

North Bay Bohemian

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Cooking Up a Getaway

Learn, taste, relax and luxuriate in North Bay culinary classes

By Patricia Lynn Henley

After quickly conferring, Michelle Burton and Bobbie Warner hurry to take their places in the area set up to prepare green papaya salad with glazed beef. With only a few ingredients, they figure this will be quick and easy to make, leaving them plenty of time to observe their fellow students creating a wide range of exotic dishes. But as they peruse the written directions, the two women start laughing heartily.

"Our strategy was so bad," Burton says, still chuckling. "The salad is delicious, but it's very labor-intensive [and time-consuming]."

These friends met 40 years ago, when their daughters were in the same nursery school. Now Burton lives in Glen Ellen and Werner resides in Menlo Park. As a way of relaxing together, they're two of 20 amateur cooks spending a Saturday morning at **Ramekins Sonoma Valley Culinary School**, getting an introduction to Vietnamese cooking from chef Joyce Jue.

"We like ethnic food and we like variety," Werner says.

"And we like to try new things," Burton adds.

They're part of a growing number of people taking culinary classes just for the fun of it, and the bountiful North Bay offers a healthy crop of both local produce and recreational cooking schools. Whether a course lasts a few hours or all week long, is a hands-on experience or demonstration-only, it's possible to partake of this region's gourmet abundance while having a blast and learning a thing or two in the process.

Jean Foley and her sister Kathy Puryear live a mile apart in Mountain View. The two cook together all the time--it's their favorite hobby, Foley says--and they made the trip north just to attend the Vietnamese cooking class. With a broad smile on her face, Foley gestures at the bright and airy Ramekins kitchen, with its wide rows of high tables for hands-on work by students and professional demonstration area complete with a large reflecting mirror, cameras and four big television screens providing close-ups of every move made by chef Jue.

"It's so much like being on a Food Network show," Foley explains happily. "I love the Food Network, and this is like living it."

The class begins with kitchen manager Susan Prue tt giving a few safety tips. Then Chef Jue gives an easy-to-understand explanation of Vietnamese cuisine and ingredients as well as a couple of quick kitchen tips.

"Read the recipe before you start," Jue advises with a laugh. "It's probably the most important thing that people forget to do."

She reviews each of the dishes on the morning's menu, demonstrating various techniques. Then it's time for the 20 students to choose a spot at one of the six preparation areas. Most of the ingredients have been chopped or otherwise prepped ahead of time, but

there's still a lot to do. Along with Burton's and Werner's green papaya salad, students are also whipping up sweet potato and shrimp fritters; Vietnamese sweet-sour dipping sauce; fresh pork and prawn summer rolls with noodles and fresh herbs wrapped in rice vermicelli; stir-fried lemongrass chicken curry with potato; fish braised in a clay pot with caramel sauce; and steamed rice.

The room's abuzz with excited voices and laughter as the participants get to work. The wide range of kitchen skills quickly becomes evident. Jue and the assistants are everywhere, giving advice and lending a hand when needed. Nearby, Burton and Werner use a specially designed grater to methodically thunk out thin strips of green papaya and carrots in a large mound. After finishing their salad, they still have a bit of time to wander around the room, watching other students work and taking their turn assembling a few of the summer rolls.

When everything is completed, the high work benches are lowered and pushed together to make a large dining table. Chairs are slid into place, so the students and Jue can gather together for the meal. After admiring their handiwork spread out appetizingly on a nearby counter, everyone is served a plate of food by the assistants, and talk slows momentarily while the classmates assess their results. Perfect. Delicious. And great fun.

Jue's class is quite popular; Vietnamese cuisine is "the new Chinese," says cooking-school general manager Lisa Lavagetto. However, it's just one of a wide range of courses. Founded in 1998, Ramekins was named Avocational Cooking School of the Year in 2005 by the International Association of Culinary Professionals. The class schedule for August includes Thai grilling, a Sonoma-style summer feast, flamin' chicken, chilies, grilled breads, easy summer sauces, Sunday brunches, a winemaker dinner demo and more. Prices range from \$45 to \$125, with most in the \$80 to \$85 range.

For those interested in a complete getaway, the school also has a luxurious six-room bed and breakfast, located upstairs and decorated in a relaxed but upscale Mediterranean style.

*Ramekins Sonoma Valley Culinary School, 450 W. Spain St., Sonoma. 707.933.0450.
www.ramekins.com.*

Diversity is the keyword for **Relish Culinary School** in Healdsburg, both in the type of classes offered and in where they're held. Founded by Donna del Rey to share her passion for food and wine, Relish is currently a roving cooking school, using a distinctive white 1952 Chevy panel truck to transport everything needed for both demo and hands-on cooking classes at wineries, restaurants and private homes in and around Healdsburg. Relish features local chefs, local foods, local wines and a variety of cuisines incorporating the North Bay's wide range of organic and seasonal ingredients. An Aug. 4 peach presentation by chef John Ash is already sold-out, but other courses on the calendar include a partially hands-on artisan food tour, a hands-on session at Santi Restaurant in Geyserville, cowboy cooking done wine country-style, Thai appetizers, the tantalizing tastes of heirloom tomatoes and more.

