



THE COASTAL CHEF

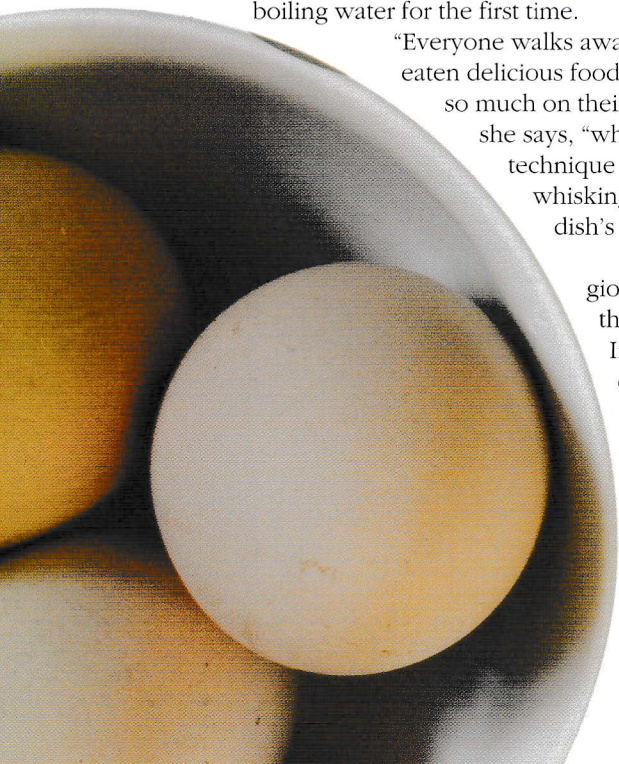
CULTIVATING THE CULINARY INSTINCT

Having a good time learning to cook well

BY EMILY CAHILL

Cold, dark winter days are infinitely better when spent in warm, inviting spaces—namely, the kitchen. As the frosty season persists well beyond the holidays, the joys of cooking, baking, and dining lend comfort to soften winter's chill. Throughout Connecticut, restaurants and cooking schools alike have become destinations for cultivating culinary hobbies and refining skills. Both **The Fig Cooking School** and **Barcelona Restaurant** take the pretense out of cooking by making gourmet recipes accessible for students of all levels. Bolstered by a supportive atmosphere led by brilliant chefs, students are brought together through the universal language of food.

THE FIG COOKING SCHOOL



Since 2009, The Fig Cooking School in Hamden has inspired cooks of all backgrounds and experience levels to come together in the kitchen. With founder and chef Heide Lang at the helm, the school's hands-on classes and demos are designed for all students, regardless of experience. Driven by the motto "find your inner gourmet," Lang is a firm believer that the best way to bring people together is over a good meal.

"I wanted to create a warm, inviting environment where people could make food that wouldn't take them two days," she says. Students thrive in her supportive setting regardless of skill level. Classes include experienced chefs and caterers along with students boiling water for the first time.

"Everyone walks away not only having eaten delicious food, but having learned so much on their particular level," she says, "whether that's a basic technique like searing or whisking, or honing in on a dish's complex spices."

Despite her prestigious credentials from the French Culinary Institute, Lang doesn't expect formality with her students. "I don't wear a chef hat, I don't like to wear an apron, and I don't like being thought

of as a chef," she says. "I'm more interested in spreading the gospel of great food and sharing that with others."

Contrary to how other cooking schools operate, Lang says, "Our classes are not top down, and I don't see myself as the authority figure. I'm the one guiding and instructing you but it's done with a lot of humor."

Resulting from The Fig School's inviting approach, organic community building happens effortlessly in the kitchen classroom. "We love doing workplace teambuilding events, since they bring people from departments together who might have never talked to each other," says Lang. "Now they're peeling ingredients together and chopping and sautéing and talking about things they wouldn't talk about at work."

Since starting more than six years ago, The Fig School has offered an impressive selection of classes ranging from basic culinary techniques to sessions strongly focused on global cuisine. The school's Spice Market series bridges cultures by introducing students to recipes from Morocco, Jerusalem, and other international culinary epicenters.

Dinner party-themed classes also continue to be some of the school's most popular sessions, especially the multi-course French Bistro dinner. In addition to the tried and true classes, Lang is constantly developing creative themes to align with food trends and seasonal ingredients.

"Classes are very seasonal," she says. "We do a lot of holiday classes in the winter, but in the spring we start moving into farmers' market-inspired classes, fresh salads and much lighter fare."

While cooking schools continue to introduce students to local ingredients, culinary techniques, and recipes throughout the world, some of Connecticut's top restaurants have begun offering similar classes to their loyal customers.



BARCELONA RESTAURANT

Known for sophisticated Spanish tapas and an expertly curated wine list, Barcelona Restaurant adds accessibility to their exquisite recipes through a robust calendar of cooking classes. With four locations in Fairfield County alone, the restaurant group began offering classes to their customers eight years ago. The session themes continue to expand, with recent offerings including Thanksgiving dishes, homemade pasta, and a popular cocktail classroom series.

While class topics go well beyond the restaurant's menu offerings, their classic Paella 101 session continues to be a popular choice. "I try to make everything accessible," says chef Darren Carbone of Barcelona in Stamford. "In some cases, people find cooking classes intimidating, and that doesn't need to be the case."

In Carbone's paella course, he demonstrates the steps of creating the authentic one-pan dish while educating students about the recipe's cultural significance to Spanish cuisine. "It's a really interactive environment that pairs knowledge with instruction," he says. Regardless of theme, the sessions combine chef demos with hands-on components to allow guests to learn from the experts while practicing technique that matches their own skill level.

Whether a class focuses on traditional Spanish cuisine, a series of winter-inspired soups, or roasting a whole pig, Carbone brings his own unique cooking and teaching approach to the classes.

"Every chef in every restaurant is encouraged to explore their own style," says Adeline Crites Moore, Marketing Coordinator for Barteca Restaurant Group. "There's no set menu in any restaurant and same goes for the cooking classes. The chefs all bring their own specialties—no one is dictating what gets taught. Each chef is encouraged to come up with their own ideas, and that's a cornerstone to our success."

Looking ahead to the first few months of 2016, Carbone says, "I'm very seasonally oriented, so we'll try to focus a class on braising and one on winter vegetables. We do a really good job at supporting local but it's always a challenge in the winter. When you're saying 'I don't want to see another root vegetable,' we try to brighten up the flavors and get people excited again." ●

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