

Getting schooled by kids in the kitchen



Corey

Mintz

Tyrell wants to show me his knife.

The little boy addresses me in a voice so tiny that at first I think it's an echo, or shaky old pipes of the building, a women's shelter somewhere in Toronto.

His toy knife is made of Popsicle sticks held together with elastic bands, the handle painted green and the other end stained red from the strawberries he's been cutting. "I cut chicken with it too," he says.

That may not be entirely accurate. But he is cooking dinner tonight. One of the activities here is a therapeutic food program called Taste of Home, run by the [Child Development Institute](#).

But first a staff member, trained in stress management, leads a snack-time discussion about confidentiality. The kids, quietly eating after-school strawberries, grapes and low-sodium Triscuits in a playroom flooded with sunlight, all nod that they understand the word and its importance, that disclosing information at school can put residents of the shelter at risk.

I can't name the shelter we're in or even the neighbourhood where it's located. The names of the kids in this story have been changed.

"They're dealing with changes in school and friends, and the loss of their home, family and routines," explained Angelique Jenney, direc-

tor of Family Violence Services for CDI, when she'd invited me, "not to mention the issues that brought them to the shelter in the first place, namely family violence, poverty and homelessness."

Once a week at three different shelters, instead of being served in the cafeteria, the kids get involved in producing a nutritious, cost-conscious meal. To certify that they're kitchen-ready, everyone uses a crayon to fill out a picture of a thermometer, indicating if they're feeling hot (frustrated, agitated, angry) or cold (sad, lethargic, tired, bored, withdrawn) or just right (happy, clear-minded, calm).

With a lot of adult supervision from lead facilitator Damian Maldaver, they work together to create tonight's dinner of roast kebabs, salad, dressing, hummus, tzatziki and limeade, all made from scratch.

We wash our hands and put on aprons, with the agreement that as soon as the situation feels too stressful, the apron comes off and we go to the take-a-break space. The kids separate into groups, each tackling a different dish. I volunteer to work on team kebab with Tyrell and Elias.

The boys co-operate, measuring onions, fresh parsley and mint into a big mixing bowl. Tyrell wrinkles his nose and vetoes the sundried tomatoes.

"I'll hold and you measure," he says to Elias, pouring from a bag of cinnamon as the smaller boy holds out a red plastic teaspoon. Little boys using teamwork in the kitchen is maybe the cutest thing I've ever

seen. Once the meat (all halal) is in the bowl, the two get a little aggressive about mixing, but they stay centred on the task despite a distracting chorus of giggles from the group making tzatziki.

Elias, forming patties, is rounding his quarter-cup measurements. Wanting to show him how to level the cup to get equal-sized patties, I reach for it and he recoils. He doesn't look enthusiastic about physical contact or letting go of his property.

Tyrell quietly hums and sings, "Started from the bottom . . ." as he finishes shaping the meat into balls.

With the beef in the oven, Tyrell moves to a corner of the room and sets to making a salad dressing. He looks very confident and in control, surrounded by his collection of olive oil, vinegar, yogurt, mayonnaise and chives. Elias runs onto the scene with a lemon squeezer.

"I want to juice the lemons," he shouts, a little high-strung and overstimulated, maybe moments away from a tantrum. Tyrell pushes away the lemon squeezer and for a moment they wrestle for control of the tool. It's pretty much the cover of *Thor No. 126*, where Hercules is trying to grab his hammer. With all the adults, all the professionals, occupied, I worry that I have none of the skills to defuse such a conflict.

But Tyrell is calm and organized in his actions, demonstrating leadership skills in the smallest of arenas, or at least emulating Maldaver's delegation, making sure each child always has something to do. He tells



Elias that there is no lemon juice in the recipe, but that he can help measure sour cream, handing him a measuring cup and spoons. It resolves more like *Thor No. 130*, where they become friends and team up to defeat . . . well, you all know what happened.

Amidst the chaos of a dozen people running about the room, with their lives in states of transition, peril and uncertainty, the two boys work together quietly until Tyrell, adding a final touch of honey, declares the dressing complete. I remind him that a chef, no matter how closely he follows a recipe, always tastes his food before serving it, to make certain that it meets his standards. He puts a small spoonful in his mouth and smiles.

It's nice to make a connection with a kid (or he made it with me). Mal-daver says that it's common for the boys to seek approval from father figures. It's not much different in professional kitchens, cooks seeking approval from chef-dads. And chefs are just as prone to be nurturing or abusive.

Tyrell is one of about 100 residents in the shelter. Any day they might move out on a moment's notice, because they've found more permanent housing or because their father has discovered where they are and they need to leave quickly.

It's an honour to share a meal with them.

Usually I go to the bathroom to take out my Invisalign braces before eating. But I do it at the table because it always gets giggles from kids. And I crave approval from children, not-so-secretly. One of the girls puts up her hand to ask a question.

"Is it your job to go places and decide if the food is yummy?"

Just as we're about to eat, Tyrell's mother takes him to buy shoes. He rushes into the kitchen, anxious about his meal being saved and saying goodbye to me. I shake his hand and tell him that it was nice working together. People always tell me to speak to children as equals, but kids are always weirded out when I shake their hands. Suggestions welcome.

The [Child Development Institute](#) is hosting a fundraiser event on

June 9, with food by Michael Caballo (Edulis), Sam Gelman (Momofuku), Joanne Yolles (Scaramouche) and more.

