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## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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# Béchamel, Not Bug Juice, Next to the Campfire

By ALINA DIZIK

*Highgate Center, Vt.*

"If you don't know how to make soup, you have no business being in the kitchen."



Monica Donovan for The Wall Street Journal

Raquel Samuels, 13, decorated a wedding cake at the Kids Culinary Academy of Vermont.

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That's what chef Kelly Dietrich told a roomful of 12- to 17-year-olds one recent sunny afternoon. Mr. Dietrich runs a summer camp that lets kids act on their dreams of becoming a chef or starring on a cooking reality TV show.

Mr. Dietrich says each year his campers at the Kids Culinary Academy of Vermont get more sophisticated: "They come in knowing what a hollandaise sauce is." Indeed, 13-year-old Colin Aylward, one of 14 camp attendees, volunteers this claim: "I made kielbasa when I was two."

Mr. Dietrich, 50, attributes this evolution partly to foodie parents and also to the rise of celebrity chef culture. "I'll hear them arguing over who's better—Emeril or Bobby Flay," says Mr. Dietrich.

For kids who grow up watching the Food Network, "these [camps] are popping up almost as a need," says author and cooking show host Devin Alexander. "So many people now see cooking as a way to become a star. Before, if you wanted to be famous and you wanted to be on TV, you had to become an actress."

### A Culinary Camp for Budding Top Chefs

2:10

Welcome to the Kids Culinary Academy. The summer camp caters to 10-to-16 year olds with Top Chef dreams who would rather make a soup from scratch or decorate a wedding cake than canoe or swim.



Though it doesn't track exact figures, the American Camp Association says ultra-specialized camps—such as cooking and tennis—are one of the industry's fastest growing segments. A North Carolina chef, Dorette Snover, takes a troupe of teens to Paris and Provence on a 12-day cooking field excursion (\$4,750 per child). Applications have increased every year, says Ms. Snover, who also runs a culinary day camp.

This month, a Baltimore camp, For the Love of Food, is set to offer *Chopped!*, a 20-hour course based on the Food Network show in which chefs create three-course meals out of everyday ingredients. Teams of kids will compete. (Tuition is \$395.)

Beyond camps, kids cooking courses are popping up all over the country, says Annika Stensson, a spokeswoman for the National Restaurant Association. Last year, Tom Douglas, a Seattle celebrity chef with five local

restaurants, offered four such courses to gauge customer interest. After those sold out, he added 11 courses to the roster. Maggiano's Little Italy, a casual chain of Italian-style restaurants owned by Brinker International Inc., started providing "tool kits" for its 44 U.S. restaurants to offer youth cooking classes three years ago. Kids learn to make signature dishes like manicotti.

Brooke McDonald Madhuit, a London camp adviser, sent the children of three Kuwaiti clients to Mr. Dietrich's camp this year for the first time. She says parents who are interested in "elite" camps have added cooking to the list. So far this is the only one she's found to meet her clients' standards, she says.

"Kids have become very demanding these days" Ms. Madhuit says. Anything from overly rustic accommodations to uninspiring activities can leave a child disappointed.

Campers come from around the world to Highgate Center, near the Canadian border, to hone their kitchen chops in Mr. Dietrich's one-week (\$2,695) or two-week (\$4,900) sessions. The camp, now in its fifth year of operation, takes place in his rural farmhouse. Mr. Dietrich, chef-owner of a local Brazilian steakhouse, takes 80 kids, ages 10 to 16, into his home every summer.

Mr. Dietrich's brother and six counselors keep refrigerators stocked, chaperone field trips and do some light cooking, though most meals are made up of the campers' own creations.



Monica Donovan for The Wall Street Journal

Nour al-Sumait, 13, frosts a wedding cake at the Kids Culinary Academy of Vermont.

They learn advanced kitchen techniques like braising, simmering and sautéing. By Colin's 10th day of camp, he already had mastered mirepoix, tempura and tricky garnishes like apple birds. And he endured three cuts while carving turnip roses.

The kids learn where food comes from by tending to a greenhouse on the property and by raising tilapia in an aquaponic pond. They harvest honey from a beehive and cultivate shiitake mushrooms by inoculating logs with fungi. There are trips to Montreal's Atwater market and the Cabot Cheese creamery. Other days are devoted to mastering such intricate dishes as crab-stuffed prawns or chocolate éclairs.

Chef Dietrich believes in challenging the campers. "I don't want to call it a boot camp, but my voice gets a little louder each day," he says.

Wake-up is at 6:30 a.m. Morning and midday chores revolve around the organic garden and tending chickens, goats and pigs. There are team sports on the front lawn for about an hour a day, but the real action takes place in the kitchen. There are three separate range stations, two industrial mixers, a wok station, pizza oven, two convection ovens, a walk-in refrigerator, and a counter that resembles an old ice-cream parlor, complete with red-vinyl swivel stools.

In a recent week, campers learned to make four soups—chicken rice, cream of cucumber, mushroom, and strawberry using freshly-picked berries.

Afterward, 13-year-old Mariam al-Nahedh went to feed the baby goats from a milk bottle. It's one of the chores she enjoys most. A few feet away, Mariam points to the bread that chickens are eating. It is the remains of rolls that were supposed to be part of yesterday's lunch until a camper mistook the salt for sugar when baking it, she says.

Campers this summer come from India, Kuwait, Venezuela and Peru, as well as a dozen U.S. states. By graduation day, they will have mastered over 50 topics from making the "mother sauces"—béchamel, espagnole, tomato and velouté—to using a professional chef's knife kit. The grand finale is a 30-dish buffet lunch the

students cook for their parents. "It is very exciting for them to show off what they've learned," Mr. Dietrich says.

"It's sort of exclusive and I feel really lucky to be a part of it," says Raquel Samuels, a 13-year-old vegetarian from Highland Beach, Fla., who is attending Mr. Dietrich's camp for the second year with her sister Eva. She's eager to perfect the chef's broccoli cheddar soup recipe. Two years ago, the sisters' father, a jazz musician, heard about the camp from relatives who'd attended.

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### Teens With Toques

Campers at the Kids Culinary Camp of Vermont must master these techniques:

The 'mother sauces,' béchamel, espagnole, tomato and velouté

Sautés

Sushi

The Wilton cake decorating method

Knife skills, such as dicing, mincing, chopping and slicing and poultry cutting

Garnishes, such as apple birds and turnip roses

Pies, handmade crusts with fresh-picked fruits

Mr. Dietrich got the idea for a kids camp while teaching at a local vocational school. "They are so impressionable at that age," he says. He opened a day program in 1996 and expanded to a sleepover camp in 2006.

Mr. Dietrich finds he must cater to individual food requirements. This week's class included two vegetarians, three no-pork eaters and one no-beef eater.

Mr. Dietrich says he enrolled a little over 100 campers his first year in 2006, but enrollment fell by half during the economic slowdown. Current enrollment has bounced back, up about 30% from last year. He expects more than 80 kids in all this summer.

Most of the campers aren't harboring ambitions to become the next Gordon Ramsay. Jay Hopkins Nagaswami, a 14-year-old from Ahmedabad, India, who attends boarding school in Buffalo, N.Y., says he is leaning toward a career in medicine. He brought his own first aid kit along, complete with a splinter remover. He says: "If doctor doesn't work out, I'll become a chef."

A few activities provide a taste of a regular camp experience—campfires with marshmallow roasts, boating on Lake Champlain, serving chicken at a fire department barbecue on the Fourth of July. Three nights before graduation they'll visit a neighbor's swimming pool, Mr. Dietrich says, "If everyone is well-behaved."

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