

# Faces and Places: The Portland Kitchen

Portland is known for its food culture. From Screen Door to food carts to Poc Poc, there are foodies everywhere, with top class restaurants and specialty shops fueled by the passions of culinary entrepreneurs. Yet, in a city that is so passionate about its food, little is being done to educate and inspire the next generation of culinary artists. The Portland Kitchen is working to change that and so much more.

As I made my way down into the basement of St. Matthew's Church in the Parkrose neighborhood of Portland I was greeted by a smile from Arielle Clark and a meatball beautifully arranged on a bed of yogurt sauce – a welcome I haven't yet experienced visiting afterschool programs across the state. I had arrived at The Portland Kitchen (TPK). Arielle, TPK's Culinary Program Director and Instructor, joins a group of high school students were making their way across the room to take a seat at the large kitchen table. There was a slight smoky haze in the room, a reminder of the hard work of making meatballs just completed by the group of ten high school students. Before I got settled down at the dinner table Abby showed me around the kitchen. Individual carts complete with burners, knives and leftover ingredients were arranged in a semi-circle directly outside the church's main kitchen, which Abby noted is not a restaurant-grade kitchen but works well. Abby Herrera is the founder and Executive Director of TPK.

The Portland Kitchen is a relatively new non-profit organization committed to preparing and empowering high school students for the world of work and careers in the culinary arts by developing their passion into skills, culinary best practices, two food safety certifications and more! Since its inception three years ago, the TPK team has worked hard to develop two TPK programs – summer and school year. Throughout the school year a group of roughly 23 students meet twice weekly for two and half hours. Throughout the year students from Madison and Parkrose high schools in NE Portland will refine and develop kitchen safety and knife skills; train for the Food Handlers permit and ServSafe® certificate; and cover meat, seafood and poultry preparation; baking; plating; menu creation; and budgeting. The summer program is a condensed version of the school-year program, expecting to run four days per week, for seven weeks.

TPK's programs are entirely comprehensive – something that makes TPK unique. One beauty of the afterschool space, and the programs and people that utilize this space, is the diversity of programs that exists. While many traditional afterschool programs are known for giving students opportunities and exposure to things they would not have been introduced to otherwise, TPK is focused on diving deep. As I sat around the dinner table with young TPK culinary artists I threw out some questions to the group. When I posed the question *Did you know how to cook before you came here?* I expected most of the group to say no – that this was their first time being exposed to the culinary arts – but the exact opposite happened. Kiara, a young woman sitting next to me, said she had been cooking since she was four years old. Another student shared his family's tradition of cooking different styles (from Lebanese to Thai) every day of the week. Every student in the room had a previous relationship/interest/exposure to cooking and the culinary arts. This, as I found out, was on purpose. See, each of TPK's 23 students went through an intensive

application process complete with written questions and interviews to be here. Two key parts of the selection process were commitment and passion.

Take Kiara for example. Kiara is a freshmen at Mt. Scott Learning Center. She lives in deep South East Portland – a full hour long bus ride away from St. Matthew's. In considering Kiara's application the TPK team was concerned about the logistical feasibility of her participation, but Kiara's deep passion for the trade trumped these concerns. So Kiara has learned to navigate the TriMet system – she spends almost as much time on the bus getting to St. Matthew's as she does in class – but both she and her mom Julie agree its well worth it. Kiara will graduate from TPK, and from high school, with solid transferable skills. She will be well prepared to pursue advanced culinary programs or get a job in one of Portland's fancy restaurants. This is made possible by TPK's commitment to workforce development.

Abby Herrera is a graduate of the Willamette University Atkinson Graduate School of Management. Abby is passionate about workforce development, about preparing our young people to be contributing members of not only our economy but our communities as well. When asked why she chose to focus on cooking, Abby's answer reminded me of my days on Willamette's campus in my economics class – cooking gives TPK the biggest bang for their buck (or maximizing benefits). Cooking and the culinary arts not only give students the opportunity to learn basic jobs skills like collaboration, accountability, feelings of success and pride in one's work, but will also increase youth and community engagement. Maybe most notably, food and culinary education offers a framework for a lifetime of healthy eating and healthy lifestyles. TPK and its donors are investing in our youth, investing in their passions in order to fuel Portland's culinary workforce – which in a foodie city like Portland is critically important.

Writing and reflecting on TPK's work the question that keeps bubbling up is: What is the relationship between work and passion? Yes, it's critically important that we fuel our workforce, that we set kids up to succeed in work and life. But is this possible without tapping into their passions? Afterschool programs have the keen ability to tap into what makes kids tick in order to get them more engaged in school and put them on a path to success. TPK is doing just that for students interested in and passionate about the culinary arts.

To find out more about The Portland Kitchen, [click here](#).