

Apples to Zucchini Cooking School Making a Difference in the Kitchen and In Life

6-year-old Santa Barbara nonprofit organization teaching kids the skills to create meals, and giving them the satisfaction of making it themselves

[Noozhawk's note: First in a series sponsored by the [Hutton Parker Foundation](#).]

SOURCE: ANN PIERAMICI, NOOZHAWK CONTRIBUTING WRITER | [@NOOZHAWKNEWS](#) | **UPDATED**



Apples to Zucchini (A to Z) Cooking School reaches 120-140 people each week, offering 10 classes per week, along with summer camps and private party options. (Apples to Zucchini (A to Z) Cooking School photo)

When Nancy Martz was in law school in San Francisco in the mid 1990s, she enrolled in a 12-week cooking class. The class — which she took “just for fun” — was structured so that each week built upon the prior week’s lesson; stock became sauce, followed by soufflé. By the time she graduated, she was making gourmet pastries — and exploring her newfound love for cooking.

It would turn out that she'd never practice law, but, she says, she's been cooking ever since.

Fast forward 20 years and Martz now serves as executive director of [Apples to Zucchini](#), the cooking school she founded six years ago. She started Apples to Zucchini (A to Z) Cooking School to teach children and young adults how to prepare nutritious, affordable meals made from real food.

While that long ago cooking class gave Martz a strong knowledge base — and the bug for putting on a chef's apron — it was a volunteer experience at the [Foodbank of Santa Barbara County](#), coupled with a challenge posed to her son's class at [Marymount of Santa Barbara](#), that sparked the idea to create the cooking school.

"My family and I were sorting food at the Foodbank, and there were these mystery vegetables, and I thought if a family got this item in their delivery, they may not know what it is," she recalled.



"They could look it up, but that assumes that everyone has internet access."

At about the same time, her son's class was presented with a social justice/math challenge of how to feed a family spending just \$1.50 per day. "It's not easy to feed a family on that budget and it became clear to me that you need to know how to cook to stretch those dollars," Martz said.

Yet, she also reasoned, that parents on a limited budget are likely working several jobs and don't have the time to cook. But their children, who are in school until 5 p.m., just might.

"That's who we want to reach," she said.

Martz took her idea to the [Santa Barbara Foundation](#), which assumed fiscal sponsorship. In March 2016, Apples to Zucchini taught its first lesson, in the after-school program at [Brandon School](#) in Goleta.

Soon after, students at [Adams](#), [Ellwood](#), [Monte Vista](#) and [Washington](#) schools were dicing onions and mincing garlic. "This program is for all kids," Martz said. "There are just as many families with beautiful kitchens who rarely turn on their stoves and call [Uber Eats](#)."

Today, A to Z reaches 120-140 people each week, offering 10 classes per week, summer camps and private party options.

The nonprofit organization now operates independently from the Santa Barbara Foundation as a 501(c)(3), with funding from program fees, grants and philanthropic contributions. Money raised goes directly to supporting programs for low-income and at-risk youth, who are served by a variety of nonprofit partnership programs.

The philosophy of the school is simple: to cook nutritious meals together, to eat together, and to clean up together.

The classes teach life skills, because kids who learn to do the dishes also tend to do their own laundry and pick up after their dogs. Turns out that doing chores and sharing meals with your family have been proven to lead to better outcomes in other metrics of life.

A to Z Cooking also emphasizes the importance of manners, so while students are taught knife skills and the differences between whisking, slicing and sautéing, they also practice the school's "1-2-3" rules of eating together:

- 1) Napkins on laps.
- 2) Be sure everyone is served.
- 3) Thank the chef(s).

Phones are not allowed at the dining table, and Martz said her favorite thing is just sitting and listening to kids connecting.

For many, Apples to Zucchini was their only source of connection during the closures during the [COVID-19](#) crisis. "We never closed our doors," Martz exclaimed. Cooking classes were moved to the garden at the [Garden Street Academy](#) campus, while other classes were held at [Pilgrim Terrace](#) or the beach.

"For some children, we provided their only interaction with others during the height of the pandemic," Martz said. A to Z offered specially created pods as well as classes open to the public. "The need was significant so we extended our hours just to allow kids time to play and socialize," Martz said.

With fully equipped food carts, A to Z is able to offer cooking classes nearly anywhere, and has plenty of recipes from which to pull, even when flames are not allowed and electricity is not available. The cost for outfitting a cart is \$1,000, and this provides enough supplies for several classes of 12 children. Many of the recipes are plant-forward, and all animal products are locally and sustainably sourced.

Whether teaching at an after-school program, a treatment center for youth or a backyard birthday party, A to Z hopes to tackle hunger on the Central Coast by providing the tools kids need to prepare delicious, nutritious, affordable meals made from real food for their families.

[Click here for more information](#) about Apples to Zucchini (A to Z) Cooking School. [Click here to make an online donation](#).

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