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## After-school program at FIU teaches kids how to cook

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CHRIS CUTRO / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

11/10/09- Catrina Narcellus, 10, and Josie Dieujuste, 11, react after tasting wasabi for the first time during a common threads cooking class at FIU in North Miami Beach.

Jerome Jacques never considered himself a gourmet.

The third-grader said he used to prefer eating hot dogs, eggs and salami sandwiches.

Now, thanks to an after-school program designed to teach inner-city kids about the importance of eating healthier, Jerome is learning how to cook nutritional and tasty food.

The best part? It's also an educational experience.

In the kitchen, Jerome has learned how to prepare dishes from countries like Thailand, Turkey and Mexico. He's also been taught the ABCs of cooking, including how to safely use kitchen utensils, measure ingredients, follow instructions and share with his classmates.

"I like that we taste foods and try to do new things," Jerome, 9, said.

Jerome is one of 31 students enrolled in the Common Threads after-school culinary program.

Once a week, he and his peers from W.J. Bryan and North Miami elementary schools meet at the School of Hospitality at Florida International University's Biscayne Bay Campus.

The program is new to Miami, sponsored by the Chicago-based nonprofit group Common Threads and spearheaded by Michelle Bernstein, award-winning chef and co-owner of Michy's and Señora Martinez.

Bernstein said she learned about the program last year and thought it was a fit for Miami.

"I helped raised about \$25,000 by hosting personal brunches at Michy's," Bernstein said.

Her friends and business contacts donated the additional \$25,000.

The first classes were held at Johnson & Wales University, but due to the program's success, Bernstein, who frequently teaches the classes, expanded the program to FIU.

"At first it was hard because [the students] are taught to cook in a real, professional kitchen, and it's very new to them," Bernstein said of teaching.

"But now my biggest problem is saying goodbye to them. I've grown so attached."

Allison Liefer, culinary program manager for Common Threads, said in the age of fast food and on-the-go eating, it's important to teach the value of nutrition.

"Kids are more likely to eat healthier food when they've had a chance in creating it," she said.

On a recent afternoon, the lesson plan included a culinary trip to Japan. As the students gathered in the food preparation room at FIU's North Campus, volunteer chef Mimi Chacin passed around wasabi.

Armed with a glass of water, the students, bright-eyed and curious, placed the spicy condiment in their mouths.

"Ahh, that's hot!" screamed the kids.

Even though they are encouraged to try everything they make, some dishes are more popular than others.

"My favorite dishes so far are the vegetable rolls and quesadillas," said

Vanessa Frederic.

Vanessa, a fifth-grader at North Miami Elementary School, has taught her parents to make some of the dishes she learned.

“All the food we've made is healthy, yet delicious,” she said.

Vanessa and Jerome joked they're little chefs in the making.

“I'd like to be a chef one day or a narcotics officer,” said Vanessa, 11.

Jerome agreed. “If I become a chef, I can cook for my mom and she doesn't have to do all the work,” he said.

Bernstein, who hopes to expand the program into other Miami-Dade schools, smiled at that thought.

“The teachers tell me that they've never had an after-school program that has helped [the students] so much,” she said.

“They are dreaming of becoming chefs and learning their dreams are tangible. . . .It's very rewarding.”