

# Young chefs rising to

'Do you have clean hands?'

Mrs. Henderson asks. "No," reply 21 Kindergarten and Grade 1 students in unison.

I'm sitting on a small chair in a classroom at Spul'u'kwuks Elementary School watching these eager students. They are part of the Edible Schoolyard Project and the founder, chef Ian Lai, is here to introduce them to the making of bread with oats they harvested from the fields in Terra Nova.

For those of you who haven't been following my stories about Ian Lai, I will tell you briefly how,



## Food for Thought

Arlene Kroeker

just over a year ago, Lai, an instructor at the Northwest Culinary Academy, dreamt of showing young folk where their food came from. He was frustrated with the responses he got when he held up a rutabaga and asked his students if it grew above the ground or below. His seed of an idea grew. Today, the City of Richmond has donated

5,000 square feet of land in the community garden in Terra Nova and five schools, from Kindergarten to Grade 12, are participating in the project.

Lai donates his time, energy, and knowledge to building and developing the project.

What do the students learn? Well, they hone their math, science, and social skills by planning the garden. They care for worm composts in classrooms. They plant, weed, harvest, and give the extra bounty to the Richmond Food Bank.

They work co-operatively and learn the cycles of the land. For most, this is new. For all, it's a wondrous thing to be told to go get dirty. And, they learn how to turn their harvest into delicious food.

Before these young students at Spul'u'kwuks leave the room to wash their hands, with Mrs. Henderson saying, "Remember to wash your hands until you have finished singing 'Happy Birthday,'" they sit on the floor in silence, eyes on Chef Lai.

# the occasion

They watch as he pours a plastic container of pre-measured flour, rye, oats, flax, sunflower seeds, and yeast into a stainless steel bowl with water.

He begins mixing the dough with his hands and holds them up. "It's squidgy, it's muddy," he tells the kids, as the dough hangs in clumps from his fingers. He turns out the sticky mess onto the floured table and begins to knead the dough.

"How long do I squish it for?" he asks. "Two hours," comes the reply. "No, that's how long we will leave it to rise. We knead for 10 minutes."



Jasmine Dy gets mixing.

"It's like massaging," a voice from the crowd says. "It's getting smoother."

"And rounder." Lai deftly works the dough into a bun. "This will double in size when it's proofed."



Elizabeth Li and Nikita Flynn work the dough.

Mrs. Henderson writes the new words on the board. Proofing. Yeast. Kneading.

Lai dips his bun into commel so it won't stick on the tray. "It's like magic," says a hushed voice.

And then it's their turn. They take their places at the table and begin the work of making bread. The intensity,



Arlene Kroeker photo  
Chef Ian Lai at work.

the wonder, the delight is palpable.

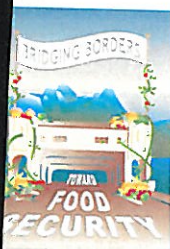
The dough sticks to their fingers, to the table; they poke it, play with it. They try to eat it, which Lai suggests is not the best idea.

Eventually, their buns line two baking trays and are covered with plastic to proof for two hours. Then they will watch their buns enter the oven.

After they clean up, they show me the worm bin. A pile of mud sits inside a plastic container with vents. They show me how the cocoons riddle the mud. "That means they are happy in there."

These kids made one step on their way to connecting harvest with nutrition, wellness, and good taste.

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Ian  
Lai

Edible Schoolyard  
Project  
Richmond, BC