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DORCHESTER

# Serving comfort food for the soul

## On group's menu: mental health

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Steve Whalen, his sweater dusted in white flour, sang as he rolled out the gingerbread dough. "Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer!" he warbled cheerfully, pressing down on the small metal shapes, making

**'It makes my day when I come here. We all have something in common, which is good.'**

BRIDGET  
MULKERRIN  
*Fat Monday  
Cooking Group  
member*

Fat Monday Cooking Group, where nine men and women with mental disabilities meet every week to share meals and learn about nutrition and health.

They come from all walks of life to the Bailey Street Residential Program kitchen, where they chop, sauté, fry, and bake with the help of staffers from Vinfen, a local nonprofit mental health organization serving 3,500 adults and children. Some in the cooking group live in group homes, some alone or with family. Some are mentally retarded, while others battle psychoses, post-traumatic stress, or depression. One woman hears voices. She cooks anyway.

No one can tell she's struggling, said Cynthia Berman, a Dorchester-based Vinfen occupational therapist, who started the group almost three years ago.

Cooking together provides members some normalcy under challenging conditions — a way to meet and learn in a low-pressure environment, said Berman, who guides the cooks with the help of two staffers. "If you're shy, or if you have trouble being around people, you're doing something," she said. "It can be . . . part of a program that

little men and trees and stars, which he carefully scraped off the Formica counter and onto a cookie sheet. "Had a very shiny nose!"

His small group of co-chefs smiled over similar tasks: rolling, pressing, cutting, peeling, placing. It was all business at the



PHOTOS BY JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Cynthia Berman (left), an occupational therapist who started the Fat Monday Cooking Group three years ago, prepared holiday cookies with member Noreen Curtin last month.

helps them get back to normal things."

The cooks of Fat Monday, part of the Bay Cove Rehabilitative Support Program, are referred by social workers and therapists. Many stick around for more than a year, Berman said, probably because every Monday brings a new dish: tacos, meatloaf, burgers, lasagna, stir-fried chicken, fruit salad, vegetables. They focus on healthy foods; as they eat, Berman asks them to place ingredients on the food pyramid. Three of the



nine members are diabetic, so desserts like Thanksgiving pies and holiday cookies are made with artificial sweeteners, as well as sugar.

The cooks, who often take their recipes, skills, and leftovers home, have also visited a Waltham farm where they picked — and later cooked — fresh herbs and vegetables, Berman said. They also served as test cooks for a new Vinfen cookbook, "Tasty and Healthy!" now being used in a pilot study on mental-health patients and nutrition. The group made about a dozen of the recipes,

evaluating them for taste, clarity of directions, and ease, Berman said. Their photo even made the cover. /

When group members leave, it's for positive reasons, she said: They move, get a job, or go back to school.

Whalen, a tall 39-year-old with a ready smile, is a natural leader in the kitchen, offering instructions, suggestions, making up songs. But he wasn't always so confident, said Whalen, a Dorchester group-home resident. "I could cook the simple hotdogs and macaroni and cheese. I wouldn't have ventured out and tried meat loaf or anything like that. Now I'm adventurous!"

Linda Sanchez, 45, was also unsure when she joined the group. But she quickly taught everyone her favorite recipe and is now a kitchen whiz, Berman said. "When Linda came she said, 'I can't even make rice.' But Linda's got a mean meat loaf recipe."

Sanchez obliged, enthusiastically: "There's so many ways you can make meat loaf. There's no end to it. . . . You can use walnuts, if you want, raisins, or chestnuts, or bread crumbs." But now she can make other dishes, too. "I've learned how to fry things on the stove without burning myself or cutting myself. It's really been enjoyable," she said, laughing. "It's good to have people help me. If I did it myself, I'd be really nervous."

Bridget Mulkerrin, who lives with her sister in Dorchester, was already an accomplished cook when she joined the group. She makes dinner every night, she said, hearty fare, like pork chops and turkey burgers. "Nothing fancy. We watch our diet," she said.

For her, the group is social. "I'm disabled, I'm unemployed. . . . It's a place for me to go to," she said, with a smile. "It makes my day when I come here. We all have something in common, which is good."

Berman said she shares her clients' struggles. As a breast cancer survivor, she knows how illness and depression can overwhelm a person. She wants to create a place where folks can lose themselves in the comforting smells and tastes of delicious, healthy food. Life can't always be about conditions, symptoms, and medications, she said.

She recalls one man who introduced himself as "a schizophrenic." "I don't call myself cancer," she told him. "You are not your illness."