

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Teaching Kitchen in Eastport to serve nutritional, educational role



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Maria Emerson (left) offers some clams casino bruschetta to Margaret Nicholas at the Labor of Love Nutrition Center and Food Pantry in Eastport on Friday. *Buy Photo*

By Sharon Kiley Mack, BDN Staff

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EASTPORT, Maine — Volunteers at Eastport's Labor of Love Food Pantry noticed a trend last year — some of the food they were handing out was being returned, uneaten.

“People were telling us that they had no idea how to cook it,” Brenda Barker said. “So many people have no experience with unprepared food — only food that comes frozen or in a box. The senior citizens we serve use everything, but the younger people really have no cooking experience. We are three generations out from those who knew how to cook real food.”

Hand most clients a squash straight from the field and you get a blank look, she said. A bag of dried fruit? A jar of artichoke hearts?

“So many people don't know how to take a few basic ingredients and combine them into a healthy, delicious meal,” Barker said. Many clients also don't know that even some boxed foods, such as dry cereal, can be the base for homemade breakfast bars or muffins.

Barker said that people below age 38 never have taken home economics — those programs were cut decades ago in nearly all high schools — and most of their moms worked outside the home, prompting the use of many convenience foods and raising the overall obesity rate.

So it wasn't much of a stretch to decide to begin teaching clients about food preparation and nutrition.

Barker, who is now manager of the Labor of Love Nutrition Center, designed a state-of-the-art commercial kitchen, which was constructed and equipped inside the pantry facility with teaching in mind. It includes two wall ovens, a gas stove top, stainless steel island with mirrors for participants to watch the food being prepared, and commercial-grade counter appliances such as mixers and food processors.

"We are hoping this will not only take hold as a teaching kitchen, but will help rebuild some families and become the first line of defense in promoting healthy eating," Barker said. "We just know that the surrounding community will embrace this."

During an open house at the new kitchen last week, Marie Emerson, a culinary instructor of 30 years, was sauteing finely chopped onions, peppers and tomatoes, filling the teaching kitchen with enticing aromas. She was making crostini, a healthful appetizer, and pointed to a store-bought baguette. "A loaf of bread in the store can cost \$3," Emerson said. "But a pound of flour to make that bread costs 50 cents. In these hard economic times, education about good, raw food and how to use it is imperative. You can make some pretty elegant food with just a few key ingredients."

Using the food pantry to educate and teach seemed a natural fit, said Colin Windhorst of the Greater Eastport Ecumenical Churches Association, which operates the pantry. Windhorst said it took seven years to raise the money and construct the food pantry, which was established in 1995.

"Over the years, we had been in church basements, in the town hall, even in the Police Department. We wore out our welcome wherever it was," he said.

Establishing the Labor of Love Pantry was, well, a labor of love, he said, as well as a huge leap of faith.

"We bought the property, cleared the land, put in a septic system and a foundation," he said of the pantry's location on Route 190 in Eastport.

A group of 70 to 80 youth from All Souls Congregational Church in Bangor arrived in the summer of 2006 and framed the building. Finish work continued over the next few years, and the new kitchen was added in late 2010.

"We built this with \$100,000 in nickels and dimes," he said. "It was and continues to be a groundswell of support."

As successful as the food pantry is, Windhorst said the coalition of churches needed a larger mission. "We wanted to be more appealing and socially useful to people," he said. "The teaching kitchen is a natural fit."

Barker said the first class will be a 20-week program offered in conjunction with the University of Maine called The Mom's Project — for makers of meals for children ages 2 to 12. No date has been set for the start of classes.

"We will start with the safe handling and storage of food, move on to spice blends and then right into cooking and meal planning," Barker said.

At the teaching kitchen, international cooking, bread making and soup making classes as well as canning and preserving classes will be offered this summer and fall. Barker is seeking state certification of the kitchen so it can be used privately by bakers, jam and jelly makers and others.

"The fees we can charge [for classes and private uses] will help offset the pantry's expenses," she said.

Barker also is looking for volunteer cooks to share their expertise. She is seeking someone to teach a food smoking and preserving class, and is looking for local fishermen to mentor a group of children in teaching them how to fish and how to clean their catch. She also is encouraging area farmers and gardeners to grow an extra row of food for the pantry.

“Food is such a common ground,” Barker said. “The nutrition center will serve so many purposes: social, nutritional, educational.”

For information about classes or the nutrition center, contact Barker at 733-4555, or the Labor of Love Food Pantry at 853-0812.

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