

Social bridges built with food in Culture Kitchen

BY AIRIN STEPHENS

IT'S A Wednesday afternoon, and the women of the Culture Kitchen are ramping up production for the premier of the Dinner Dash Meal Program.

The sound of knives chopping and mixing spoons knocking against metal bowls overtake the brush of sorting parsley and squeezing lemons. All this to contribute to the hummus, salads and, the pièce de résistance, ouzle — a thin crispy dough stuffed with rice, peas, ground beef, cashew, almonds and pistachio.

Tonight, the women are making enough food to feed 45 families in Thunder Bay. The chatter is in both English and Arabic, but there is one common sound as the food gets tested: "mmmmm delicious!"

Thunder Bay has been home to many newcomers for the past century: Italian, Jewish, Finnish, Portuguese, and most recently people from the Middle East . . . each bringing with them unique cultures and traditions to create the vibrant and



ONE CITY,
MANY VOICES

The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario

diverse community that is Thunder Bay particularly through their food.

Roots to Harvest is a non-profit organization here in Thunder Bay that uses food as a tool to build community. Whether it's growing in the garden or being prepared in the kitchen, food has the power to bring us together. For the past several years Roots to Harvest has worked with the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association to run a cooking pro-

gram for multicultural youth. It is from the success of these bi-weekly cooking sessions that the Culture Kitchen program was born.

The Culture Kitchen pilot program involved 10 women, originally from the Middle East, who have been trained in food skills, safe food-handling certification, recipe development as well as small business training. Over the past few months, the group has built relationships with community organizations across the city. It's a key to feeling less isolated and more involved in the Thunder Bay community.

For these women, Culture Kitchen is creating social and economic opportunities. Building on the knowledge and skill of those involved, the program aims to support employment opportunities, such as confidence, English language and professional experience. In addition, the Culture Kitchen has proven to be a valuable networking hub connecting newcomers to new opportunities while providing workplace skills, knowledge and experience.

For example, participants received Safe Food-Handler Certifications, delivered and tested in Arabic, a valuable jumpstart to employability. This was delivered in partnership with Thunder Bay Public Health who worked with the group of women patiently as all learning materials were presented in both English and Arabic.

Overall, Roots to Harvest's hope is to create space for meaningful work and a unique opportunities for engagement and integration for newcomers so that they can begin to have varied social interactions and feeling more at home in Thunder Bay. The Culture Kitchen has only begun to realize the dynamic relationship and potential impact on the prosperity and well-being of Thunder Bay's newest citizens.

Aya Wadi, the Culture Kitchen interpreter and champion describes her experience in the program: "The Culture Kitchen was the way to get



PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY ROOFA RAKSHIT

Culture Kitchen women prepare yalanji (stuffed vine leaves) for the Roots to Harvest annual general meeting.

to know new friends in the community, and build bridges between different cultures with a smile and generosity. It also means hope for us as newcomers because it provides the opportunity to improve ourselves, put our fingerprints on our new home and share our food and culture with others."

Beyond the value it provides the participants, the Culture Kitchen

makes Thunder Bay a more dynamic and vibrant place to live for all.

Airin Stephens co-ordinates the Culture Kitchen Program at Roots to Harvest she loves how food can be the connective force between people, culture and language. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.



Suwar as-sitt (also called lady's bracelet baklava) is made by the women of Culture Kitchen for Roots to Harvest annual general meeting.