

Apples to Zucchini Cooking School Adds Science as Ingredient of Success

*Scientific-based approach to cooking curriculum makes a lasting impact
on kids and adults alike*



Nancy Martz, executive director of Apples to Zucchini Cooking School, and program coordinator Jeff King in the school's kitchen, where sourdough bread is just one of the many items on the constantly changing menu of what kids learn how to cook. (Ann Pieramici / Noozhawk photo)

By Ann Pieramici, Noozhawk Contributing Writer | [@noozhawknews](https://www.noozhawknews.com) |
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You don't have to be a foodie to enjoy walnut chorizo, halibut ceviche or polenta Bolognese. Instead, you just need an appetite for learning, tasting and experimenting.

Apples to Zucchini (A to Z) Cooking School, which for six years has taught kids how to prepare nutritious meals using seasonal and local ingredients, is expanding to include more adult classes.

It also is extending partnerships with local nonprofit organizations, where it can teach young students and adults on a consistent basis, building skills through repetition and practice.

And, yes, walnut chorizo, halibut ceviche and polenta Bolognese have been on the menu.

Also on the menu, a new food-science curriculum. The school recently hired a **Le Cordon Blue**-trained, **Stanford University** student who's majoring in materials science, to develop a science program that advances its holistic curriculum.

Introducing a scientific-based approach to her cooking classes has been a goal of Nancy Martz's since she first founded the school. Anna-Katharina Preidl, the student she hired, is someone Martz knew when the two taught cooking classes at a school in Austria.

Martz told **Noozhawk** she was always inspired by Preidl's love for cooking, kids and chemistry. Now Preidl's goal is to create a program that helps the younger students in A to Z's program think critically and make confident, informed decisions in the kitchen.

"It's also an opportunity to demonstrate the ubiquity of science in a home setting and make it accessible and approachable to a diverse audience," Preidl noted.



Students will discover exciting topics, ideas and flavors that they may not have the opportunity to otherwise encounter, while learning the science behind mixing, freezing, heating and blending.

"This is not your typical cooking school," said Jeff King, who works in A to Z's kitchen when he's not busy writing screenplays and novels.

"A to Z is not offering a one-off cooking class, rather a full education on the importance and influence of food."

King said he discovered Apples to Zucchini during **COVID-19** lockdowns when he wanted to get out and give back. He is a foodie aficionado and the master behind the scenes — securing produce at farmers markets, overseeing the school garden, organizing ingredients and baking a mean lemon tart.

He is also responsible for developing adult classes that will focus on food as medicine, explaining how what we eat affects how we feel.

King, Martz and others from the A to Z team recently attended the “[Healthy Kitchens, Healthy Lives](#)” conference in the Napa Valley and King said it was “transformative.” The annual conference, hosted by the [Harvard T.H Chan School of Public Health](#) and [The Culinary Institute of America](#), examines the intersection of nutrition science, health care and the culinary arts.

The health benefits of nutrient-rich foods have been proven, and this conference hopes to spread the word, and eventually establish teaching kitchens in every hospital in America.

“It’s really that dramatic and remarkable and it’s what we want to do,” King said.

A to Z is already making inroads in improving student’s mental health. In addition to staying open during the COVID-19 pandemic and providing some kids with their only social outlet, the cooking school helps adults forge connections and find confidence in the kitchen.

Its ongoing program at [Casa Serena](#), a women’s recovery center in Santa Barbara, pairs social-emotional learning with cooking. The food-influenced mindfulness curriculum was developed by Julia Cushing, A to Z’s chef-educator and a licensed clinical social worker.



Cooks don’t clean, the saying goes, but it’s important for students to get the full experience in their kitchens.

Before anyone puts on an apron, Cushing facilitates conversation among the women. They share their feelings, tying the process of cooking and food to their social-emotional wellness. After the meal is prepared, the group breaks bread together, forging deeper connections that nourish mental health.

“Connection is one of the most important contributors to good mental health,” Cushing explained. “And food has a powerful way of bringing people together.”

A to Z brings adolescents together through its programs at [Noah’s Anchorage](#), a youth homeless shelter, and [S.A.F.E. House](#), a rehabilitative center for young girls who have experienced sexual exploitation.

“Our classes at these residential shelters are designed to be fun cooking lessons,” Cushing said. “We offer choices in the kitchen, as these young adults have faced serious trauma, which often relates to not being in control.



Students get an opportunity to go to the source for the freshest ingredients they'll be using later. (Apples to Zucchini (A to Z) Cooking School photo)

“We give them control in the kitchen and we hope it provides a fun break from their other more serious groups.”

A to Z organizes cooking classes at many other local nonprofit organizations, including [Pilgrim Terrace](#), [Gaucho Underground Scholars](#), [Girls Inc. of Greater Santa Barbara](#) and the [Santa Barbara Public Library](#).

Martz said she hopes to build upon this and teach team-building and fellowship classes to more adults.

“Coming out of the pandemic, there are groups of people who are working with colleagues they’ve never met in person,” she said. “Breaking bread together is a really fun and constructive way for people to build trust and camaraderie.”

Martz is hoping that these additions and changes will continue to be a recipe for success.

[Click here for more information](#) about Apples to Zucchini (A to Z) Cooking School. [Click here to make an online donation](#). All gifts received from now until Aug. 31 will be matched, up to a total of \$15,000.

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