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WORKING: Local caterer works with teen community project

Kitchen serves community through teaching and service

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On the outside it may look like just any other Victorian on Main Street in Sebastopol, but the aroma of savory soups, hearty stews, fresh pasta, and roasting vegetables gives it away and a peek inside reveals a bustling center of cooking activity.

It's not just a house but rather the home of a community kitchen used by several local chefs including teenagers who work for the Ceres Community Project, preparing meals for those suffering from cancer and other chronic illnesses.

"Food brings us together and connects people on a personal and deep level," said Patti Stack, who has been a chef for the Ceres Project for several years and recently started Capers & Co., a catering and event planning business that also features personal chef services.

Stack's role with the Ceres Community Project includes working with teens. About 200 young people from more than 17 area schools have spent time volunteering in the Ceres Project kitchen. By working with adult chef mentors, like Stack and Executive Director, Cathryn Couch, the teens learn about cooking and eating healthy foods and discover how satisfying it is to give to others.

Cancer treatment often wreaks havoc with peoples' appetites yet without solid nutrition the body does not have what it needs to rebuild. Keeping weight on during cancer treatment is a challenge to say the least but fresh food with flavor inspires patients to eat.

About 500 meals are prepared weekly in the community kitchen on Main Street and in the past two years, more than 35,000 free, nutritious and delicious meals were provided to individuals with cancer and other life-threatening illness throughout Sonoma County.

When Stack is not working with the Ceres Community Project, she uses her chef and organizational skills to plan parties, menus and events for Capers & Co. clients.

"Sometimes as a personal chef, I prepare sugar, gluten or dairy free meals, that's part of what I do," said Stack, who started her business during tough economic times less than a year ago. "I always try to think about what people need or haven't considered."

Stack is also experienced in determining the amount of food it requires to feed a crowd.

"People usually want help when they are preparing a meal for 15 to 20 people," she said. "You can actually save a lot of money if you know how much food to prepare."

A discussion of the kinds of foods her clients like to eat and the setting they want to create are important questions that follow.

"Casual and elegant are popular right now," said Stack, who does as much or as little her clients desire.

Often her clients are interested in entertaining but they don't want to do all the work.

"Eating at home creates a more intimate setting, and it's easier to talk to more than just the people sitting on either side of you in a restaurant," Stack said. "A lot of people want to eat local and I'm a big fan of that."

Providing canning services might well be the next Capers & Co. endeavor.

"In this economy, maybe that is something that people haven't thought about, preserving the bounty," said Stack who is eager to transform the leftovers from harvest into jars of homemade apple sauce, plum marmalade and tomato chutney to be enjoyed in the winter months.

Capers & Co. is located at 330 South Main St. in Sebastopol.



CAPERS — Patti Stack in her kitchen. - Photo by Kimberly Kaido-Alvarez