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Dunedin cooking school refines daily fare

At La Maison Gourmet, a child might prepare berry beignets. An adult might whip up savory sweet potatoes with bourbon and blue cheese.

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DUNEDIN - There is life beyond frozen meals, takeout food and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

La Maison Gourmet in downtown Dunedin is determined to prove that. The storefront cooking and catering center just finished a nine-part series of hands-on Monday night classes called "Culinary Skills & Techniques Course," in which four women and one man sliced, diced and sauteed their way to greater culinary awareness.

La Maison Gourmet's classes are open to students ranging from rank amateurs to the more advanced, says chef John Lewis, owner of La Maison Gourmet.

"We have people who have trouble boiling water to those who want to know more," Lewis said.

Each class focused on a different aspect of cooking. On a recent Monday night, it was side dishes, vegetables and starch. Camille Caudle, a La Maison chef and a graduate of Johnson & Wales Culinary School, guided the culinary skills class as they whipped up savory sweet potatoes mashed with bourbon and blue cheese, orange barley salad with roasted pecans and Craisins, and pan-fried polenta.

Sweet potatoes exude more flavor if baked instead of boiled before mashing, and Craisins are sun-dried cranberries, Caudle told the class.

Children also had a chance to test their cooking skills under Caudle's tutelage at the restaurant's seventh annual "Summer Camp in the Kitchen," a series of eight one-week sessions for young chefs ages 8 to 16. They prepared dishes such as Cajun burgers, fresh berry beignets with maple syrup, shrimp remoulade, almond crusted shrimp with apricot mustard, vegetarian egg rolls and bacon cheddar mashed potatoes.

At camp's end, children prepared a graduation lunch for parents. "My child doesn't usually eat that," Caudle recalled one mother saying.

Hannah Barnes of Dunedin signed up for La Maison Gourmet's culinary skills class because her young daughter attended the summer camp series.

"I'm trying to touch up my skills and get better at that," she said.

Barnes and her classmates paid \$630 each to move beyond the microwave's "time cook" function.

Natalie Pack of Palm Harbor said she cooks for fun. "I'm into computers and accounting so it's fun to come here and do something in an environment that's forgiving," she said.

Forgiveness, fun and organization are keys to good home cooking, Lewis said. Students are first taught a basic technique, the mise en place, or everything-in-its-place, rule of food preparation. Recipes are read thoroughly and all ingredients are chopped and measured into tiny bowls before burners are fired.

"The reason it's so important is that once you start the cooking process, you have everything there necessary to complete the recipe," Lewis said. "I think it's important for any cook, especially true in commercial kitchens, but invaluable a technique, if you will, for the home cook as well."

Improving one's cooking skills also means eating habits change, class members said. Kelly Sutton of Clearwater said she cooks with her husband and likes to have control over what goes into the food.

La Maison Gourmet also offers "Heart Smart Cookery" with Lewis, who said he has dropped 50 pounds over the past year. While the restaurant offers Atkins and South Beach Diet-related classes, Lewis promotes his own eat-less-exercise-more mode of nutrition.

The restaurant also offers classes on grilling, dessert and vegetarian cuisine.

Lewis said chef Julia Child, who died this month, emphasized the importance of home cooking. Child, he said, made cooking fun.

"She was the first television chef that related to the average American cook," Lewis said.

Nan Jensen, a registered dietitian with the Pinellas County Cooperative Extension, monitors changes in cooking and eating habits. Families and single folks, young or senior, want to minimize time in the kitchen, Jensen said.

"Whatever we do needs to be quick and easy," she said. "It can still involve an amount of preparation but needs to be minimal."

She joined Lewis in promoting prebagged salads, diced vegetables and cut-up fruits, easily found in supermarkets, but cautioned that those convenience items can raise grocery bills.

Jensen, who conducts food demonstration courses across Pinellas County, said cooking classes can make food preparation less of a chore.

"Food preparation at home doesn't have to be all time-consuming, and in many cases can be healthier - rather than fast food and restaurants," she said. "We need to find some ways to reach those families and individuals with fast-food ideas that are healthy. They can be one and the same."

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