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Home-grown veggies a hit with kids

By IAN GILLESPIE

I'm expecting a chorus of yucks and blaaaghs. I'm expecting pinched noses and grim faces. Heck, if the truth be told, I'm expecting to see somebody turn green and spit.

I mean, these are seven- and eight-year-old kids. And they're eating raw vegetables -- not packaged pizza pockets, microwaved corn dogs, fast-food french fries or any of the other chemical-crammed junk that passes for food these days.

They're eating a salad composed of spinach, cress, swiss chard, pea shoots, radishes, asparagus, endives and fiddleheads (fiddleheads!) topped with a vinaigrette dressing.

And when I sit down next to eight-year old Felix Muxwahl, I see his plate has been picked clean.

"It's really delicious," he says. "And it's organic."

Does he usually eat this kind of stuff?

"I don't usually have salad at home," says the Grade 3 pupil. "But now I'm convinced to have it!"

What in the world are they teaching the kids these days?

Well, here at Tecumseh elementary school in Old South London, they're teaching them about the importance of nutritious, locally produced foods. They're teaching them where food comes from. And they're teaching them it's possible -- and even fun -- to grow their own.

It's all part of Growing Chefs, a program that originated in Vancouver, B.C., about three years ago and has migrated to London, which is only the second city in Canada to offer the program to school kids.

"We're not expecting to change the world in one go," says Andrew Fleet, director of Growing Chefs Ontario. "We don't expect 40 kids to go home and plant gardens. But we expect 40 kids to go home and know it's a possibility."

After working for about 10 years in the food industry in Vancouver, Fleet has returned to his hometown with a purpose: To inspire a love of growing and eating sustainable food in young people.

For no charge, Fleet brought the not-for-profit program into two classes at Tecumseh. He also brought in two local chefs -- Jason Schubert and Andrew Wolwicz -- to help inspire the pupils.

"They dress in full chef gear and the kids go a little crazy," Fleet says with a chuckle. "It's kind of like going in dressed like Spiderman."

Over seven weeks, the kids planted and tended their own indoor vegetable garden (mainly lettuce) and through games, lessons and various activities, learned about nutrition and the importance of consuming local produce.

Those lessons dovetail perfectly with the beliefs and practices of Schubert (owner/chef at The Only at 172 King St.) and Wolwicz (executive chef at Crave Restaurant in the Hyland Centre at 1737 Richmond St.), who both focus on using local, organic foods.

"The quality of local produce is far superior," says Wolwicz. "It hasn't travelled thousands of miles to get to your plate -- it may have been grown across the street."

Of course, buying local produce is good for both the environment and the local economy. And while that lesson may -- or may not -- stick with the kids, they certainly seem to have gained an appreciation for green food.

Yesterday, the pupils worked enthusiastically together -- some harvesting the lettuce, some preparing plates and cutlery and some making vinaigrette dressing -- as they prepared, served and then consumed salads made from their own-grown lettuce.

And I didn't hear a single yuck.

