





TEACHING, AND LEARNING, WHITE SPACE

Doing What You Love and Making a Difference

BY YASMINE McGRANE

PHOTOS BY CLAY McLACHLAN

It's something we all know we want more of. But not something we all know how to describe. White space. Slowing down the pace of our lives so we can enjoy the moment. Curbing our urge to overcommit so we can be creative and do more of what we love.

One ordinary day last year, I was given the chance to bring more white space into my life. At my son Finnegan's back-to-school night, the volunteer sign-up sheets circulated. I had to physically stop myself from overcommitting. This year I wanted to be a human being not a human doer. In all aspects of my life, I would try to focus on a few things I was passionate about and enjoy them deeply.

So I asked myself, "What do I love to do that may be needed?"

One thing I love is cooking. I mentioned that to Finnegan's teacher, Mrs. Devol, and suggested that it would be great to use the school's gardens more and develop a culinary farm program. Because she is an amazing teacher, she listened. The next day she asked if I wanted to teach a cooking lesson. I jumped at the chance.

I was committed to doing it in a way that enhanced the subjects the students were already learning in school, by integrating their core curriculum into a fun, real life cooking environment. I had admired Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard Project and felt confident we could use it as a model.

I soon found myself reflecting on my time growing up in Montreal. Walking home from school, hand-in-hand with my Maman, as she told tales of biking to the market that morning to see what was fresh for supper. About the Italian plums that had just come in and how we had to quickly whip up dough for plum tarts. It was pure exhilaration.



Little Minou.

Apple Pie

Art is full of rainbows



We had a vegetable naming contest and our winner, Chef Owen, was knighted by baguette as the “King of the Land of Vegetables.”

When we got home, we put on our aprons and headed for the kitchen. While I did my homework at the counter, she would magically incorporate what I was learning at school into our home “classroom.” If I was learning subtraction, she would have me count green beans, eat four, then tell her how many were left. If I was working on reading, she always seemed to have misplaced her glasses, asking me to read the recipe. For art, I had to creatively plate the food while setting the table.

Those memories reminded me a lot of my son’s school, Willow Creek Academy, a public charter school in Sausalito. The faculty consciously incorporates lessons taught in the classrooms into real life environments in order to deepen the students’ understanding. Enabling children not to just memorize things for a test, but understand it for a lifetime.

But how would I get a class of 20 first graders interested in cooking? When I showed up that first day with my farmers’ market cart filled with vintage mixing bowls and potato mashers to make applesauce, it dawned on me: I would start with a story.

As we sat in a circle, I described this little French girl, nicknamed Minou (my pet name as a child), who lived in Canada and fell in love with



cooking with her Maman. It was a real life story from my childhood.

When I noted the students hanging on every word, I knew this little girl had inspired a love affair with food for them. And it confirmed for me the value of telling kids your own life stories to capture their attention and pass on wisdom.

After the first lesson, Mrs. Devol asked if I wanted to continue. I found myself staying up late creating fun recipes, wondering what cooking adventure Little Minou would have at her Uncle Pierre’s bakery or Uncle Jacques’ farm.



At the start of each lesson, the teacher would have the kids read and spell the recipe, then paste it in cookbooks they would publish. I would teach skills like how to chop safely. Plating the food became an art lesson. Students gained presentation skills by sharing their creations with their classmates. We discussed where our food comes from and composted our scraps.

I also worked to incorporate mindfulness principles into our lessons. The inspiration came from my own children. When our family spent a summer in a farmhouse in Provence, the kids got to experience how our French neighbors enjoyed their food. Even today, when I am eating on the go, Delphine reminds me “Maman, eat like the French!” My first mindfulness lesson would be to teach children how to live in the moment by savoring your food.

The week we made fruit-filled puff pastries topped with crème fraîche, I actually asked the kids to wait before digging in. Imagine how hard it is for a room full of first graders to wait with something so tempting right in front of them! But they were fascinated when asked to stare at their dishes while classical music played.

When the music stopped, they could express what they imagined. Excited hands shot up to share their stories. Chef Sophie pictured snow-covered mountain peaks with raspberries skiing down cliffs. Chef

Marcelles said it was a submarine coming up out of ice-capped water.

Then the music started again. They took one bite, put their forks down, and closed their eyes to taste, feel and enjoy every flavor. I had to stop myself from chuckling watching little boys and girls, eyes closed, moving their heads side to side in bliss. Then they described the textures and flavors in colorful detail. I made a mental note to savor my own food this way.

Another week we practiced mindfulness through salad. After measuring a two-foot dinosaur kale stalk for math, bowls were passed, each filled with six different kinds of lettuce. The children were tasked with noting and then describing the textures, smells and tastes of each using food critique descriptions. Chef Evi described arugula as “spicy and bitter.” Chef Estella critiqued mâche as “flowery, nutty and jammy.”

After learning how to make a vinaigrette and add seasonal toppings, they plated their salads. I photographed their creations, remarking that they reminded me of the work of professional food stylists. Chef Mason intently stacked squash and croutons into towers for a medieval fort. When his masterpiece was complete, he announced, “Chef Yasmine, now I am ready for the photo.” Encouraging them to express themselves through food is a fun way to inspire self-confidence in children.



Take a bite



Subsequent lessons included how to set a table and respectful table manners, furthering the development of social skills through breaking bread together.

Kids that were initially hesitant about cooking were now begging to wear one of the coveted sous-chef aprons. Imagine my delight when one such boy, Chef Raymone, sat down next to me to say he had been thinking a lot about cooking, then described lessons we might consider. Soon he chaired a leadership team that brainstormed innovative recipes.

We had a vegetable naming contest and our winner, Chef Owen, was knighted by baguette as the “King of the Land of Vegetables.” Surely an honor to highlight on his future college application.

Willow Creek Academy has an amazing cultural diversity. In my son’s class alone there were students from India, Turkey, Sweden, Italy, France, Peru, Canada, Africa and even Sri Lanka. Cooking is a fantastic way to teach geography, the different languages people speak at the table, and the myriad of flavors and cooking and eating traditions around the world. Acceptance and compassion. When I looked around at these little chefs, I could imagine them as the next generation of leaders at the United Nations. Breaking bread together may just be what this world needs more of.

We ended our final lesson in their garden, clipping edible flowers to put into popsicles. I had written inspirational messages on popsicle sticks and asked each child to select one with their eyes closed. When I read them, we looked one another straight in the eyes. I will always remember that

connection and how a simple message like “You light up the world” or “Your laugh is magic” can have a lasting impact on a child—and you.

To my surprise, there was one message that many children tried peeking through their hands to get, “Your ideas will change our world.”

At the end of the year, the class surprised me with a book they created from their individual “Dear Little Minou” letters and drawings, describing what they loved most about our time together. The recurring theme was how much it meant to them to “slow down and enjoy the moment.”

The funny thing is, when you create a bit of white space before making a less-than-conscious commitment, the universe often elevates things to a higher level. This year, I am leading a team of passionate teachers, parents, students and members of our extended community to build a culinary farm program leveraging our 14-acre campus with a creek running through it, four vegetable gardens, three hens and five happily chirping chicks.

When you are asked to commit to something this year—whether it be at work, home, school or wherever—try stopping first to create a bit of white space, allowing time to ask yourself what you are passionate about and how that can make a lasting difference in the world.

Yasmine McGrane lives in a restored 1893 Victorian in Old Town Sausalito with her husband and two budding chef children. She is writing a book on her personal journey back to white space. And now Little Minou children books. As founder of Maison Réve, she loves to inspire people to live with white space. Join the movement at MaisonReve.com.