

***Secrets of Salsa***  
**Anderson Valley Adult School**

Anderson Valley is a small, rural agricultural community in Mendocino County whose demographics reflect one of the largest immigration movements in history. In the last twenty-five years, the Mexican immigrant population has risen from almost non-existent to nearly seventy percent. The EL Civics grant at Anderson Valley Adult School has been a key factor in building community assets during the last four years, promoting projects that enhance the two-way assimilation of cultural values.



During the 2000-01 school year, the women in the morning multi-level ESL class created *Secrets of Salsa*. The cookbook contained recipes that had been family traditions, but that no one had written down — a link to good times past. The cookbook became an instant success and took on a life of its own. Even native English-speaking community members joined the effort by volunteering to do artwork, computer work, and photography.

*Secrets of Salsa* was published, and a demand for salsa-tasting events and book signings arose, creating new forces to shape the curriculum. Driven by the students' and teachers' interests and a passion for producing the cookbook, the curriculum expanded to include a whole range of self-empowering activities centered on conflict resolution and family issues. It incorporated skills such as scheduling, arranging transportation, obtaining the support of family members to go out into the larger community, and talking with the media. Leadership skills among the "Salsitas," as the women called themselves, slowly emerged. As their teachers accompanied the students to the post office, bank, or store to practice English in context **outside** the classroom, the women gained enough confidence to go out into the community by themselves and use English; they felt understood and respected.



During the 2004-05 school year, two local documentary filmmakers were doing literacy volunteer work in the morning ESL/EL Civics classes. They realized the potential for a film that



featured the empowerment of the women and the bridges being built in the community. The film would also help the school financially and might inspire other community projects. Thus, the film *Sharing Secrets of Salsa: Mixing English with Community Spirit* was born. A majority of the women who had contributed recipes and worked on the salsa events also participated in interviews for the documentary film.

After four years of follow-up EL Civics units, the women are making and setting goals for themselves. In addition to the ongoing salsa cookbook project, and

*2005-06 EL Civics: Making a Difference in the Community Awards*

in conjunction with the adult school and Even Start, they now form the centerpiece of a quilt-making and storytelling project. Their leadership skills continue to expand as they organize a cooperative to market and sell their incredible quilts (see [loshilosdelavida.blogspot.com](http://loshilosdelavida.blogspot.com)). One student organized a successful march on May 1, 2006, to support immigrant rights. More than



250 English and Spanish speakers participated. Some of the women have made presentations to teachers at educational conferences. Several “Salsitas” have given cooking classes, including one in which they donated the proceeds toward the purchase of much needed ESL textbooks. Those students who regularly attended classes have had very high rates of success, not only in improving their English, but also in participating in civic events, getting their citizenship, passing the GED, and transitioning to job training or college classes.

Cooking and eating are universal cross-cultural activities. *Secrets of Salsa* has helped the students and the community adapt to each other’s cultures in a creative way!