

Kids in the kitchen

3 area meal-assembly businesses cook up classes that let families learn, prepare meals to take home

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Kerri Humble, an employee of The Dinner Station, shows children from the Cornerstone Learning Center how the stomach processes food in a health and nutrition class at the store. This business and others offer classes that teach children how to cook.

Carson Sarver of Flower Mound knows her way around the kitchen. Just a few weeks ago, she cooked a chicken pot pie and a dessert for her family's dinner.

Not only can she put together a mean dirt cake -- complete with a gummy worm -
- but she can also set the table and count fractions.

Carson is 4.

She learned these skills at The Dinner Station, a chain of meal-assembly kitchens that until recently served only adults, letting them make several meals at once to be taken home, frozen and eaten later.

It is one of several area businesses opening their kitchens to include the younger set. Their programs teach nutrition, sanitary habits and table-setting, as the children learn to whip up that night's dinner.

Amy Cole, a founder of The Dinner Station, noticed that parents wanted to bring their children to sessions to make batches of family dinners. So, the business started offering Conductor Camp for young children this summer in Southlake, north Fort Worth and Mansfield.

Conductor Camp has been so successful that Cole plans to continue to offer it after school starts.

"Our main goal is to get them interested in eating healthy and cooking," said Cole, a former third-grade teacher in the Lewisville school district. "But we wanted it to be fun."



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Kristi Long, co-founder of The Dinner Station, shows children from the Cornerstone Learning Center how to make a dirt cake.

Corie Sarver, Carson's mother, said she is delighted that her daughter learned basic cooking skills as part of an activity they could do together, she said.

Other Tarrant County businesses have joined the cooking club. The Wooden Spoon in Keller has offered cooking classes as its primary business since opening last fall. Dinners Ready in Southlake also expanded into children's cooking classes as a permanent part of its business last November, store owner

Susan Landa said. The decision was made by a teacher who was looking for a place for a field trip.

Reaching out to children may have been a natural instinct for the three businesses, which were all started by current or former teachers who love the kitchen. Cole said many of her customers are teachers who, like other patrons, want more free time.

"There's not a family out there who doesn't eat," Cole said. "This is a way for families to get some time back."

Families with children use the businesses to streamline dinner by combining cooking and grocery shopping.

"It's awesome that with two kids wanting me to play with them, I can be making creamy almond chicken," Sarver said.

Prices for the classes vary. At Dinners Ready in Southlake, which has hosted mainly Girl Scouts troops and other community groups, the cost is \$10 per person, Landa said.

The Wooden Spoon's classes cost \$25 to \$35 per person and offer themes such as private parties, tea parties and pajama parties.

The Dinner Station's Conductor Camp has classes for \$30 that include a T-shirt, a conductor hat, a whistle and the pot pie and dirt cake that Carson made.

The experience made the young girl even more keen on cooking, her mother said.

"She wants to do everything now," Sarver said. "Because now she's the expert."

www.dinnerstation.com, www.dinnersready.com, www.woodenspoonkeller.com

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