Prices vary but average around \$65 to \$85. The company plans to open its own location by the end of this year, but will continue to offer its "roving" sessions as well.

*Relish Culinary School, PO Box 933, Healdsburg, CA, 95448. 707.431.9999.
www.relishculinary.com.*

Learn the tantalizing secrets of traditional and modern Italian cooking at Viva--The Culinary Institute of Florence and Italian Cultural Center in Sebastopol. For the last 10 years its parent company, Study Abroad Italy, has set up a network of six partner schools in Florence, Rome, Milan and Sicily. Viva is a branch site of Apicius--The Culinary Institute of Florence. The result is Italian chefs sharing their love for their native cuisine in Viva's intimate 12-seat demonstration kitchen in Sebastopol.

Apicius chef Marcella Ansaldo will be teaching in August and September, presenting classes on seafood, al fresco dining, cuisine from the Lazio region of Italy and traditional Italian fare. Flying in at the end of September will be Apicius chef Andrea Trapani. He'll teach classes in desserts, fresh pasta, culinary delights from Italy's Liguria region and pizza-making the Italian way. The average fee is \$65 for a three-hour demonstration class with multicourse meal; reservations are strongly recommended

Viva, 7160 Keating Ave., Sebastopol. 707.824.9913. www.studyabroaditaly.com/viva.

The emphasis is on scrumptious health at the **Patty James Cooking School and Nutrition Center** in Sebastopol. "People are pleasantly surprised when they find out you can eat beautiful and delicious food that's organic," James says. "I take basic recipes and tweak them to be healthier." She always explains why she picks certain ingredients, "so people can understand and make permanent changes" in their cooking styles. A trained nutritionist as well as a dedicated chef, James presents a series of ongoing classes, some aimed at adults and others geared for youngsters.

"We have a blast," James says of her students. "This is my passion, and I guess it shows." She provides an all-organic approach to the cuisines of India, Japan, Italy, Spain, Mexico, China and France, as well as sinfully delicious healthy desserts, plus basic cooking skills, including menu planning and shopping. People can also bring a favorite recipe to class and James will show them how to make it more nutritious but still tasty. Class fees range from \$45 to \$90; she also offers a "Learn to Cook" weeklong class for 10 people for \$550 a person.

Patty James Cooking School and Nutrition Center, 330 S. Main St., Sebastopol. 707.829.6707. www.pattyjames.com.

Small classes of eight to 12 students are the rule at Gourmet Retreats at **CasaLana** in Calistoga. These sessions are "truly hands-on" says owner Lana Richardson, because students get lots of one-on-one instruction and are involved in every phase of preparing the food, including prepping all the ingredients. "It's a very intimate, personal style of instruction," Richardson explains. "We like them to have a fun time while they're learning. We often have people say they arrive as strangers and leave as friends."

Held in the professionally equipped kitchen of CasaLana Bed and Breakfast, classes can last anywhere from three hours to five days. Students harvest fresh herbs, fruits and other produce from the B&B's organic garden. Upcoming topics include Tuscan flavors, a Latin grill gourmet weekend, a five-day "learning vacation," salsas, relleÒos, a Mexican fiesta, a Mediterranean weekend, holiday entertaining and more.

After 20 years in the corporate world, Richardson made a career switch and graduated from the California Culinary Academy. She worked for a variety of local B&Bs, caterers and restaurants, then started her own catering company which evolved into teaching cooking at her own B&B. Midweek classes are \$75; one-day courses are \$140 to \$175;

the three-day "learning vacation" is \$575 and five days is \$875. Accommodations at the B&B are available for an additional fee.

*Gourmet Retreats at CasaLana, 1316 S. Oak St., Calistoga. 707.942.0615.
www.gourmetretreats.com or www.casalana.com.*

Learn the ins and outs of a variety of cooking techniques in a professional kitchen surrounded by acres of vineyards at **Cakebread Cellars** in Rutherford. This winery offers an ongoing series of hands-on cooking workshops, with an emphasis on seasonal, fresh food paired with its wines. In addition to the luxurious kitchen, there's also an outdoor barbecue with a wood-burning oven from Italy.

The annual grilling session is always a hit. Classes have a minimum of 10 students and a maximum of 16, and often sell out quickly. The August class where students will catch and then cook their own salmon is already booked solid, but there's still space in "Exploring the New American Farmers Market" on Aug. 18. Next year's schedule will be posted in November. Prices range from \$75 for "Kids in the Kitchen--Build Your Own Burger" to \$175 for the average adult-oriented class to \$275 for the salmon catch-and-cook.

*Cakebread Cellars, 8300 St. Helena Hwy., Rutherford. 800.588.0298.
www.cakebreadcellars.com.*

Also welcoming the public to its professional kitchen in the heart of its estate vineyards is **Michel-Schlumberger Wines** in Healdsburg. The winery recently started an Estate Kitchen Series featuring local chefs. The plan is to present about two classes a month, both hands-on and demo, says marketing communications director Juliana Chioffi. Aug. 17 will feature organic garden cooking, using produce from the estate's enormous garden. Of course, the resulting gourmet goodies are always paired with Michel-Schlumberger wines. The average cost is \$45 to \$55 for a two-hour session.

