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Child Care Centre chef puts kids on the path to healthy eating

ANDREA LEFEBVRE
Advertising Features Writer

Every morning, Lina Holland is asked the same question: "Mrs. Holland, what are we having for lunch today?"

Some days the answer is black bean soup. Other days, baked sole with whole-wheat couscous or fresh basil pesto with whole-wheat pasta is on the menu. Sometimes it's a delicious Asian butter chicken.

Although she doesn't work in a restaurant, Holland's cooking draws rave reviews from her most important critics: the children and staff at the Maple Avenue Regional Child Care Centre in Georgetown.

"I tell the kids what we're having and they get really excited and tell all their friends," Holland says with a laugh. "They love it!"

For the last seven years, Holland has been cooking healthy and, most importantly, delicious breakfasts, hot lunches and snacks for the kids at the Maple Avenue Regional Child Care Centre. All of her food is made from scratch, using fresh local ingredients and produce.

"I want to encourage the kids to try new things and expose them to a variety of food they may not otherwise get to try," Holland says. "It teaches children that healthy food tastes good and will hopefully influence them to make good food decisions in the future."

Holland, who has her chef's papers from George Brown College and studied nutrition at the University of Western Ontario, draws inspiration from Canada's Food Guide and the Dieticians of Canada, but with a few additional steps to make her meals even healthier. She purchases all her meat from a local butcher to ensure it is hormone and nitrate free. She also buys fruits and vegetables from local farms and serves them fresh.

"Halton Hills has so many beautiful farms," she says. "You can't beat the freshness of shopping local."



Lina Holland (left) shares a healthy snack with Brendan Sutton, Connor Hamilton and Nolan Domingos.

Photo by Andrea Lefebvre

Most importantly, she says, she has completely removed processed foods from the menu.

"I don't serve a whole lot of products where you have to read a label," she says. "I cook from scratch, so I know exactly what's in my baked goods."

From her cranberry and flaxseed cookies to her chicken tenders with a wheat germ coating, the response to Holland's healthy meals has been overwhelmingly positive from both the kids and their parents.

"Parents think, 'Oh, my kid won't eat Asian butter chicken.' Then the kids ask them for it because they like it so much," she says. "I get parents and even kids asking me for recipes."

Wendy Harper, the supervisor at Maple Avenue Regional Child Care Centre, says Holland's passion for healthy food is a real asset to the centre.

"She has a passion for high quality, she has a passion for the removal of processed foods and she has a passion for cooking. The children can see it and so can their parents," she says. "When the kids move on to elementary school, their parents often come back and say, 'We miss the kids, we miss the teachers, but we really miss Mrs. Holland!'"

For her part, Holland is glad to be passing her passion on to the next generation.

"I love it here," she says. "I have the best job in the world!"

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