presented locally by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Center for Health Promotion & Disease Prevention.

The series of six classes follows a curriculum developed by Share Our Strength's Cooking Matters, said Dr. Molly De Marco, project director and research fellow with the Center for Health Promotion & Disease Prevention.

Also taught in Orange County, the Quick Chef course came to Warren County as a result of the center's work with local churches and agencies.

"There was a need in Warren County," De Marco said.

The current lessons represent the fourth series of Quick Chef classes held here. Previously, the course was held at the Warren County Cooperative Extension Office and Warren County High School, De Marco noted.

The classes are especially designed for people using Food Stamps, the Warren County Health Department's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, or similar programs.

"The focus is on eating healthier on a budget," De Marco said.

She said that classes focus on nutrition, such as the importance of whole wheat; cooking skills, such as safe handling of knives in food preparation; alternatives to salt, such as herbs and spices, as well as ingredients that can be found easily in rural communities.

"We emphasize local produce, and to support the local community to keep dollars in the community," De Marco said.

During last week's class, participants began by reviewing what they learned in their first meeting on July 31. At that time, topics included proper portions, reducing the amount of fat and sodium in meals, and including more fruits and vegetables in one's diet. They also learned some tricks of the trade, such as placing a damp paper towel under a cutting board so it won't slip.

As the second class began, instructor Michael Ring, manager of Warren Foodworks, told those attending that he would be demonstrating how to cook ratatouille and pineapple-carrot muffins.

Ring said that the muffin recipe represents just one of the ways that parents can “sneak” fruits and vegetables into meals so that children will enjoy eating healthier. He added that ratatouille is a great way to enjoy the vegetables that are in season right now, such as squash and eggplant.

Using the fresh vegetables that would go in the evening’s recipes, Ring demonstrated how to look for the best squash, zucchini, eggplant, tomatoes and onions at the farmer’s market or grocery store.

Following the discussion, Ring and the class turned their attention to preparing the recipes. Some participants sliced the vegetables for the ratatouille, while others grated carrot and began mixing wet and dry ingredients for the muffins.

As Ring prepared muffin pans for the batter, he continued his cooking tips. He said that, if you don’t have cooking spray on hand, you can wipe a light coating of oil on muffin cups to prevent sticking, or, you can use cup liners.

He added that fresh herbs can be preserved by chopping them and mixing them with an equal amount of salt.

“The salt dries out and preserves the herbs so you don’t waste them,” Ring said.

As the muffins went into the oven, he prepared to cook pasta for the ratatouille. Ring told the group to always bring water to a boil before adding pasta.

He demonstrated how to chiffonade leafy green vegetables and herbs by stacking basil leaves, rolling them, and then cutting them into strips to use in the ratatouille.

With the pasta cooking, Ring and the participants discussed how they use leftovers in other recipes. Ideas included using vegetables in soup, potatoes in potato cakes, and chicken in tacos and chicken salad.

The group also learned that fresh, frozen and canned fruits and vegetables are all good sources of vitamins. However, reading labels is important to watch salt and sugar content.

With the muffins done, Ring stir-fried the ingredients for the ratatouille as a quick alternative to the traditional method of preparing the dish. As the class concluded, participants had the opportunity to taste the evening’s dishes.

Lessons in upcoming sessions will include the selection and cooking of meats and a field trip to a local grocery store to learn how to make healthy choices on a budget.

De Marco explained that the course is designed for students to work their way through the entire six-class series of lessons, so no additional spaces for the current sessions are available. However, plans for future Quick Chef classes in Warren County are in the works and will be announced when they are finalized.