Due to the nature of this week's column, I didn't cook for anyone. So for a recipe, I wanted to share something that's been on my mind. Last year I made biscuits from Rock Lobster. They were OK, considering they were made from Bisquick. But biscuits are one of those recipes, like apple pie or ribs, where if you're not fixing them the way your mom or dad did, you might cycle through five versions until you settle on one as your staple. Recently I ate some stellar biscuits, crisp and fluffy, at Weslodge. The chef, Kanida Chey, was kind enough to share the recipe for what are now my go-to biscuits.



KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR

Weslodge chef Kanida Chey was kind enough to share the recipe for what are now Corey Mintz's go-to crisp and fluffy biscuits.

Biscuits

3 cups (750 mL) all purpose flour
2 tbsp (30 mL) sugar
1/2 tsp (2 mL) salt
5 tsp (25 mL) baking powder
1 cup (250 mL) unsalted butter, cubed and chilled
2 eggs
1 cup (250 mL) buttermilk
2 jalapenos, seeded and diced
1 coarse salt

In the bowl of an electric mixer, combine flour, sugar, salt, baking powder and butter. Using paddle attachment, mix on low until butter is pea-sized. Add 1 egg and mix. Add milk and jalapenos.

Cover dough and refrigerate for 20 minutes. Preheat oven to 350F/180C.

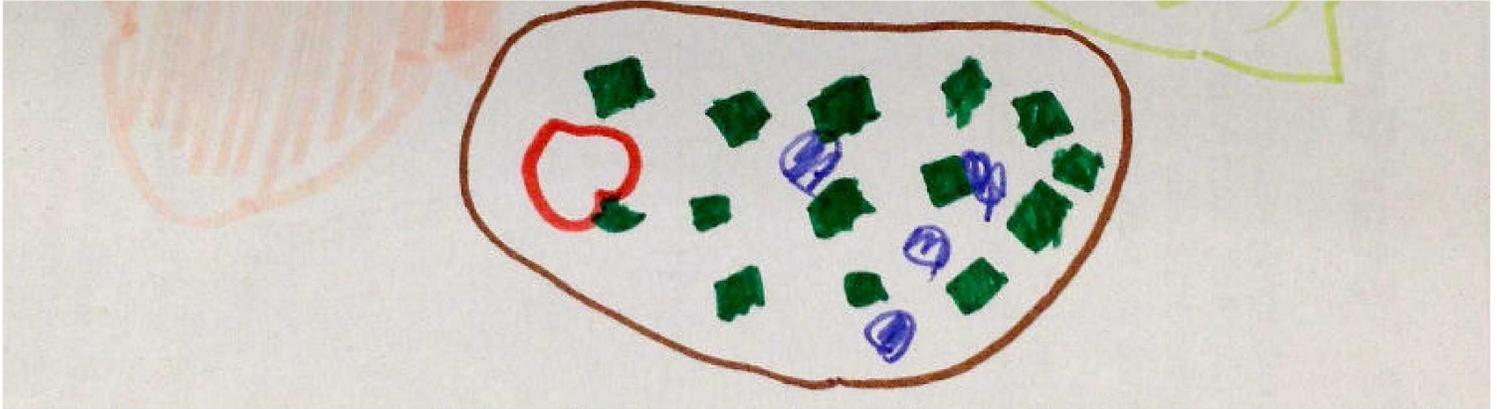
On a floured work surface, roll out dough to about 1 inch (2.5 cm) thick. Cut into squares or circles or rectangles or parallelograms.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms allows for any biscuit shape except triangles.

Place biscuits on baking tray lined with parchment paper. Whisk egg and use it to brush the surface of each biscuit. Sprinkle a few grains of salt on each.

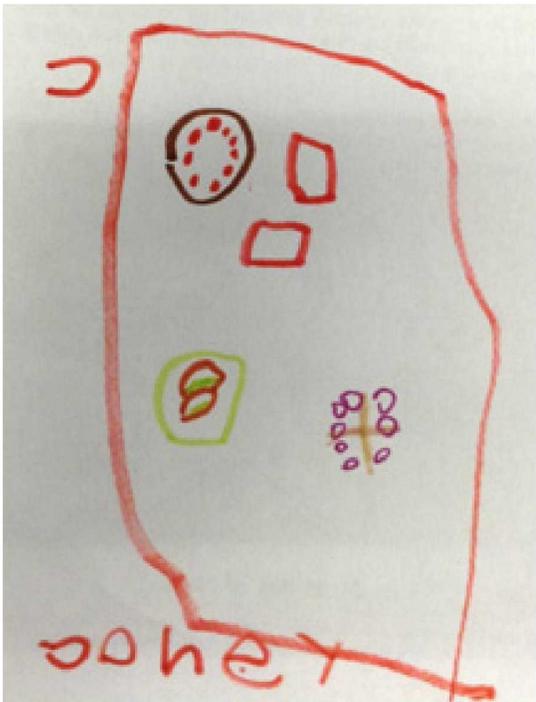
Bake for 15 to 20 minutes. Serve immediately. Makes about 20 biscuits.

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COREY MINTZ PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

We couldn't take pictures of the children learning to cook in a Toronto women's shelter. Instead, they drew pictures of food.



Once a week at three different shelters, kids eschew the usual cafeteria meal and come together (with a lot of adult supervision) to produce a nutritious, cost-conscious meal.