

Q&A

with Benjamin Brown

By Callie Thomas

HERE'S SOME FOOD FOR THOUGHT: HOW DO YOU GET KIDS to learn about nutrition, try new foods, boost their learning skills and do it all in a creative and fun way? Resident Benjamin Brown, a.k.a. "Mr. B," has come up with just the right recipe for success. This Teach for America corps member, licensed school teacher and food-critiquing journalist has combined his expertise with his love for all things culinary and founded a program called First Grade Food Critics.

It's hard to imagine a six year old straying beyond food choices such as mac and cheese or peanut butter, let alone taking pen (or crayon) in hand to comment about their meal. Still, Brown has found a way to provide dining experiences for children that can be used as learning tools to advance their writing abilities and help them learn about new careers and eating healthy.

Perhaps Brown was willing to give it a try based on his adventurous spirit, which has led him across the globe to Panama to document a previously uninhabited island for future tourism and to teach English at a rural elementary school. He's also volunteered in the Israeli Defense Force, working on a tank base in the Negev Desert, minutes from the Gaza Strip. When he's not teaching in Clark County, he's busy earning his master's degree from UNLV and reviewing restaurants for Examiner.com. Brown relishes the opportunity to explore the Vegas dining scene and has reviewed more than 100 different eateries. He's also an avid fitness enthusiast and competes as an amateur track athlete while coaching a local high school team. Brown talks about his inspiration for First Grade Food Critics, future aspirations and the best thing he's ever eaten.

What spurred the idea of First Grade Food Critics?

"It came to me during the summer between my first and second year as a teacher. I spent that time in Panama, and teaching English at a rural elementary school showed me that my students in Vegas have luxuries kids across the world don't have. Las Vegas has incredible resources with its renowned hospitality industry and I knew there had to be a way to integrate those facets into tools for our city's children."

The students in First Grade Food Critics are in at risk schools?

"Yes, the vast majority of students qualify for free and reduced lunches. The families, many of them are maintenance staff, front desk workers and sanitation workers. These kids are being exposed to jobs that the families wouldn't otherwise be able to put them in touch with."

Tell us about some of the Food Critic events.

"My favorite event was our trip to the top of the Stratosphere tower. We were joined by a fifth grade class from another elementary school, a great opportunity for the older students to serve as mentors and for the program to expand. They reviewed Carvery 108, a gourmet deli, then went down to watch the teacher (me) take the SkyJump. An exhilarating experience and a fun way to freak the kids out! We also recently did a taste-test of two new menu items for the 2012 Summer Food Service Program (a federally funded program administered by Nevada's Department of Education providing free meals to children in low-income areas) at Springs Cafe at Springs Preserve for The Culinary Academy of Las Vegas, the largest SFSP sponsor in Nevada."

What are some of your aspirations?

"This program has taught me so much about management, expansion, customer satisfaction (even if the clients are six years old) toward the business side of journalism that I hope to use in the future. I also want to grow the program to become a national non-profit."

What is the best dish you've ever eaten?

"What a question for a food critic! Leaving Las Vegas out of this one, it would be a meat and cheese ravioli at a quaint trattoria in Florence, Italy. I have yet to experience anything close to that blissful dish."

