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## Cooking With Kids Foundation, an Enterprise and a Mission

By Sophie Braccini



Lynda Rexroat teaches children how to cook at the Lafayette Recreation Center. Photo provided

become a pastry chef, "just for the pleasure of it," she remembers. But as a professional door closed, another opened, and she started a wholesale pie business.

"First I was cooking for parties, but my dietary needs changed," she says. "I started to be more interested in healthy choices and looked for ways to reduce sugar, and avoid gluten and dairy." Rexroat developed a new line of pies, without gluten, dairy, and very low glycemic index. The wholesale business was called Apple Lane Bakery, for the many apple trees in her Lafayette garden. Rexroat was selling to cruise lines and large catering establishments like the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley. "More and more people were looking for options for people with diabetes or heart problems," she says.

But one day, a friend of hers planted an idea in her mind. "She said that I should combine my love of children with my love of cooking and teaching," she remembers. "That is how I started Cooking with Kids as an after-school program." Very quickly, Rexroat modified the angle of her business from food appealing to kids, like pizzas and pretzels, to healthy food for kids. "Children can appreciate everything, especially if they are the ones preparing it," she says.

In the kitchen, every moment is used to learn something. Rexroat teaches how to recognize the fruits and vegetables in their raw form, to identify their colors and texture, how to weigh and measure food, how to read labels and make a grocery list, and to always be clean and frequently wash. She even teaches the youngest of her students to use the kitchen tools, emphasizing safety. "Each class has a theme and at the end of class we share the food and critique it," says Rexroat. "We wonder if we would do it again, if it was good for us, and the parents get to taste as well." Then the children do the dishes and clean up.

"My purpose is to help the children to connect with the food, to realize what is healthy and that it can also be delicious," says Rexroat. "This is important here, but it is even more important in underserved communities. This is why I transformed my business into a nonprofit because the children come first, and it was important to be able to apply for grants and raise money."

Rexroat has invited different people from the community to join the board, including members of the Lamorinda Winegrowers Association with whom she is planning her first fundraiser in the spring. "We would like to raise enough money to acquire a mobile kitchen," she says. Rexroat wants

Standing by the prep table in the Lafayette Community Center's kitchen, Chef Lynda Rexroat held a big knife, getting ready to slice a carrot. The tiny fingers and palm of a 4-year-old child pressed on Rexroat's steady hand, as she learned the slicing technique. Pretty soon, the youngster will be cutting the vegetables herself.

Learning to prep like a pro and handle knives is just one of the things that the children who attend the Cooking with Kids Foundation classes are learning. Over a four-week period, they learn to prepare and value healthy food and grow an appreciation for what it takes to put dinner on the table. Rexroat not only teaches Lamorinda kids, but also wants to teach children in underprivileged communities how to become healthier.

The Lafayette resident has had an unusual professional life. She was an ultrasonographer at Children's Hospital for years until a back injury stopped her career. Rexroat also studied in Paris to

to be able to go to any school to conduct after-school programs, even if they do not have the space and equipment required. She is already teaching several after-school programs locally at Wagner Ranch Elementary in Orinda, the Husky House Day Care Center and Happy Valley Elementary School in Lafayette as well as other schools in Walnut Creek.

Rexroat is also looking for new members for her board to extend the reach of her mission. "I am looking for chefs, moms of young children, retired business people, teachers," she says. She already has enrolled Lafayette dietician Lisa Ota and Virgil Birgona from the Fremont Bank; Saint Mary's College students will also intern this summer to update her website. For more information, visit [www.cwkf.org](http://www.cwkf.org).

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[back](#)

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