

Now They're Cooking

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DURHAM -- Joel Goldfarb, owner of Chez Bay Gourmet Cooking School, said, "Since Adam and Eve met, somebody had to go and whip up something to eat."

The biblical parents of humanity had to figure it out themselves; they didn't have cooking schools.

But Durham and Chapel Hill are home to a small but growing number of cooking schools, where even the most unskilled home cooks can learn from experienced chefs. The schools range from the demonstration-oriented and businesses that are extension of the chef's home. Many of the schools listed below will customize classes for your taste and time preferences.

Chez Bay Gourmet

It's a crisp November night, and inside Chez Bay Gourmet Cooking School, there's a bustle of activity that raises the airy main room's temperature -- even more than its stoves. Chez Bay Gourmet founder-owner Joel Goldfarb, who attended Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, floats around the room. Tonight is the fourth and final class of his "Beyond Basics" cooking series, for the home cook who has already mastered the fundamentals. Chez Bay also offers "casual classes" -- only several hours -- on some specialty: Greek, Indian, or Mexican cuisines, vegetarian fare, or holiday dishes. Most of these students have already "passed" Chez Bay's basics series. That four-day series teaches different cooking methods, culinary terms and how to outfit your kitchen -- as it also teaches students how to make recipes like mushroom risotto.

"My recipes were developed to all be teaching recipes," said Goldfarb, who opened the business in early 2002. For the basics class, "they are about teaching technique -- like poaching, frying. One part of the class, every recipe will cover at least two stove-top techniques. It's not about whether the cookbook says to cook three to four minutes. You should know how to tell if the onion is cooked."

Once participants complete the basic series, they can move to the "Beyond Basics" intermediate set of classes, which focuses on how to develop a menu.

Tonight is also "Cook's Choice," where students get to make a dish of their own selection. The ambitious menu includes an aromatic vegetable tagine, a seafood celeriac bisque, and Cornish game hens stuffed with compote.

A dry-erase board details the duties and a timeline: who's making what, how long the preparation and plating should take.

Now, it's 8 p.m., and most of the students are cooking or waiting for oven space. Larry Phipps, a Raleigh consultant, is carefully "pleating" the dough corners of his balsamic onion pastry cups. He calls the process "the Goldfarb fold." Randy McGregor, a database developer from Durham, is minding his purée of celeriac root, which will become the base for bisque with monkfish.

Goldfarb stops behind Adrienne Grant, who is slowly stirring a creamy solution of milk, butter and flour at one of Chez Bay's three cooking stations. The thick liquid is the beginnings of Grant's project: a Clementine soufflé with mango and kiwi compote.

Goldfarb directs Grant, a database developer, on how to pour and fold the sauce in egg whites.

"Hopefully, this will turn out OK," said Grant. "This is the first time I've made soufflé."

But this is Grant's second series with Goldfarb, and she's comfortable with her cooking ability.

"Before I started this," she said, "I was afraid of phyllo dough. Now I have people at work requesting my spanikopita [a Greek dish with layers of the delicate pastry]." The point of cooking classes, Goldfarb said, is making home cooks confident enough that they can feed their families, entertain or just experiment.

In this more advanced class, he has taught students how to plan a meal and how to analyze cookbook recipes to find the best one.

Randy McGregor will find that handy in his own kitchen. "Now that I've taken the class," he said, "I look more in my cookbook. The recipes aren't intimidating anymore."-- How to pick the right place

All cooking schools are not created equal. There are differences in approach, teaching style and equipment.

The key to choosing a cooking school is, however, determining what you want from the experience.

The first thing you should do is visit the school. Talk to the owner, chef or instructor about his or her philosophy of teaching.

Here are some questions you should ask yourself.

-- Am I comfortable watching someone else do most of the work in a demonstration class, or do I want to try things myself?

-- Do I learn better in small or large classes? (This question is related to the first one; larger classes tend to be demonstrations.)

-- How well do I work in groups?

-- How much do I already know about cooking techniques, like sautéing, poaching or how to cook pasta? Could I use a class on these skills or a refresher course? Often, talking with the school staff will help you figure this out.

-- Do I want to learn how to use specific cookware or equipment?

-- Am I taking a cooking class because I want to cook for my family on a regular basis, because I want to entertain friends or both?

-- Do I want to learn a particular dish or type of cuisine?

-- Are there methods or dishes that give me problems or I've always wanted to try?

-- Do I want a quick class that lasts a couple of hours or a series?