



As part of its Family Meal Program, Ronald McDonald House invites locals to cook for people staying at the center while their kids receive treatment at Golisano Children's Hospital or other nearby facilities. Chef Adam Nardis and his wife, Erin, participate with two of their kids Adelyn and Evan.

## The Family That Cooks Together

*Coldwater Oyster Market's Adam and Erin Nardis teach their kids important life lessons while volunteering at Ronald McDonald House.*

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Photography: Dan Cutrona

"Cut only part of the stem off so it doesn't fall apart," chef Adam Nardis explains to two of his children as he demonstrates on a head of romaine. His tone is gentler and more patient than it would be on the line at Coldwater Oyster Market, his Fort Myers raw bar and restaurant that celebrates the prized seafood from icy waters. "Turn your wrist like that, and keep moving your fingers back each time you make a cut," he instructs. "You know from all the Caesar salad we eat that it's important the pieces fit on a fork."

Eleven-year-old Adelyn and 9-year-old Evan are not only learning culinary techniques and kitchen safety, they are getting a lesson on the importance of giving. Along with Adam and their mom, Erin, they are preparing lunch for the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Southwest Florida (RMHC) in Fort Myers as part of the volunteer Family Meal Program, which allows

individuals to sign up to cook free meals for families with kids (or high-risk expecting mothers) receiving care at nearby healthcare facilities. "We've explained to the kids that a hot meal is not a daily option for many people across the globe," Adam says. "Never take it for granted. Sharing food and time is the absolute least we can do."

The family is no stranger to the idea of fostering connection through food. Adam started with stints as an executive chef at M Waterfront Bistro and Crave Culinaire, before making the leap into restaurant co-ownership with the buzzy Seventh South Craft Food + Drink in Old Naples. Two years ago, Adam and Erin opened Coldwater Oyster Market in Fort Myers, in part to be closer to their home in Estero and to Three Oaks Elementary School and Evangelical Christian School, where the kids are enrolled. Adelyn, Evan and their siblings, 7-year-old Caleb





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and 5-year-old Wyatt, often work with their parents at the restaurant, bussing tables and acting as taste-testers. "We are both extremely high effort. Our parenting philosophies fall very much in line with that, and we ask the same from our children," Adam says. "Evan is very inquisitive. He wants to know the 'why' behind everything. Adelyn sees what needs to be done. If people come in the door, she's there to seat them."

Since becoming part of the Fort Myers community, the family has made a concerted effort to get involved. Most recently, Coldwater Oyster Market hosted a fundraiser for Hurricane Ian relief, opening the restaurant's garage

door, shucking oysters and staging live music for about 500 people.

Today, the Nardises are preparing lunch for families occupying the 12 rooms at RMHC, many of whom have sick children at Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida. "We have four kids; it really tugs at you," Erin says. Volunteers for the Family Meal Program sign up online, design the menu for RMHC staff approval, buy the groceries, and bring the ingredients to prepare the meal in the house's fully-stocked kitchen. The space sports the McDonald's color scheme, two-stovetop ovens, two refrigerators

and two, large marble countertops.

"There's not ever going to be a perfect situation where all the families sit down and eat together," Amy Velez, director of marketing and creative design, says. "Whatever is left over gets wrapped up for the shared family fridge."

Participating chefs-for-a-day range from corporate and service groups to families, who then clean up afterward. The goal is to have a warm dinner for the families every night. As befits their experience, the Nardises opt to go gourmet for their meal. The foursome prepares lobster- and ricotta-stuffed tortellini

with garlicky roasted tomato sauce and spinach, a classic Caesar salad and cheesecake served with fresh berry sauce. The kids are eager to help with prep, finding suitable servingware and garnishing the dishes, especially when it comes time to plop plump berries atop slices of cheesecake. "Cooking with your kids is an excellent opportunity to spend quality time together," Adam says. "There are frequent teaching moments, and teaching your children to cook is something they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Your recipes, techniques and stories will be passed on for generations to come. Few things in life check that many boxes." 

