

Kids in the Kitchen – Young Chefs Academy to hold grand opening Sept. 3

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SEMINOLE – Jessica Yuen always had a passion for cooking and working with children. But she chose a different path when it came to her career, working as an IT professional for 13 years.

Then, two years ago, she threw a birthday party for her daughter, Kaleah, now 8. She invited over a group of her daughters' friends for a pizza party where they made the pies themselves, kneading the dough and selecting the toppings.

“The kids loved it and something just clicked for me,” Yuen said. “I finally figured out what I wanted to be when I grew up.”

She added, “My daughter really is my inspiration.”

Yuen had always wanted to open her own business, but figured there was already a company out there that offered cooking parties and classes for kids. This is how she discovered Young Chefs Academy, a Texas-based company founded in 2003.

After two years of research and training, she'll hold a free back-to-school open house for the Seminole franchise, located at 9690 Seminole Blvd. – the only one in Florida – Sept. 3, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sponsored by Food Network Magazine, Bumble Bee Seafoods and the California Grape Board, the event will allow children to create back-to-school snack recipes, learn kitchen safety tips, enjoy samples and win prizes. Representatives from Young Chefs Academy will be on hand to discuss classes and curriculum, special events and programs with interested parents.

Each month, the 20 or so Young Chefs Academies around the country offer a diverse curriculum based around a specific theme for its students. September's theme, for instance, Yuen said, is Street Food Quest. Recipes for the month include everything from Southern buttermilk biscuits and bacon pimento cheese dip to Thai chicken satay in spicy coconut sauce, poutine and pork tostadas.

“It’s pretty gourmet,” she said.

Yuen has always loved to cook for family and friends, learning to cook at home at an early age. Her children – she also has an 18-year-old son, Tyler – often joke that she should open a restaurant.

“But I always tell them that I don’t want those hours,” she said.

The big draw of a home-cooked meal is the togetherness, she said. It brings loved ones together. At her home, the family sits together for dinner each night, something not all modern families are able to enjoy due to hectic schedules, she said.

“[Food] brings families together. It’s a representation of love to me,” she said.

The classes at Young Chefs Academy – which ranges from workshops for 3- to 5-year-olds, called KinderCooks, to classes affiliated with the Food Network’s televised Master Chef competition – also teaches children necessary life skills.

“Home [economics] is not even available in school anymore, so those life skills are being life skills,” Yuen said. “What a great idea to teach these skills to children, who can continue them on.”

Additionally, she said, these classes promote self-sufficiency and creativity.

“There are so many positives,” she said. “It’s exciting.”

For more information, visit seminolefl.youngchefsacademy.com.