

Taking the jar out of baby food

By **STEPHANIE KANOWITZ**
Current Correspondent

Toast the barley. Check. Add fresh thyme and garlic. Check. Soften the mushrooms in the vegetable stock. Check. Mix it together and feed the baby. Check.

Wait. What?

Barley with mushrooms is just one of chef Ryan Morgan's recipes for homemade baby food, and he shared it with 40 parents and soon-to-be parents at a baby food cooking class last month.

With the crying, the sleepless nights and the diaper changes, it's a wonder parents get the formula temperature right, let alone make their own baby food. But Morgan told the crowd at Art and Soul restaurant that making the food at home doesn't take long, it saves money and, most importantly, it's healthier for the baby.

"You're talking about a little jar of baby food that can cost anywhere from 80 cents
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to \$1.60. What is in a 1-ounce jar is equivalent to half a carrot, which is going to cost you like 5 cents,

10 cents," he said. "But the biggest thing is the nutritional benefits that you're going to get."

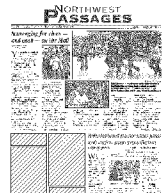
Morgan, a D.C. native who has worked at the Capitol Hill restaurant for over a year, has been making baby food for his nieces and nephews for years. But "when I found out my wife was pregnant," he said, "it was something that was really important to me to investigate a little bit more how to cook healthy and organically for my daughter," who is now 10 weeks old.

Through his research, Morgan found that parents shouldn't shy away from spices such as cayenne, cinnamon, fennel, ginger and turmeric in their babies' meals — just mind the quantities, he said.

"There's no reason why we can't use some of the same foods that we cook for ourselves on a day-to-day basis," said Morgan. "Garlic is great for children. A lot of people know what wonderful qualities garlic has for adults. Children are no different. We just need to watch how much we are giving them."

Morgan recommends getting creative with baby food starting when children are 6 months old and ready to branch out from milk, formula and rice cereal. To introduce a new food, try it over a period of three or four days to find out if the child has a taste for it, he said. The first time around, the baby might be distracted or disinterested in eating. By giving the food another shot in subsequent days, parents can get accurate feedback.

Also, "it's very, very difficult to tell what your child is going to be allergic to unless you spread it out throughout three or four days," Morgan said. "If you change it every day, it's going to be impossible to be able to tell which one is giving them bad bowel movements, which one is making them break out in hives."



A food's consistency can be a deal-breaker for babies. To get it just right, he recommends tools such as food processors, potato mashers and temperature spoons. Bacteria grow best in food with a temperature of 40 to 140 degrees, he said, so the spoons, which change color when hot, can help keep it out of the danger zone.

"The best way to cook food for a child is to steam it," Morgan said. "The reason for steaming is its indirect contact with the water. You lose a lot of vitamins, a lot of nutrients when you're boiling things.

"One of the best and most nutritious things that you can give to your child at 6 months is a roasted sweet potato," well-mashed and skinless, he added. "There's no salt added, there's no sugar added; it's naturally sweet. The first taste a baby has is sweet. They love sugar."

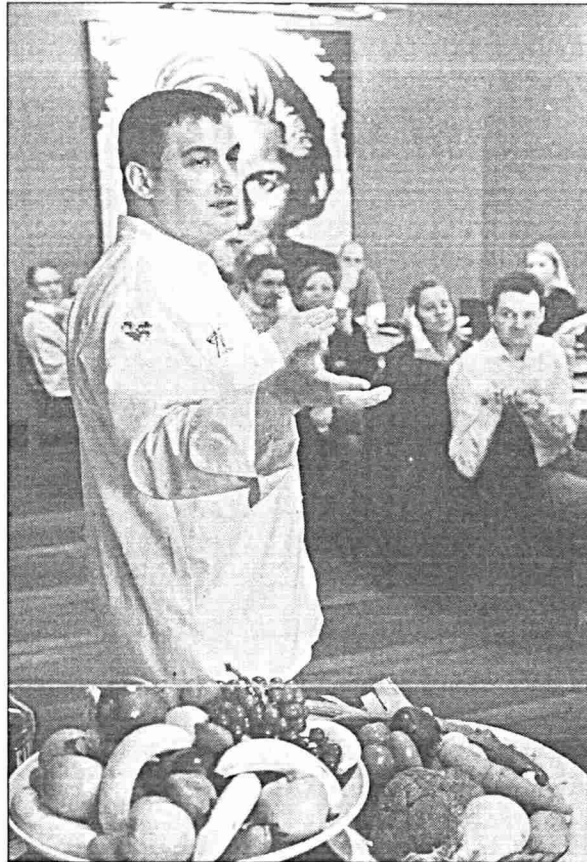
As for the time-crunch issue, "there's no reason why we can't freeze this stuff," Morgan said. He recommends storing the food in containers approved by NSF International, a non-profit focused on public health.

Those in the sold-out crowd had different reasons for attending the class. U Street resident

Brandon Thomas, who brought his 7-month-old son, said he and his wife already make their own baby food. "But we're pretty basic at it right now," he said. "We're curious to see what Chef Ryan has up his sleeve."

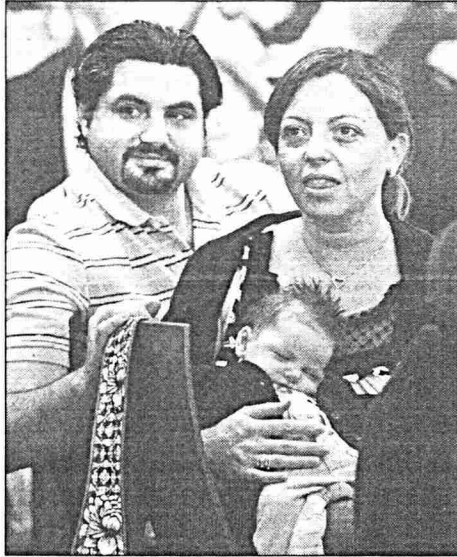
Beth Graves' 8-month-old, James, recently started eating rice cereal. "We're going to be moving up to other foods soon," she said. "We're interested to try to make some of our food at home. It's not like it's rocket science, but hey, there are some things that are better to do than others. Plus I thought it would be fun — a different kind of spin on a cooking class."

Whatever parents decide to feed their babies, they must take their own preferences out of it, said Morgan, who plans to offer the class again. "It's not important what we like or what we want to make. We have to take care of them. It's really important to pay attention to what their likes and dislikes are."



Bill Petros/The Current

Art and Soul chef Ryan Morgan extols the virtues of homemade baby food: He says it's cheaper, it doesn't take long, and it's much healthier for the baby.



Bill Petros/The Current

Parents watch as Art and Soul executive chef Ryan Morgan demonstrates how to make homemade baby food.

Chef Ryan Morgan shared with The Current his recipe for **barley with mushrooms** (for 9- to 11-month-olds).

Ingredients:

1/2 cup pearl barley
1 tablespoon unsalted butter
1 clove minced garlic
6 ounces finely chopped cremini mushrooms
1 cup vegetable stock
1/3 cup water
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon pepper
1/8 teaspoon thyme (fresh or dried)

Directions:

In a saucepan over medium heat, toast barley, stirring often until it starts to brown, about three minutes. Transfer to a mixing bowl.

In the same saucepan over medium heat, melt butter, add garlic and cook for about one minute. Stir in mushrooms and cook till they release their liquid, about three minutes. Stir in vegetable stock, 1/3 cup water, salt, pepper and thyme. Bring to a boil over high heat, reduce to medium-low and simmer until barley is tender, about 30 to 35 minutes.

Can be served whole, passed through a food mill or puréed in a food processor.

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