

Simple steps to vegetarian cooking provide food for thought

By SUE REID

On a recent afternoon, a group of about 10 residents got down to the business of slicing and dicing in the kitchen at the Solon Senior Center. Yukon gold potatoes, red bell peppers, shallots and extra-firm tofu were on the cutting boards. Mixed in was a dash of humor, a whole lot of education and an extra pinch of camaraderie.

It was all part of a vegetarian cooking demonstration presented by the Loving Hands Group, a Cleveland-Heights based business which provides the center with successful life-long learning and health promotion programming in Solon.

The class, led by Loving Hands Group Founder Judith Eugene, centered on vegetarian cooking based on requests from residents who want to learn healthful options for their diets. The Solon Senior Center has been offering monthly cooking demos from professional chefs for about eight years.

A class in September, which combined both demonstration and hands-on practice, had more than triple the number of people the kitchen could accommodate.

The vegetarian class was even more popular.

The 90 minute session began with a tasting of Chilean salsa called Pebre, which the group found spicy, yet delicious. Ms. Eugene passed around the Merken, a smoked, dried chili pepper, with a word of caution.

"It's strong," she said of the smell, which led many in the group to sneeze.

Ms. Eugene noted that when dipping, cucumber slices are a healthy alternative to chips. The group explored other tasty treats.

The first was a red pepper soup with a balsamic reduction, including ingredients like agave nectar, peppers, sweet potatoes and fragrant cumin. From there, Ms. Eugene helped the class with the preparation of vegan/vegetarian chili, using tofu instead of meat. Other ingredients included kidney and black beans, fresh cilantro and oregano.



Photos by Alana Clark

Loving Hands group founder Judith Eugene explains vegetarian cooking to a class at the Solon Senior Center.

"I have a daughter who was vegetarian and now is vegan," Solon resident Mary Alice Turner, 87, said explaining what drew her to the class. Ms. Turner still cooks for herself each night and wanted to learn more dishes to prepare for her family.

"I'm half way in between," Ms. Turner added of being vegetarian and vegan.

Ms. Eugene told the class that, while she is not a dietician or a chef, her expertise comes from 25 years as a vegetarian. She noted that it is simpler in today's world to find vegetarian options on menus and in grocery stores, so different from decades ago.

"Today, people are more accepting," she said, adding that her decision to become vegetarian was a "moral" one involving compassion for animals.



Debbie Battles of Mentor starts making a stew during the vegetarian cooking class in Solon.

"I have been trying to eat more vegetarian," Solon resident Cathy Wyer, 68, said. She looked forward to adding that afternoon's recipes to her collection.

All of the group members were given a job and were part of the dish from start to finish, with Ms. Eugene talking about the ingredients. For those who were not familiar with shallots, she noted they are in the onion family with their own unique flavor.

"I've never eaten vegetarian chili," Ms. Turner added. "I'm interested because I love chili."

Former Solon resident Joann Dibacco, 87, of Twinsburg, has a friend whose daughter is vegetarian due to health issues. Ms. Dibacco

said she plans to share some recipes from the class.

"I'm a semi-vegetarian and I have a lot of vegetarians in my family," added Lillian Lodwick, 86, of Solon.

At home, she prepares food with plenty of vegetables.

At the end, the group enjoyed the fruits of their labor.

"I just love beans," Ms. Lodwick said of the ingredients.

"Give food more thought," Ms. Eugene said in conclusion to the group as they enjoyed their meal. "In our eating, it is good to make sure our actions are conscious and not out of habit."