

# Maine Arts Academy’s pilot program in culinary arts a hit with students and staff

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By Greg Levinsky

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SIDNEY — Lindsay Knapp presented two options regarding sweet potato preparation to the six Maine Arts Academy students gathered around her.

“You can peel them and chop them,” Knapp said, “or roast them off.”

“Oh, yeah,” responded Kadence Reynolds.

Roast them it was.

The six Maine Arts Academy students collaborated to prepare a meal of roasted chicken thighs, oven-roasted sweet potatoes and garlicky spinach Thursday afternoon as part of a culinary arts class at Maine Arts Academy. The class is a partnership between the public charter school and Snow Pond Center for the Arts.



“With the school wanting a culinary program, it’s the perfect marriage,” Snow Pond Center for the Arts Director of Development Christa Johnson said.

The 10-week pilot program began Jan. 21, with students attending class for approximately an hour and a half each, a double-block, Thursday afternoons. The six-student class is made up of students in ninth and 10th grades: Brady Gardner, Reynolds, Andrew Rowe, Kai Gray, Mateja Beaulieu and Jaidyn Reynolds.

Gardner was the first student to sign up. The sophomore from Farmingdale encouraged some of his friends to join. Gardner cooks dinner for his family every Thursday, and the class offers him an opportunity to bring new dishes home. Thursday’s menu included buffalo chicken pie.

“I wanted to get better,” he said. “It’s very fun.”

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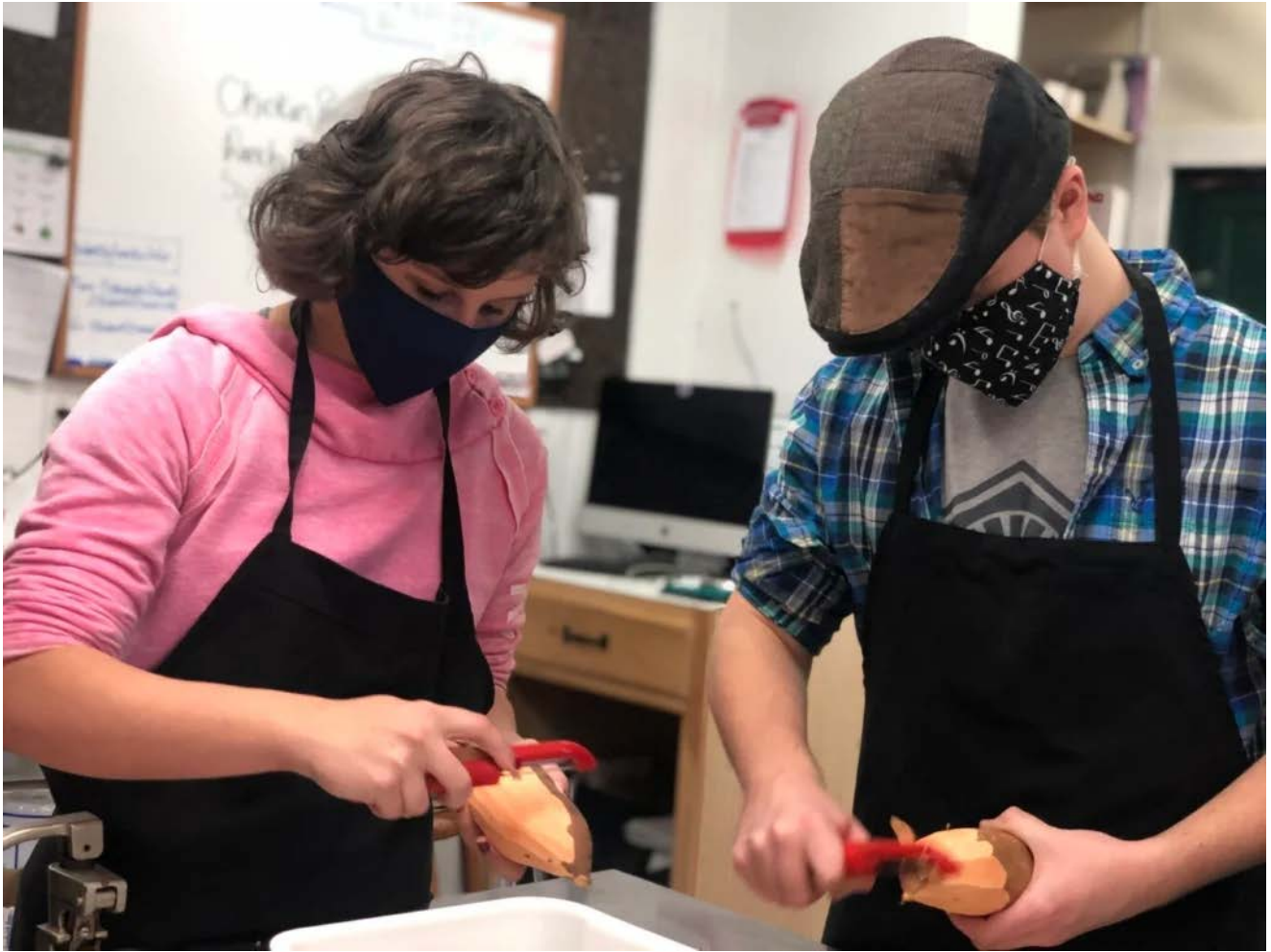
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The class is taught by Knapp, a former chef and current land designer at Master Gardener. Attorney Todd Ketcham, also a former chef, volunteered to help out for the entirety of the program.

