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Eva Overton, left, and others participate in Sustainable Solano's youth cooking pilot program at St. Patrick-St. Vincent High School in Vallejo, Tuesday, Oct. 12, 2021. (Robinson Kuntz/Daily Republic)

Sustainable Solano, Catholic high school pair up for cooking program with emphasis on local fare

By [Amy Maginnis-Honey](#)

VALLEJO — Eva Overton is looking forward to college. And to being able to create her own meals while she's on her own.

Overton is one of eight students who are part of a Youth Cooking Pilot Program launched by Sustainable Solano.

She and her fellow students at St. Patrick-St. Vincent High School are the first class. They have met weekly to learn basic culinary skills as well as the importance of healthy, local food and supporting a local food system while at the same time helping Mother Earth.

The teens, ages 14 to 18, will wrap up their lessons this week.

Sustainable Solano will introduce Girl Scouts to the same program in November.

Overton did some baking early on during the pandemic.

"Cooking is not my thing," said the senior. "I'm going to have to eat."

Freshman Isaak Oshauna partnered with Overton on some tasks during a recent class. His family members embrace the culinary experience at home and he loves to be a part of it.

Stephanie Oelsligle Jordan is the main instructor. She caught the cooking bug in 2004 after a career in marketing and public relations.



Fresh ingredients are included in Sustainable Solano's youth cooking pilot program at St. Patrick-St. Vincent High School in Vallejo, Tuesday, Oct. 12, 2021.

During a recent class, she demonstrated how to pit a date. Each student took a turn pitting dates, which were then rolled into small bacon slices.

"They are gross," said Gabby Perez, after pitting some dates. "It's a process."

Perez loves cooking and even made a meal at home to surprise her family.

"I get to do something I love and I get to eat," she said.

Next, it was on to cutting potatoes with this suggestion: "The smaller (the portions) the faster they bake."

Tristan Espana, a freshman, said his family had a restaurant in Virginia. While he plans a career in anesthesiology, the cooking skills will come in handy when he marries and has children, he said.

Espana compared pitting dates and wrapping them in bacon to "an organ transplant wrapped with bandages."

Program Manager Stefani Iribarren Brooks said the school was the perfect place to launch as its home to an Urban Ag Club.

She brings a hospitality background as well as education.

"Our goal is to support the local food system," Brooks said, adding that's the way to help keep local farms in place.

A recent class included making curry, something none of the students had done previously.

Sustainable Solano did a presentation at the school. All those who attended signed up.

"We were pleasantly surprised by the motivation to learn," Brooks said.

The program can set the stage for youth to later become involved in urban agriculture, community gardens and other parts of the food system as they share the knowledge at home and in their community.

"The course helps to raise awareness about what is growing in our school garden and connects students with the work chef Robin Perry (the high school's chef) does every school day to produce nutritious and fresh meals in our school kitchen," said Rick Rodgers, who advises the Urban Farmers Club. "Students are enjoying the course and love the fact that they get to eat what they prepare at the end of the course."

Sustainable Solano in the coming months will bring the Youth Cooking Pilot Program to other partner organizations and sites around the county, including Solano County 4-H, the Fairfield Police Activities League, Vallejo Project and Vallejo First 5. Some classes will be taught at the Solano County Fairgrounds.

Sustainable Solano continues to look for additional sites and organizational partners as the program grows.

This pilot program is part of a larger vision for the organization that would bring similar culinary programs to youth and adults in the county, imparting workforce skills while also raising awareness about health and nutrition and the local economy, the organization reports. One part of that vision includes the possibility of creating medically tailored meals through such training programs.

For more information, visit sustainablesolano.org.

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