

Across the county wannabe chefs are chopping and dicing with the experts

BY CARLI TEPROFF

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At Casa Toscana in Miami, a group of women chopped, diced and mixed together a three-course Italian meal that included stuffed eggplant rolls, fresh pasta, pan-seared corvina puttanesca and a rosemary and lemon zest ricotta tart.

At Two Chefs in South Miami, a group of men and women worked at stations that included making mozzarella cheese to create a feast of cauliflower fritters, green tomato frittata and grilled cheese sandwiches for the group.

And across town at Don Ignacio's cooking school in Doral, a group of novice chefs learned how to cook sticky rice, cut fish and prepare colorful sushi rolls.

Restaurants and cooking schools throughout South Florida are opening up their kitchens to give wannabe cooks a chance to tackle everything from fancy drinks to Indian meals. National chains like Publix, Bloomingdales and Macy's also offer demonstrations and recipe ideas, and some chefs are putting on classes at people's homes and kitchen appliance stores.

``Cooking is really big right now," said Sandra Stefani, chef owner of Casa Toscana, 7001 Biscayne Blvd. ``It's a great way to show people what really goes on in the kitchen."

With a recession inspiring more people to cook at home, plus the popularity of foodie reality shows like *Top Chef*, local restaurant owners and chefs say do-it-yourself cooking classes are becoming more popular.

``Chefs are like rock stars now," said Jan Jorgensen, chef-owner of Two Chefs, 8287 S. Dixie Hwy. ``Everyone wants to be a chef."

Miami resident Oweny Rosales has been a Two Chefs Restaurant client for the past five years, and she likes its food so much that she started recreating the European-inspired menu at home.

``This is probably my 10th class," said Rosales, 23, at a Sept. 12 class, where

restaurant chef Jose Guerrero teaches classes with different themes. "One of the reasons I keep coming back is their desserts, and I like to try doing them at home."

Guerrero, 26, teaches a class every Saturday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

He starts his class by handing out the to-do list of the day: the menu. Each class has a maximum of 10 students, and each one is assigned a different role.

With aprons and kitchen towels in hand, all the chefs-for-a-day settle into their stations.

"I got the most important part of the meal," said Weston resident George Cantafio, who was in charge of the tiramisu during the Italian-themed class. As each student follows the recipe instructions created by Guerrero, he walks around the kitchen making sure everyone is learning not only the recipe, but the proper way of chopping, handling cooking equipment and keeping their stations clean.

"I like to satisfy people and make sure everybody is happy and having fun," he said. "We teach them a lot of things, like the importance of a sharpened knife, to be creative, and to know that presentation is the most important at the end."

At Casa Toscana, Stefani often teaches classes for parties or other occasions.

At a recent surprise party for Amy Vogel, a Miami resident, Vogel and her friends worked with Stefani to create an elaborate lunch.

"All of us love food, so this the perfect thing to do," said Vogel, after she diced parsley and rosemary. Several of the women who took Stefani's class, including Roseann Lovell, said they enjoyed taking cooking classes because they get more for their money.

"You get to learn how to cook and you get to eat it, too," Lovell said.

In addition to restaurants opening their kitchens for classes, some chefs teach classes at their homes or someone else's. They also teach classes at kitchenware stores like La Cuisine Gourmet in Coral Gables.

La Diva Cucina, also known as Laura Lafata, teaches classes at the appliance store, offering up a twist on cocktails and appetizers.

"I teach people how they can throw their own dinner party," she said. Other cooks like Eleanor Hoh and Ayesha D'Mello offer their expertise on ethnic dishes. Hoh uses fresh vegetables and meats to show people how to whip up

a healthy, Asian-inspired meal with a wok, including pineapple fried rice.

D'Mello often visits homes teaching adults and children about Indian spices, including tumeric and cumin.

“A lot of times, it is just easier to go out and get something, but I try to show people it can be just as easy to make it yourself,” D'Mello said.

Miami Herald writer Pamela Duque contributed to this report.

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