“There’s no such thing as a mistake here,” Ketcham, a Cape Elizabeth resident, told one student as they cut a garlic clove a bit too thin. “This is an investment of time, because we want to do more.”



Kadence Reynolds, left, and Brady Gardner peel sweet potatoes Thursday during a culinary arts course at Maine Arts Academy in Sidney. *Greg Levinsky/Morning Sentinel*

The class is designed for students who are interested in developing culinary skills as a possible career, or for those who just want to learn more about cooking — anyone, really.

Knapp sent out a survey to students prior to the class asking why they wanted to join. She got varying results, from casual interest to career intentions.

“Kids who are involved in producing their own food eat better,” Knapp said.

The first week of class included knife skills and other safe kitchen habits. The last three weeks, students prepared a full meal with a protein, starch and vegetable. All students and staff wear masks at all times given the pandemic, but spaced out in the cafeteria they do get to eat their meals after making them.

One of Knapp’s favorite parts about the course is seeing the students talk about their accomplishments. Sometimes, they bring the recipes home. Knapp, who called the students “fabulous,” sees food as a vehicle for socialization.

“They (cook) the food, and we release them into the wild with their food and they show their friends,” said Knapp, a South Portland resident. “They’ve eaten every last speck of what they made, so clearly we’re on the right track.”

In its fifth school year, Maine Arts Academy is a free public charter high school housed at Snow Pond Center for the Arts. Maine Arts Academy serves 250 high school students from nearly 80 Maine towns.

Snow Pond Center for the Arts is also in the process of installing a greenhouse. Rachael Lowe, a Maine Arts Academy teacher and Green Team leader, secured funding for the greenhouse from a Non-State Educational Agencies Planning Grant. Maine Arts Academy plans on providing the Snow Pond Center for the Arts with some produce for its summer programs and specialty farm-to-table dinners, which Knapp will help with.



Maine Arts Academy students collaborated on the making of this meal Thursday. *Greg Levinsky/Morning Sentinel*

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Perhaps the course will develop into a regular option for students in coming semesters.

Discussions throughout the class cover a wide range of topics. One Thursday was about garlic — does it taste better raw or cooked.

What is on the menu each week is also, at least in part, up to the students. Next week a lesson on how to make focaccia bread will be the focus, with the bread later turned into pizza.

“You good with that?” Knapp asked.

“For sure,” Rowe said.

A 10th-grader from Anson, Rowe wants to pursue a music career. He plays piano and guitar, but “cooking has always been my thing,” Rowe said. “Pretty much anything thrown at me, I’ll try.”

Reynolds, a 10th-grader from Sabbatus, said she never cooked meat before the class. Now she knows how to cook and season a variety of proteins.

“I do this to learn stuff, because I haven’t really worked with food,” Reynolds said.

And that’s music to the instructor’s ears.

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