

GIVING BACK

Planting Good Seeds

New Orleans chef Emeril Lagasse is raising a new crop of young cooks through his school gardens and teaching kitchens

A PLACE TO GROW
Emeril Lagasse with student participants in his Culinary Garden & Teaching Kitchen program



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HEN YOU'RE a TV celebrity chef and win \$125,000 on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, what do you do

with the money? For New Orleans' Emeril Lagasse, the answer was easy. He phoned his friend Sister Lillian McCormack, founder of St. Michael Special School in New Orleans (which is privately funded for students who have intellectual and developmental disabilities), and offered a lifeline in the form of his winnings.

For high-profile chefs, the options for giving back are endless, but that donation 22 years ago was Lagasse's first taste of what it meant to make a real difference. Grateful for his enormous success, not only on television but also with his award-winning cookbooks and restaurants throughout the nation, Lagasse (who grew up in Massachusetts and later made a home in New Orleans) found himself in a position to empower and inspire young people. Just two years after his game show win, he launched the Emeril Lagasse Foundation with the aim of mentoring youth through food. His organization has since granted more than \$18 million to children's charities, supporting nutrition, arts, and culinary programs.

But early on, the chef realized that a major obstacle for young children in the U.S. was a disconnect with food—not knowing where it comes from and not having access to enough good, fresh ingredients. Even kids who do have adequate meals sometimes still believe that juice comes from a carton or carrots from a can. In 2016, Lagasse

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turned his focus to establishing teaching kitchens and edible schoolyards nationwide, and his organization hired Katie Mularz to launch what's since become its signature outreach: Emeril's Culinary Garden & Teaching Kitchen. This initiative helps kids in kindergarten through 8th grade learn to seed, harvest, cook, and share the gifts of the garden.

As the program expanded, the team realized that the foundation needed to find a way to engage the parents. They began inviting families to come on Saturdays and harvest what they wanted out of the garden—as long as they did something with the food at home that included the child. “Having the support of the family when the kid is out of the classroom is crucial,” says Lagasse.

At Dr. John Ochsner Discovery Health Sciences Academy, one of the partner sites, seventh grader Nakira is gaining useful know-how as well as confidence in the kitchen. “She loves learning cooking techniques, which she then teaches her father and me,” says her mother, Raina Edwards. They frequently make one of Nakira's favorite dishes, yaka-mein (a beloved local noodle soup spiced with Creole seasoning); each family often has its own secret ingredient. “The program has changed the way we cook,” says Edwards. “We have decreased the amount of processed meals we eat and make a lot more fresh food together at home.”

Emeril's Culinary Garden & Teaching Kitchen program currently has six official partner schools across the country, from Washington, D.C., to California, with the hopes of reaching more, especially as others see the impact it has had on whole communities. But even with nothing left to prove, the chef remains committed to mentoring the next generation of cooks, gardeners, and teachers. And he knows it's not solely up to him. Everyone can give back in small ways, he says, particularly when it comes to investing in people. “Volunteer your time; be present,” says Lagasse. “You don't have to have means in order to have meaning.”

BAKING 101
Let your kids help make this easy fall recipe.



Emeril's Maple-Butter Corn Muffins

ACTIVE 20 MIN. - TOTAL 45 MIN.

MAKES 1 DOZEN

- 1¼ cups all-purpose flour
- ½ cup fine yellow cornmeal
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. baking soda
- ½ tsp. kosher salt
- 2 large eggs
- ½ cup whole milk
- ½ cup sour cream
- ¼ cup light brown sugar
- 3 Tbsp. melted unsalted butter, plus 7 Tbsp. softened unsalted butter, divided
- ½ cup, plus 2 Tbsp. pure maple syrup, divided

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line a 12-cup muffin tray with paper liners; set aside.
2. Whisk together flour, cornmeal, baking

powder, baking soda, and salt in a medium bowl until combined. Whisk together eggs, milk, sour cream, brown sugar, melted butter, and ½ cup of the syrup in a large bowl until smooth. Add flour mixture to egg mixture; whisk just until incorporated, being careful not to overmix. Divide batter evenly among prepared muffin liners.

3. Bake in preheated oven until golden brown, 18 to 20 minutes. Remove from oven. Let cool in muffin tray 5 minutes.

4. While muffins bake, whisk together softened butter and remaining 2 tablespoons maple syrup in a small bowl until smooth. Set aside until ready to use. (Bowl of maple butter may be wrapped tightly with plastic wrap and stored in refrigerator up to 2 weeks.) Serve muffins warm with maple butter.