

Cooking up a storm

Local woman fills niche for kids' cooking classes

BY ANNA GALAN
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At the end of a long day, when Michelle Stern is working in the kitchen and a fellow parent shows up with 10 hungry children and asks, "What's for dinner?" she doesn't give the response many busy moms might expect. She's thrilled.

A former high school biology teacher and current stay-at-home mom and consultant for the Pampered Chef, a direct sales company that sells cooking tools, Stern recently moved back to her hometown with her family — and a great idea: why not offer cooking classes for children in a safe and familiar environment — their homes. So in September, "What's Cooking" was born.

The San Rafael resident and native came up with her inspiration when she was hosting parties through the Pampered Chef. It was through her work with this company that she learned of the demand for children's cooking classes. She received several requests from Girl Scout troops who wanted to earn cooking badges, as well as parents short on birthday party ideas.

Stern, who is registered with the San Rafael Chamber of Commerce for her Pampered Chef business, began What's Cooking slowly at first, testing out the area and the demand. Since Stern relocated here several months ago, the demand has increased rapidly, and she often finds herself having to limit her work in order to make sure she spends enough time with her own family.

"Because I'm in business for myself, I can put my family first," said Stern, who limits herself to one event on the weekend so that she has one workday and one family day.

Stern also teaches cooking classes at the Marin Jewish Community Center preschool



Privette

Michelle Stern founded What's Cooking, a business that provides in-home cooking classes and parties for children. Here Stern is pictured with her class for children ages 4-5 at the Marin Jewish Community Center, where she teaches at the preschool.

for 4- to 5-year-olds. Demand for these classes has also increased. When she started teaching the class, there were seven children, and in each subsequent class there were more. Now, with the beginning of the second session of classes and the maximum number of 10 children in attendance, there are children on the waiting list.

Stern said that parents, through both the MJCC and What's Cooking, have been very positive.

"I had one mom stop me and tell me how her daughter had woken up that morning and was just saying 'It's cooking day! It's cooking day!'" Stern said. "Hearing that made me so happy."

As far as Stern knows, she is the only one in the Bay Area offering classes to children so young. She knows that Viking HomeChef in Corte Madera

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offers classes, as well as Apron Strings in San Francisco, but in general, children must be at least 10 years old.

Stern believes that making children wait to get involved in the kitchen is a mistake.

"Because we start at the early age of 4, that really captures the excitement of the children," Stern said. "You may lose that window if you wait."

Some parents may worry that children that age are too young, but Stern takes many precautions, especially with

kitchen tools, safety and sanitation.

"We use tools that are appropriate for children, we don't use anything that is too sharp, and I teach them how to hold things properly," Stern said. "And we have a lot of products, such as an egg slicer, that we use for strawberries or olives, or a food chopper that can effectively do cutting without hurting anyone. We also use close instruction and supervision."

"I was surprised at how well it worked out. Parents would see me using a tool with the kids and ask, 'Where can