

Nonprofit launches cookbook by kids

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The Hawk Eye

FORT MADISON – Cooking long has been a staple of Elliott Test Kitchen, where students can go after school for a good meal and academic support. So when the time came to organize a fundraiser for its operations, a cookbook was a natural choice.

The “Elliott Test Kitchen Young Chefs” cookbook, launched this month, features 31 recipes cooked by 34 fourth-through sixth-graders at the kitchen in Fort Madison, and proceeds from the cookbook sales go back into supporting the nonprofit.

“All the sales go to keeping this program going,” said Kumar Wickramasingha, founder and director of ETK and the Elliott Test Kitchen Foundation, the nonprofit under which the test kitchen operates.

When Wickramasingha launched the Elliott Test Kitchen three years ago, he had hoped to serve 30 youths each week. The Test Kitchen, whose services are provided at no charge, now sees 200 students per week in grades four through 12 on a \$120,000 annual budget.

The cookbook has been about a year in the making for Wickramasingha, ETK volunteers, and the students who helped put it together. The idea first was brought to Wickramasingha by ETK volunteer Libby Laughlin.

“She has done a cookbook for a fundraiser before, so she thought this was a great idea,” Wickramasingha told The Hawk Eye. “I went along with it because I always wanted to do a cookbook.”

Students involved in ETK – which has grown to include STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) programming, science fair practice, chess club, Spanish classes, math tutoring and reading programs in addition to ACT prep classes – look forward to cooking with Wickramasingha and are encouraged to do so, so long as they are showing up and doing their work.

Wickramasingha selects students meeting those requirements to help him prepare meals for their peers. When it came time to begin assembling the cookbook, Wickramasingha took photos of each young cook with their respective dish to be published in the cookbook. Students were sent to



Kaydey Plate, 11, of Fort Madison, stirs rice at Elliott Test Kitchen in Fort Madison. JOHN GAINES/THE HAWK EYE

Laughlin, who helped them write down what ingredients were used and what steps they took to make the food, after completing the meal.

The students took pride in their work.

“The kids really did work hard on it because they wanted it to be nice,” said Krys Plate, a teacher at Fort Madison Elementary School who volunteers at ETK with her husband, Jim Plate, a math teacher at Fort Madison Middle School.

Fifth-grader Myrthe Van der Linden, 11, noted how some of her peers with not-so-tidy handwriting took their time when writing out the instructions and ingredients, being sure to write legibly for readers.

The cookbook features a range of recipes with various cultural influences. There are recipes for Southern green beans, chicken quesadillas, pumpkin spice and mint feta quinoa salad. There’s also one for yellow basmati rice, a recipe Wickramasingha brought with him from his home country of Sri Lanka, and kale stew with sausage, a popular dish from the Netherlands.

The inclusion of the kale stew with sausage is courtesy of Van der Linden,

who moved to Fort Madison from the Netherlands three years ago when her father took a job at Climax Molybdeum Co. She told Wickramasingha she wanted to make something from her home country for the cookbook for her birthday.

“I really like it, and we eat it a lot in the winter, and I just felt like making it for my birthday,” Van der Linden said.

Van der Linden first started coming to the Test Kitchen thinking it would be all about cooking, but she soon learned academics were at the forefront of the ETK’s mission.

She now attends ETK each week for math night, during which she works in groups with her peers and the Plates to get ahead in math, both through direct lessons and more hands-on activities, such as making angles with toothpicks and marshmallow peanuts, which was the project Wednesday evening.

Cooking lessons are given as a reward.

Molly Schulte, 10, a fourth-grader, is another regular on math day, as well as a contributor to the cookbook. Her recipe is fruit salad.

“I like the idea about it. You get to

have really good food and you also get to learn something new,” she said. “And I like Kumar.”

In addition to photos and handwritten recipes, the cookbook also features illustrations by Lily Elliott, a seventh-grader in Illinois whose father, James Elliott, inspired Wickramasingha to start ETK.

“(James Elliott) has a daughter in Chicago that’s really fascinated in this program,” Wickramasingha said. “She’s done a lot of book reports, so I asked her to do the illustrations. She’s a great artist, so she did all the pictures.”

Molly Dillon, another ETK volunteer, helped to design the book, and Dodd Printing and Stationary printed it.

Wickramasingha said he thumbed through about 50 cookbooks when deciding what kind of paper to have it printed on. It needed to be one that would withstand cooking ingredients.

Wickramasingha said he plans for the younger students of ETK to make a new cookbook each year.

“There are recipes in it and the food is delicious,” said 11-year-old Karley Plate, a fifth-grader who made sauteed asparagus for the book.