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Megan Beatt

# FROM THE GROUND UP...

## MSU Camp Connects Kids with Food

**By Robbie Ward**

Fewer family farms and busier families mean today's children may think milk comes from the grocery store, cayenne pepper from the spice rack and chickens from KFC, and they may have no clue how to make basic meals from scratch.

That's where Sylvia Byrd has her work cut out for her.

Byrd, an associate professor in Mississippi State's Department of Food Science, Nutrition and Health Promotion, coordinated this summer the university's first "fun with food camp," which was aimed at empowering third- through sixth-



Marco Nicovich

grade students in the kitchen, teaching them how food goes from the farm to the dinner table and passing on practical skills associated with food preparation. Byrd, who grew up on a family farm, said she worried about people finding themselves more distanced from the food they eat.

"We just go to the grocery store and think it magically appears," Byrd said during a field trip to the Mayhew

Tomato Farm near Starkville. "If children are involved in food preparation, they have a better idea of how it works."

From family-run farms to Mississippi State's own dairy, Byrd took her 40 young campers directly to food sources—literally. The students saw long rows of peppers, cantaloupes and tomatoes at the local farm, and they saw about 150 Jersey and Holstein cows at the dairy.

"Coming out here goes a long way in showing students where their food comes from," Byrd said, watching students put juicy pieces of fresh watermelon in their mouths.

A few fruits and vegetables away, near the okra, eggplant and cabbage, 9-year-old Emily Beth Ivy of Ackerman hadn't decided the fate of the long cayenne pepper in her hand.

"I might give it to my grandpa because he likes peppers," said Ivy, whose favorite vegetable is corn on the cob.

While Byrd and her staff took students on field trips during the weeklong camp, she didn't leave learning outdoors. Each day she coordinated something most students never do—they prepared their own lunch each day in an oversized kitchen at MSU. From vegetable pizza, soups, pasta and more, students chopped, measured, baked and did everything else needed to prepare healthy food good enough for their taste buds. Even Megan Moorhead, 10, of Starkville, the self-proclaimed pickiest eater of the group, found a few things worthy of her selective taste. She didn't think twice about pasta she prepared.

"It was good," she said, smiling and sitting at a table with about 10 other students.

While the camp allowed students to learn more about food, it also enhanced their interest in the culinary arts. Nine-year-old Ryan Mikel may be a little fellow in size, but not in ambition and ideas. He and a buddy plan to open a restaurant inside his tree house in his backyard.

The menu will include traditional American foods like



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hotdogs and burgers, along with his special treats. Students at the camp have composition books used to write unique recipes, food safety tips and other nutrition notes.

Taking a break from preparing garlic bread one day before lunch, Mikel, wearing a chef's hat, described a dessert he plans to serve, the "Chocolate Ginny," made from Hostess cupcakes, chocolate syrup, Hershey's Kisses, ice cream and cherries.

"I made it for my dad on Father's Day," said Mikel, a rising fourth-grader and Starkville resident.

While Byrd encouraged students to use creativity while preparing food, she also taught kitchen fundamentals that stretch far beyond the sink and oven. Students learned organizational skills by reading and following recipes and gathering equipment needed, such as mixers and cutting boards. They learned patience while preparing food, realizing quality often takes more than two minutes in a microwave. The students also used math and critical thinking skills when they read food labels and compared food prices. The kids made homemade granola and priced the snack at a local grocery store, showing the value of preparing food themselves.

While Byrd spoke, a few students sliced pepperoni and vegetable pizzas into eight slices each.

"You can go to a classroom and hear all about fractions," she said. "But cutting watermelons and pizzas into fourths and eighths makes it real."

Students learned throughout the camp about different kinds of foods—"go, slow and whoa." Byrd told students about the value of limiting amounts of sweets and sugary foods while munching on plenty of fruits and veggies.

Whether preparing spaghetti squash, pizza from scratch, or vegetable soup filled with fresh onions and carrots, students learned that making tasty, healthy food doesn't take forever or require a professional chef. They also learned skills and experiences that allow them to feed themselves and have a good time in the process.

Byrd knows she can't reach each child and teach the food process to them. However, she's doing her part one batch of students at a time.

"Just look at how much they enjoy this," she said, walking with her group through rows of fresh cantaloupes.