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Teaching Healthy Eating Options For Young and Old

Sugar and Olives Looks to Expand

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Teaching cooking classes out of her Westport home, Jennifer Balin is the mother of four, a food lover and owner of Sugar and Olives.

Balin said she is "self-taught" when it came to learning how to cook, but she does have a bakery license. What brought about her starting cooking classes for children and adults was her children having play dates at her house, which eventually turned into cooking classes.

"I have four kids who love to cook and I was always cooking with them and their friends," said Balin. "I love food and so do my kids."

Even though her children love food, Balin said some of them were "extremely" picky eaters, so she had to find ways to help them breakout of their picky eating ways.

"I found that letting them explore food and experiment with cooking techniques broadened their diet," Balin said.

Currently Balin teaches cooking classes out of her Westport home. For the cooking classes she teaches to children, she is only allowed to have four children per class, which she said is a "huge plus." Each class is an hour and 45 minutes and is "extremely hands-on."

It costs \$50 for one class and \$180 for a series of four classes; there is also a one-time registration fee of \$20. When children register for the series of four classes, they get a "personalized" apron and recipe binder.

Classes are also themed by the month. For the month of October, its Halloween-themed where they make candy apples, apple cider and what Balin calls "pumpkin sushi." Pumpkin sushi is roasted pumpkin that's seasoned with brown sugar and oil and is coated in sushi rice, with the pumpkin located inside the sushi roll.

In November, they will be making "comfort foods" such as fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and turkey.

Sugar and Olives' food is whole grain and trans-fat free, according to its Web site.

"The whole idea of the business is to make kids and people aware of healthy choices," said Balin. "We use milk and eggs without antibiotics and educate people on

how you can put together a meal in a healthy way."

An example of this is, instead of baking cakes with butter, she uses olive oil. Balin said she spends a great deal of time developing recipes that children will love, but recipes that contain "fresh, wholesome ingredients" such as olive oil, wheat flour and vegetables. She said one of her favorite things to do is teach children how to cook.

"They ask different questions," Balin said. "They are interested and eager to learn. We sample every ingredient before we put it in the recipe, so they taste the whole process."

Balin also offers special "dietary needs classes" to children with special diets. For example, they make gluten-free meals for children who are allergic to yeast, and dairy free meals as well.

Sugar and Olives also does interactive cooking classes for children's birthday parties, where the birthday boy or girl chooses the menu and that menu is prepared by the children at the party. Children also receive goody bags, stock full of a personalized apron, candy and other foods that were made at the party. The cost for a Sugar and Olive birthday party is \$55 per child.

Sugar and Olives also offers cooking classes to adults where they learn how to make rosemary flatbread and olive tapenade. This class costs \$60. Another adult cooking class focuses on learning how to use the kitchen appliance, Cuisinart (which is used to chop-up food and kind of resembles a blender) to make dips and appetizers. This class costs \$50.

In addition to the cooking classes offered to children and adults, Sugar and Olives also provides instructional dinner parties, which Balin said are "very interesting and eclectic parties." Individuals invite guests and plan a dinner menu with Balin and then she and a few crew members do the food shopping, help individuals and their guests cook the meal and clean-up after the party ends.

Sugar and Olives also provides food products through its catering section, such as cakes and cup cakes. Cup cakes are \$3 each and a slice of cake costs between \$8 and \$12.

Balin said Sugar and Olives is an "environmentally-conscious company." All of the



Contributed photo

As the owner of Sugar and Olives, Jennifer Balin teaches cooking classes at home and at her clients' homes. She also caters and creates cakes like the one below.

packaging her products come in is recyclable and the utensils are made out of corn.

She is trying to "grow the business." Currently, for the catering section of Sugar and Olives, Balin rents out kitchen space at various Westport restaurants for large order meals. For example, she rented out kitchen space at the Westport Center for Senior Activities when she had to make 300 cookies for an event.

However, Balin plans on opening a commercial kitchen around the start of next year on the border of Norwalk and Westport, where she can make and sell food.

Balin also teaches "technique classes" about various food styles such as grilling and chilling as well as "cocktail parties 101" on Sunday's once a month, at Williams-Sonoma on Main Street in Westport. These classes are free and open to the public.

For more information about Sugar and Olives, visit www.sugarandolives.com

