What do you get when you combine Emergency Food Network, Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, Washington State University, United Way of Pierce County, fresh produce, and hungry guests?

You get Colorful Cooking Made Easy, a series that is encouraging healthy eating at food pantries throughout the Pierce County. Like hit television programming that challenges chefs to make a meal using surprise ingredients, four agencies and great community volunteers have combined efforts to show food pantry guests innovative ways to use the fresh produce that is available at local food programs.

The concept of Colorful Cooking Made Easy is simple – highlight fresh produce and complement fruits and vegetables with shelf stable-food that is readily available at food pantries. Fresh produce is made available by Emergency Food Network’s Mother Earth Farm, local grocers and farmers, and individuals that donate extra food they grow at home. Spotlighting produce in these demos is a great way to show people new ways to prepare fresh, healthy meals.

Volunteers are recruited through the Hunger-Free Pierce County Coalition and are trained by the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department on food safety regulations. Volunteers partner with local food pantries to do on-site demos. Participating food pantries include St. Leo Food Connection, Eloise’s Cooking Pot, Orting Food Bank, Harvest House, and Nourish Pierce County’s Northwest Tacoma location.

As guests come in to pick up their groceries from the food pantry they are greeted with a tasty, healthy, sample that features produce that is available in the food pantry that day. Because the food is cooked on-site they also learn how to make the dish and are loaded up with the ingredients to make it at home.

What has the impact been?

Food pantries like Orting report that the featured food has become a popular choice with guests. Arugula was recently featured at Orting Food Bank, transformed into a delicious arugula pesto. Normally, guests are hesitant to take arugula due to its unfamiliarity and unique taste. Once guests got to taste the pesto, and see that it was something they could prepare for themselves at home, the arugula flew off the shelves! Other favorites have been potatoes with mustard greens and a sweet corn and black bean salsa.