

Community Chefs train those who pick up food from a pantry how to use a bigger supply of fresh produce in creative ways

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. - **NORTH SHORE** - Greenmarkets and food clubs that bring locally grown, fresh food into a community have taken a bite out of the need to persuade someone to "eat your vegetables."

It almost doesn't matter that fruits and vegetables help people lose weight and aid in diabetes prevention, fresh veggies just taste a lot better.

"Eating your veggies" has also become more of a mantra at food pantries where the norm has long been finding foods with a long shelf life. These days "crisp" and "fresh" are starting to get their due.

Through Local Produce Link, a program facilitated by Just Food and the

United Way of NYC, a weekly delivery of produce from local farms is trucked to 44 pantries throughout the city, including Project Hospitality in Stapleton where four other pantries make pick-ups.

"It's a great asset for people to get fresh food. The food at pantries is usually canned or processed," said **Angela Davis**, community food education coordinator with Just Food.

The Manhattan-based organization provides New Yorkers with farm-fresh produce through a number of programs that benefit consumers and support farming, whether it's a local family farm or a group of urban gardeners.

In addition, through its Community Chefs program, a link is provided between the product and what is served up come dinner time.

"For the last two years, Community Chefs has recruited from the food pantry community. They know the clients and can tap into what interests them to eat and what will and will not work," said Ms. Davis, community food education coordinator with Just Food.



Food from Cranberry Hill Farm is delivered to Project Hospitality headquarters on Bay Street in Stapleton; it is picked up by other food pantries. Philipp Schreyer, 22, a volunteer from Frieising, Germany, and Kevin Lopez, 17, of Mariners Harbor, load watermelons for delivery. (Staten Island Advance/Kathryn Carse)

On a Wednesday in August, the truck from Cranberry Hall Farm in Cookstown, N.J., delivered its seasonal harvest of watermelons, tomatoes

and corn at the food pantry headquarters of Project Hospitality. Community Health Action, Stapleton; Richmond Senior Services and Rescue Ministries, both of Port Richmond; and Christian Pentecostal Church, Concord picked up their allotment over the following two days.

On Aug. 18, at Richmond Senior Services, **Community Chef Peter Noga** was ready to teach folks how to prepare "Dressed Up Corn," using some of the ingredients.

"If we know two days ahead, we are lucky. He works with what comes in, which is a challenge," said **Beverly Neuhaus**, executive director of Richmond Senior Services (RSS) which helps seniors maintain their independence and provides a client-choice food pantry for all. Having prepared Burmese duck at the age of 7, Noga loves the adventure of cooking. Being a community chef has added an extra layer as he involves others in the process.

In his preparatory, three-day intensive training, he received a manual and instruction on teaching that did not include the familiar dictatorial role of the teacher.

"This is more the interactive where people participate, and the teacher may actually learn from the student," he said.

A heavy morning shower put a damper on attendance. It was a small group that took its seats in RSS's multi-purpose room, which is part grocery with shelves and a deli-size refrigerator and part office with desks and computers.

Like a celebrity TV chef, Noga had a portion of the ingredients prepared, but demonstrated each step from slicing the corn off the cob to dicing tomatoes, onions and peppers and grating carrots. He emphasized safety with knife and grater, "especially for the vegetarians" and provided nutritional and culinary tidbits.

"Corn can be eaten raw. Just shock it – put it in boiling water, whistle dixie, it's done," advised Noga as he separated the corn from the cob. He kept the patter going, eliciting other ideas for using corn – chowder, grits, hominy, bread and fritters made the list.

He added a little bit of food history: Corn was among the three staple crops of Native Americans, along with beans and squash.

Follow the recipe, then taste it and adjust, he said, as he began to hand out

samples to a group that had expanded with the arrival of clients for the start of the food pantry at 10 a.m.

"It's good. It's fresh. He didn't cook anything," said **John Delvalle** of Elm Park who came a little late. Living alone, he cooks for himself and appreciates new ideas. "Basically, I get the recipe because I just tasted it. I can figure it out.

Although **Anne Morrison** of Stapleton studied at the New York Food and Hotel Management, she appreciates the cooking lessons.

"It's a good thing. You get little ideas from them. You never think to put corn and all that stuff together," she said.

"What he made today, you could make at home. It tastes good. I will go home and try it, said **Annette Martin** of Stapleton, articulating the Community Chefs program in a nutshell.

The Local Produce Link has been re-funded recently with a five-year grant by the state Department of Health through its Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program.

"It is great news for the farmers who have shifted to growing for the food pantries, and for the food pantries that are assured of a reliable, high-quality source of fresh vegetables," said **Abby Youngblood**, Fresh Food for All program coordinator with Just Food.

The state's Partnering with Just Food is one of a number of programs that connects the farmer and the community. Check out its website at www.justfood.org.