

Concocting a recipe for team unity

by Dale Gibson, Triangle Business Journal
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There I was on a Friday morning at 11, chopping parsley in Durham. What would the boss think? No fear. The boss was there as well, chopping mushrooms and onions. Point of fact, the TBJ office was empty Friday morning. Thank goodness for voice mail and e-mail.

We were instructed not to be late for work on that day. At 8:15 a.m., we were to leave the office for a secret destination. Our publisher had something up her sleeve. This was mandatory - only those who'd previously scheduled vacation were exempt.

All hands, save the two on vacation, car-pooled the 35 or so miles to Durham - braving the perils of the seemingly endless work on Interstate 85. When we pulled into the parking lot of our destination, dread spread over many a face: The first sign we saw was for a karate studio. Please, not that.

Next door was Chez Bay Gourmet, which we took to be a cooking school. Clearly, our publisher had figured out the way to build team spirit with the TBJ crowd is through their stomachs.

We were greeted by Chef Joel, aka Joel Goldfarb, who opened the school off Guess Road two years ago. He and Chef Mel, aka Melanie Wanders, would be our guides through our half-day cooking experience.

Chef Joel told us we'd be preparing a full menu. From scratch, we would make the dough for homemade pasta and pizza. On the menu were the pizzas with arrabbiata sauce, baked clams, hummus with pita chips, kebabs, Moroccan chicken rollups, spinach stuffed eggs, chickpea and tuna salad in lettuce cups, banana and chocolate empanadas and a fruit platter.

As I scanned the room, I really started to get worried about the "cooks" in my midst. I won't mention names, but in the room was a co-worker whose diet - as far as I can tell - consists of Nabs and coffee.

Just across the table was a colleague who eats peanuts for lunch.

A group that parades itself under the banner of its own nickname uses a delivery service to order pizza with a taste that's barely distinguishable from the box it comes in.

Thank goodness, the fellow who calls two Hardee's hot dogs a gourmet lunch was on vacation.

Chef Joel assured us the meal would turn out fine. So off we go, daunting menu and detailed recipes in hand - to do battle with chicken breasts, clams, garlic, parsley, eggs, flour and all manner of ingredients - some of which I'd never heard of.

We started with the eggs, flour, water and yeast, with one group making pizza dough while the other pounded out dough that was to be our pasta. The dough made and set aside to rise or stiffen, we were divided into groups of four or five to prepare the main dishes.

Hands that normally don't get three inches from a keyboard all day were slicing, dicing and chopping. I had to hustle around the room in search of parsley, while someone else was in pursuit of a lemon.

Out of such chaos, the team got the job done - and that was the point. This was not a lesson in cooking. It was a lesson in how to work as a team toward a common goal. And the reward was worth the work. We actually were able to eat what we cooked - and some of it was very good.

It was just the kind of result Chef Joel had in mind when he began offering cooking classes as a way for companies to teach teamwork. Besides TBJ, his corporate client list includes GlaxoSmithKline, NBC 17, PPD and Tekelec, among others.

Chez Bay, which has the motto, "teaching the Carolinas to cook, one chef at a time," also offers classes - with titles such as "Asian Trinity" and "Bavarian Biergarten" - that individuals can sign up for.

A summer kids camp is tailored for youngsters from 7 to 17. With the help of volunteers, Chef Joel has turned his kitchen over to Special Olympians.

Though he began his career as an accountant, Chef Joel never wavered far from his love of cooking - not surprising, given that he hails from the culinary Mecca of San Francisco. In that gorgeous city, he owned a restaurant on Lombard Street before deciding to start a cooking school.

So how did he end up in the Triangle? The answer: Chef Joel's story is like thousands of people who have moved here for opportunity.

Realizing that San Francisco had plenty of restaurants and more than enough cooking schools, he scouted the nation for a market with a population of about 1 million and solid demographics.

He believes he's made the right choice. At least for one day, I know his business was cooking.