

Meet Cricket



Cricket Azima is a dynamic young professional chef who specializes in cooking for and with children.

Cricket is the Director of Kids' Programs for Kidfresh™ an innovative company in New York City offering all natural, freshly prepared foods for kids.

Since 1999, Cricket has been teaching cooking classes to over 1000 children of all ages at various locations in New York City, including schools, Whole Foods Market, Girl Scout groups, the Children's Museum of Manhattan, and in her private classes.

As an instructor, Cricket is one of a kind. She strives to teach more than a recipe or basic cooking technique, with a teaching philosophy that is based on "the educational benefits of cooking." "We can learn about so much more than just food, while in the kitchen," says Cricket. "In addition to cooking skills and techniques, children in my classes learn about history, geography, math, nutrition, science, foreign language, art, and much more."

In an exclusive interview for CityPages, we learnt more about Cricket.



Where are you currently based?

New York City

What motivated you to taking cooking as a profession?

I have always loved to cook and eat. I was at a crossroad in my career, trying to decide between becoming a chef or an elementary school teacher, when it hit me – I can do both! Now, I teach elementary aged children about food, my favorite topic – talk about having your cake and eating it, too!

What formal education you have taken related to cooking?

I have my Professional Culinary degree from Peter Kump's (now known as The Institute of Culinary Education) and my Masters in Food Studies & Food Management from New York University

Why do you get involved with children mostly?

I am overwhelmed with satisfaction when I see a child's eyes light up at the discovery of a new food or ingredient – one he or she thought they wouldn't enjoy. I am also pleased to be able to share this news with parents, who I often find are a bit leery of that food or ingredient themselves!

Here's an example: Recently, a parent returned to pick up their child from class and was surprised to learn his child now likes eggplant. "You made something with eggplant?" he questioned, squishing his nose at mention of the vegetable. They went home with the recipe, and the next time I saw them, the father shared that, at age 40, he now likes eggplant!

What kind of activities you do with children?

In addition to learning how to make a delicious recipe, children learn educational material, such as math, science, geography, history, nutrition, social studies, art, language and reading skills. They are also exposed to and develop skills related to socialization, physical activity, and lifetime learning.

Tell us about you Special way of teaching cooking to children?

When I develop recipes and curriculum for The Creative Kitchen classes, I work to incorporate as much educational content as possible – such as math, science, and nutrition – while still maintaining an entertaining and interesting environment.

The lesson absolutely has to be of interest to kids. And, with that said, my primary goal is always to work with fun ingredients and foods – ones kids

love already, as well as ones I can teach them to like.

I make sure children keep both their hands and minds busy the entire time they are in the kitchen with me. For example, even when I am completing a simple step on my own – adding a spice, for instance – I keep children involved, by asking them to smell the spice and spell its name. We might also talk about where the spice grows and how it is harvested.

What is the best age to begin learning cooking?

I teach from 2 1/2 years old and up. The 2 1/2 year olds until about 4 years old need some assistance from a parent or care-giver. In their classes, we discuss colors, shapes, numbers, foods, etc. From 5 years old, the children are truly able to absorb more of the "educational" content that accompanies the lesson, for example how foods are grown, from



where the foods originate, the science of how they cook, they can do math when doing measurements, etc.

Which are the books published by you?

The books I've written include Everybody Eats Lunch, Handstand Kids Mexican Cookbook (I developed and wrote the recipes), and Culinary Improvisation (I contributed). I am in the process of another book - details to come soon.

Tell us about the awards and achievements you have received?

Everybody Eats Lunch received a gold award from the National Parenting Publications Awards (NAPPA).

What are your current goals?

To continue to teach children's classes, write children's cookbooks, and do more video content

with kids and food (my latest is on IVillage.com - in the food section, under the Kids header).

What is the ultimate Achievement that you are looking forward to?

This changes daily :)

Do you invent new recipes or cooking styles?

Yes - I develop and write recipes for my own classes and food companies that hire me to consult (for example Kellogg's, Fruit Simple, etc.)

What motivates you or inspires you?

Food :)

What middle-eastern foods you like most?

Since my father is from Iran, I have to say that Persian food is my favorite :)

What are your other hobbies?

I love to spend time with my son, Kingston.

Tell us a childhood memory?

My mother was not much of a cook, unless opening a can of tuna is considered cooking! I think her aversion to cooking directly affected my desire to be a good cook (plus, I was sick and tired of canned tuna).

My fondest childhood memories surround the kitchen. I remember taking cooking classes at age 5 at a small gourmet store in Kansas City. Believe it or not, I actually prepare some of those same recipes today – Stone Soup and Navajo Fried Bread are both regular menu items, in my home and my classroom. I also recall being in Montessori school and the excitement of simply cutting up bread and passing it to my peers. Without question – of all the classes and schools I have attended over the years – my food and cooking experiences are the most unforgettable.

What is one unique thing about your cooking?

That I don't just cook a recipe - I look at the history of the ingredients, the culture of the people from the country where the recipe originated, the science behind why the recipe is cooked a particular way, etc. I also enjoy adapting traditional recipes to suit my taste or that of the children I teach.

What are your future plans?

Time will tell :)

What is your zodiac sign?

Scorpio

How do you celebrate your birthday?

Typically over a big, fun meal with my friends and family...if not dozens of these meals, as I enjoy celebrating my birthday the entire month of November :)