

## A Bird's Eye View of Our Cooking School for Persons with Autism

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There are 4 students in a class, each at his or her own cooking station in one large kitchen, each preparing one or more recipes different from the other students' recipes, and each with individual support from his or her own cooking coach (or teacher). Together, all these recipes form a well-balanced meal that we share at the end of our two-hour class. During that meal the coach sits beside her student and uses some innovative techniques to foster social/communication skills.

### Who are Our Students?

**Age & Diagnosis:** Our students all have a diagnosis on the spectrum of autism disorders. We give priority placement to people who are at least 18 years old, with no upper age limit. We have served students over 50, as well as those as young as 14. People under 18 years can register for a term, if no one 18 or over is available to take the spot.

**Profile:** Students need to be literate because we use the written word so much as an instructional tool during both the cooking portion and the eating portion of classes.

Because we work with the full range of kitchen utensils and appliances, students cannot exhibit behaviours that could put themselves or others at any risk. Anyone who might push or hit people, throw things or engage in any aggressive behaviour would not be suitable for this class. With chopping knives lying on counters, pots of boiling pasta being carried to sinks for draining, and 450 degree ovens being opened, maladaptive conduct could result in serious injury. We have had no injury of any sort since we began the cooking school in 2002 and intend to maintain that record.



No prior cooking experience is required of students, but those who have already done some cooking are welcome. Students are assigned recipes suitable to their skill level.

Both genders attend our cooking school.

**Catchment Area:** We do not restrict our catchment area. Some students travel long distances to attend our classes. As long as they can arrive at class on time and can bring along the utensils they will need to use during a particular class (a list of which will be supplied to them beforehand), we will not disqualify them from attending simply because they live far away from the Town of Dundas, Ontario where our classes are conducted.

### What is the Registration Process?

Inquiries about registering for the cooking school can be made by e-mail to [autism@bell.net](mailto:autism@bell.net). If there is a waitlist when you first make contact with us, it is still worthwhile going through the intake process because we do offer some service to those on the waitlist. When any student registered for a term is absent from class we contact someone on the waitlist to attend that class instead. This is an excellent way for incoming

students to “test the waters” and decide if this is a group activity that suits them, before committing to a full term. Potential students are also welcome to observe a class in session before starting the registration process. Observing beforehand may help them better determine if they want to participate in this program.

The formal intake process begins with a telephone conversation, usually with a parent or guardian, during which basic information about the applicant is gathered. Then a face-to-face meeting is scheduled with the applicant and a parent or guardian to review a long list of foodstuffs to find out what the applicant likes and dislikes. This enables us to schedule recipes for students to prepare that they will find appetizing when they attend our classes.

## When and Where are Our Classes Held?

Classes are usually held Friday evenings from 5:30 to 7:30 PM in the Town of Dundas, Ontario. Each term is 8 weeks long. We have 3 terms per year: an autumn term, a winter term and a spring term. We do not have summer classes.

Our facility is not wheelchair accessible.

## Who are Our Teachers?

All our teachers, or cooking coaches as we call them, have had prior, verifiably successful experience working with people on the spectrum of autism disorders before they start working at our cooking school. Some have full-time jobs in the autism field. We give them training specific to our cooking school as well as opportunities to attend suitable workshops about autism. We have had both genders serve as cooking coaches.

## What are Our Goals and Methods?

We teach students how to cook delicious, healthy food from scratch, using fresh produce, poultry, fish, whole grains, lean meat and so on, rather than using commercially processed ingredients. Students can use this skill wherever they live -- whether in the family home, in an independent or semi-independent living arrangement, or elsewhere.



Although our cooking school is not a vocational program, some of our students have marketed their cooking skills in the workplace environment and have secured remunerative jobs in restaurant kitchens preparing food.

We instill sound eating habits by having our students consume a well-balanced meal at our classes week after week, and by explaining to them what elements make a particular meal healthy. We also have some interactive tools for students to use when they finish their recipe earlier than others – interactive tools that teach in a graphic, visual way about sound eating habits and that indicate the degree to which a student is meeting the standards of healthy eating.

We augment social/communication skills during both the cooking and the dining periods of our classes. During the cooking part of class, there are plenty of opportunities for interaction between students -- for example, when they are using the same ingredients in their different recipes (“Are you finished with the flour yet? Can I use it now?”), when one student finishes cooking quickly and can offer to help someone else clean up, or when a student simply inquires of others what they are each cooking that day. Cooking coaches are always on hand to give whatever support is necessary – such as modeling or prompting— so that students negotiate these interactions successfully.

At mealtime, placed in the middle of the table, is a stand with a few easy-to-read general questions (visible wherever you are seated) that are suitable to start conversations. This is the “Conversation Menu.” It gives participants ideas about ways to converse with others. The cooking coach may quietly encourage her student to use one of the questions to start talking with someone else, or may help students give more detailed answers to

questions put to them and can model how to pose follow-up questions after answering someone else's query. In other words, coaches help students develop a sense of the rhythm of a conversation, of the back-and-forth pattern necessary for chatting with others.

Different questions appear week by week in the Conversation Menu, with some reappearing from time to time, so that students will more easily remember them to use outside the cooking school.

## What Role Do Parents Play?

Parents (or the principal caregivers) of our students are welcome to visit our classes at any time without notice. We solicit feedback throughout the term, and are genuinely eager to learn anything that will ensure our classes are an enjoyable, successful experience for our students.

Parents are not obliged to attend any classes, but at the end of every term we do ask students (sometimes with the help of parents) to complete an evaluation of our classes. We use this feedback to make any adjustments that can improve our school.

To ensure that students generalize their cooking skills outside of our cooking school kitchen, we do ask them to prepare something at home once during a term and then to tell us about how it went. This can be a recipe they've cooked with us, or a favourite family recipe. They can prepare it independently or can get whatever support they need at home. We give plenty of notice by what date the cooking-at-home assignment is to be completed, and parents often play an important role in encouraging students to fulfill this expectation of the course.

## What Do Our Cooking Classes Cost?

Our classes are currently in the range of \$37.00 per class. They are likely to rise gradually in the next few years. For anyone with Special Services at Home or Passport grants, our fees can be refunded.

Students are not required to supply any groceries, but we do ask them to bring from home the utensils they will need to prepare their recipes each week. This allows them to learn how to use the utensils they will ultimately be working with independently at home. There is a wide variation between different models of kitchen utensils, so it makes sense to learn how to use the particular implement you own.

## End-of-Term Celebration

The last class of each term has the usual cooking and eating portions of the class, but we also include a celebration of the achievements of each student that term. Each coach pays tribute to her student by presenting the student with a certificate of achievement and a gift of a new kitchen utensil. Parents and friends of students are welcome to join the party.

## Assisting Others to Adapt Our Cooking School Model in Their Own Communities

Our program is easily transportable. We are happy for others to copy or adapt our program to meet their own needs and are prepared to help them do that. For this reason, we have published a cookbook, *Coach in the Kitchen*, with 290 pages of our task-analyzed recipes. It also includes a 26-page manual and toolkit setting out everything you need to launch and operate a cooking school like ours. Details of how to purchase the cookbook and toolkit are on our webpage at [www.cookingwithautism.com](http://www.cookingwithautism.com).

We also offer a workshop entitled "*Teaching People with Autism to Cook Really Well for Jobs, Health & Friendship*". The workshop shares tips that can be used at home, in school, in residential settings and elsewhere to ensure cooking with someone on the spectrum is as successful as possible. More details about the workshop can be found on our website as well.

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