

## Apples to Zucchini Cooking School Partners with Schools, Nonprofits to Get Kids Cooking

*Meal time and preparation just first steps in transformative learning experience for youth in array of after-school and enrichment programs around Santa Barbara County*



Thanks to Apples to Zucchini (A to Z) Cooking School, children not only learn how to prepare and cook food like butternut squash, but how to work together in teams and how the food they eat affects their energy levels.

(Apples to Zucchini (A to Z) Cooking School photo)

By Ann Pieramici, Noozhawk Contributing Writer | [@noozhawknews](#)  
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Kids along the Central Coast are stewing, simmering and steaming, thanks to [Apples to Zucchini \(A to Z\) Cooking School](#), which teaches local students how to prepare nutritious meals using real food.

What started as an after-school enrichment program at [Brandon School](#) in the [Goleta Union School District](#), has blossomed into a full-scale cooking school that reaches more than 1,200 people each year.

Since its inception six years ago, Apples to Zucchini now partners with several local schools and nearly a dozen nonprofit organizations.

Julia Cushing, a licensed clinical social worker, spearheads A to Z Cooking's partnership programs, develops curriculum and teaches classes at [Noah's Anchorage](#), [Girls Inc. of Greater Santa Barbara](#), [S.A.F.E. House](#), [Casa Serena](#), [Gaucho Underground Scholars](#) and the [Santa Barbara School of Squash](#), among others. She emphasizes a mindful approach to cooking and eating.

"Our curriculum includes discussions about how we can be mindful as we prepare our food, and mindful as we eat our food," she told [Noozhawk](#). "We highlight the importance of being aware of our emotions and stress levels and paying attention to how the foods we consume make our bodies feel."

Cushing said meal time is also an opportunity to pause, take deep breaths, and really notice how food smells and tastes.

Kristina Webster, director of learning and development and culture at Girls Inc., shared that her students have learned how food affects their energy levels. She said they now pay closer attention to how their bodies react to the foods they consume.



Girls Inc. is one of A to Z's largest partnerships, serving their elementary and teen programs, at three locations: Girls Inc.'s Goleta Valley Center and [Goleta Valley](#) and [Santa Barbara](#) junior high schools.

Olivia Diaz, after-school coordinator at Girls Inc. of Greater Santa Barbara, says girls initially were hesitant to work together but quickly learned the importance of collaboration.

"Girls Inc. staff excel in youth development and a wide range of whole-girl offerings, yet, we may not have more extensive backgrounds in all of the areas our youth want to explore," Webster said. "Relying on program partners like A to Z has been a tremendous benefit to the girls in our programs.

"Program partners like A to Z are able to provide a rich education and specific skill set around their area of expertise."



Janely Murillo, **Teen Program** facilitator at Girls Inc., noted that while girls are learning how to properly operate kitchen equipment, more important, they practice working as a team.

“Having the girls work together on a recipe from start to finish is unifying and community-building,” after-school coordinator Olivia Diaz explained. “When we first started our partnership with A to Z, the girls were hesitant to work together, but now they understand the importance of collaboration.

“Starting our week with an activity that allows the girls to work together sets a rhythm for the rest of the week.”

The girls not only work together as a team, they eat together in community.

“Teens socialize during meal times, share their opinions and have an endless amount of laughter,” observed Suzette Gonzalez, another Teen Program facilitator. “A lot of our teens have blossomed throughout this program, and I cannot wait to see how else this may impact their career plans, future lives and more.”



“When kids can be part of a community experience around food, it opens their palates, gets them more excited about food and encourages them to try foods they might not otherwise eat,” says Beth Skidmore, who chairs **Rooted Santa Barbara County**. (Apples to Zucchini (A to Z) Cooking School photo)

Beth Skidmore’s children have participated in A to Z’s summer camps.

“When kids can be part of a community experience around food, it opens their palates, gets them more excited about food and encourages them to try foods they might not otherwise eat,” she said.

Skidmore also chairs **Rooted Santa Barbara County**, a nonprofit organization focused on optimizing community health through whole food plant-based nutrition, education and support. Rooted has partnered with A to Z, collaborating on ideas to share plant-based cooking and eating with the community.

The plant-forward curriculum at A to Z has been incredibly well received. Ahmed Merza, supervising librarian at the **Santa Barbara Public Library**, noted that parents were particularly receptive to the

program, as many want to teach their children how to incorporate healthier habits into their diets but they don't always have the tools or knowledge.

"We cherish our partnership with A to Z," he said. The Eastside library has been partnering with A to Z Cooking for more than a year, offering summer camps, even during [COVID-19](#) closures.

At the height of the pandemic, A to Z Cooking provided simple nutritious recipes via [Zoom](#), to complement the library's virtual preschool story time. The popularity of this program led to summer camps, with cooking stations set outside of the library or at [Ortega Park](#).

"Parents were so grateful as many can't afford summer camp and to be able to give this experience to their children was incredibly valuable," Merza added.

Thanks to grant money, there is no fee for students to participate via library and other select programs, and no one is ever turned away, even when it meant that A to Z volunteers had to run to [Trader Joe's](#) for more ingredients.

Camps are offered throughout the summer at A to Z's Garden Street campus, for students in kindergarten through third grade and in grades four through six.

While A to Z is plant-forward, the organization also prepares meals using sustainable, locally sourced meat, and offers programs for many palettes, including "Sabor: Flavors of Spain & Latin America," "Baking: Sweet and Savory Treats from the Oven," "Mangia: Regional Dishes of Italy" and "Spice Route: Flavors of Asia."

While learning how to cook is critical, understanding where the food comes from is just as important. There is a garden on site, and students often take field trips to the farmers and fish markets to learn from the growers firsthand.

"My son got to learn directly from a fish monger," said Kathy Bazarganan, whose son attended a summer camp, as well as the after-school program at [Adams School](#) in the [Santa Barbara Unified School District](#).

"Imagine dropping him at the beach and picking him up a few hours later and he had learned how to make ceviche," she marveled.

Not bad for a 10-year-old.

The cost to sponsor a semester of weekly classes, or a school year of monthly classes is just \$2,400, and A to Z welcomes private donations of any amount. All contributions go directly to supporting programs serving low-income and at-risk youth.

[Click here for more information](#) about Apples to Zucchini (A to Z) Cooking School. [Click here to make an online donation](#).

— Ann Pieramici is a [Noozhawk](#) contributing writer. She can be reached at [news@noozhawk.com](mailto:news@noozhawk.com).