

The Slow Food Junior Chef's Academy Summer Camp

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You use hing (asafoetida) in your cooking, but do you know what it actually is? No? Then go and find out.

This challenge was given to a group of 25 children, ages 12 to 18 years old, from different low-income areas around Delhi, during the week long Slow Food Junior Chef's Academy Summer Camp hosted by the Creativity Adda (at the Commercial government-aided school) and the Indian Slow Food Chef's Alliance in June, 2016.

Wait you might ask, do 12-year olds really use *hing* in their cooking? Well, these twelve year olds do! The Creativity Adda is an 'unschool' self-designed learning space initiated by Shikshantar Andolan and DS Group. It aims to nurture children's creativity, self-confidence, intrinsic motivation and peer-to-peer collaboration. The Adda also seeks to reconnect learning back to daily life and make it practical and relevant, to take education out of classrooms and into the complexity of the real world. Children attend the space voluntarily (without compulsion or bribe) and explore and learn things that interest them from cooking, organic farming, music, dance, filmmaking, website design, sports, upcycling and design. They lead their own learning projects, and guides help facilitate and challenge them along the way. One of the projects started by the kids is the Slow Food Junior Chef's Academy. Several interesting initiatives have emerged as a part of this: an urban farm on the school campus, daily cooking workshops with the kids, a monthly Dariya Dil Community Café run and managed by the kids, and a local food walk organized by the kids. There have also been visits to many food festivals and innovative restaurants of Delhi. The Junior Chef's Academy has been developed with the guidance of Slow Food India Board members Akhil Kapoor and Chef Himanshu Kapoor.

The Creativity Adda and the Chef's Alliance are concerned about many issues including: the onslaught of junk food, the spread of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, the increase in packaging, the carbon footprint involved in transporting food which is not grown locally, genetically modified seeds, and the additives found in processed foods. They are also concerned with the loss of many traditional food recipes and cooking processes. Most importantly, they are concerned with the condition of local farmers and local biodiversity. The motto of the Slow Food Movement is to promote food that is "Good, Clean and Fair."

Kids attending the workshop learnt many recipes and asked many questions about the food they are eating as well as healthy alternatives. They also had several challenges including cooking on a traditional *chula*, and creating a menu for the whole group of 50 people to eat with a limited budget of 150 rupees. They also took some of their food creations onto the streets to serve rickshawalas, laborers and homeless people in the neighborhood.

During the week-long workshop, the children met master chefs from some of the top restaurants and hotels in Delhi. Slow Food Chef Achintya, shared his personal journey from chef to organic farmer and his questions about where our food comes from. He now runs a farm on the outskirts of Delhi. He brought in some micro herbs and seasonal vegetables that he had grown for the children to touch, taste and smell, and to experiment with new recipes and presentations. He made fresh pesto with the kids using basil from the urban farm at the school. He spoke to the junior chefs about the necessity for a good chef to know where his or her ingredients come from. Chef Achintya told the kids, "A good chef must know and support his local farmers. He must try to source as many products locally as he can." He hopes to take the children to his farm during the next workshop. He was very happy to see the kids working on the urban farm at the Creativity Adda.



Chef Vaibhav Bhargava, from the Sheraton Hotel, came to the Creativity Adda and ran a Japanese-themed workshop. He took the children on a tour of special markets in Delhi where they identified ingredients they had never seen before and used them to make exotic sauces and dishes. He then took them to the Sheraton Hotel to spend a day getting acquainted with all the steps which lead to running a 5-star experience, from procurement and quality control, to the kitchen management, to presentation and service. He talked about the importance of keeping our different diverse regional cuisines alive while at the same time wanting to expose the children to different diverse international cuisines. Chef Vaibhav is also working diligently to find more local substitutes for his Japanese cuisine rather than importing materials from abroad. Junior Chef, Labansh Bharadwaj class 9, took away many important lessons on how to maintain hygiene and cleanliness in the kitchen. He went on to share, *"Sometimes other kids used to tease me because of my interest in cooking. So it was really good to see so many men working as chefs during our visits. I feel more confident now."*

In the neighbourhood of Qutub Minar, the kids were invited to visit Chef Dhruv at the Olive Bar and Restaurant, famous for their pizzas. Chef Dhruv challenged the kids to a little pizza-making contest. Chef Dhruv was impressed by how quickly the children learnt to roll pizza bases. The students really enjoyed the beautiful Mediterranean décor and came away more interested in how to improve the presentation of the food that they make.



At Lavaash Armenian-Bengali Restaurant, the students were fascinated by the preservation of traditional lavaash bread from Kashmir. It is the only bread featured in UNESCO's list of world intangible cultural heritage. There are 200 Armenians settled in India, mostly in Kolkata, hence the Armenian-Bengali fusion. Chef Saby shared his personal life journey where he had started as a coal worker and worked himself up to the top position of executive chef at Lavaash, where he has worked for the past 35 years. The children were invited to sample a three-course meal including the restaurant's signature hummus, roasted tomatoes and herb rolls. Junior chef Shashank Bharadwaj class 11, was inspired that more than formal education, what matters most is passion: *"Cooking is not a very hard*

task. There are no cans and can'ts. The thing is practice. The more you practice, the more you will be perfect.”



And, in case you haven't figured it out yet, *hing* originally comes from Iran and Afghanistan and is made from the dried sap from the roots and stems of *Ferula Asafoetida*.

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