*Michel-Schlumberger Wines, 4155 Wine Creek Road, Healdsburg. 707.433.7427.
www.michelschlumberger.com.*

If your wallet is fairly healthy, indulge in **Hugh Carpenter's Camp Napa Culinary**, spending five days with this author of 14 cookbooks (*Fast Fish, Fast Entrées, Hot Wok, Fusion Food Cookbook*, among others). The mornings are spent in the kitchen, learning to create Carpenter's easy recipes for entertaining. Afternoons are unscheduled, and in the evenings, Carpenter introduces his students to owners of elite wineries and food-related businesses in the Napa and Sonoma valleys.

"They get to meet the people they would read about in *Wine Spectator* magazine," Carpenter explains. "I provide access to people they wouldn't meet otherwise." His programs are geared toward those who want to combine a cooking vacation with plenty of flexibility to pursue their own interests in the Napa Valley. The camps run through October and participation is limited to 18 attendees each week, at \$1,920 each. Lodging is not included.

*Hugh Carpenter's Camp Napa Culinary, PO Box 114, Oakville, CA, 94562;
888.999.HUGH (4844) or 707.944.9112. www.hughcarpenter.com.*

The **Depot Hotel Cooking School--Scuola Rustica** in Sonoma lets restaurant chef and

owner Michael Ghilarducci share his enthusiasm for Mediterranean cuisines in a relaxed and fun environment. Classes are generally offered on Monday or Tuesday evenings from 6:30 to 9:30pm starting in the restaurant's kitchen. Ghilarducci demonstrates the dishes then serves the class participants the complete four-course dinner, accompanied by vintage wines. Recipes are provided.

Ghilarducci also offers small master classes where a few students cook with the chef all day, then the staff serves a five-course dinner to the students and their invited guests. A demonstration class and dinner highlighting the cuisine of the Andalusia region of Spain is scheduled for Sept. 11-12; the cost is \$75. These sessions sell out quickly.

Depot Hotel Cooking School--Scuola Rustica, 241 First St. W., Sonoma. 707.938.2980. www.depothotel.com.

Enjoy three courses with wine pairings as part of the cooking demonstration series at the **Sea Ranch Lodge** high on the Sonoma coast. The demos and meals are whipped up by executive chef James Romeo, who specializes in "French-trained California cuisine with a solid Italian background," according to the lodge's promotional materials. A recent session highlighted great sauces; the Sept. 13 event will focus on hors d'oeuvres.

Participants receive a complete set of recipes. The classes are held every other month; in November that will change to monthly. The fee is \$45.

Sea Ranch Lodge, 60 Sea Walk Drive, off Highway 1, The Sea Ranch. 707.785.2371. www.searanchlodge.com.

Cooking a Gas

Other tricks to the trade

There are any number of ways to harvest a made-to-order cooking experience in the North Bay. Chef Todd Davies, owner of **Juniper Café and Juniper Catering** in Novato, offers private, custom-designed master chef sessions. Costs vary from \$30 each for a two-hour demo including lunch, to \$600 plus the cost of ingredients for a hands-on four-hour session for up to 10 people, with the class culminating in a four-course meal (415.328.7377; www.cheftoddavies.com). . . .

For the health-conscious, there's **Cooking for Your Life** with weight-loss and disease-prevention classes in the professional kitchen of Marin County resident Janet Dresser, a registered nurse, caterer and certified chef (415.455.8939; www.cookingforyourlife.com).

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And for fast, easy and delicious vegetarian meals, **Patti Breitman**, founder and director of the Marin Vegetarian Education Group, leads classes with a focus on easily prepared dishes highlighting the flavors, colors and creative recipes of the changing seasons (415.258.4640; www.marinveg.org). . . .

For a more traditional gourmet approach, Napa's **COPIA** offers 25-minute cooking demos at 11am and 3:15pm Wednesday through Monday, with the cost included in its \$5 admission fee. For July, the theme is "Sweet and Simple Berries of Summer"; in August the focus changes to "Beans: From Fresh and Delicious to Boston Baked" (707.259.1600; www.copia.org). . . .

Of course there's always the one-hour live cooking demonstrations at the **Culinary Institute of America**, alma mater to any number of celebrated professional chefs. The

demos for the public are held at 1:30pm and 3:30pm on Mondays and Fridays, or 10:30am, 1:30pm and 3:30pm on Saturdays and Sundays. Copies of recipes are provided; upcoming topics include a Middle Eastern sampler, peanut-ginger ice cream with peanut tuiles, fresh crab corn chowder, peach cobbler with shortbread crust, tuna salad with cranberry beans and black olives, pear and cardamom bread pudding, and roasted tomatoes with orzo stuffing. Admission is \$15; reservations are recommended (707.967.2320; www.ciachef.edu/california/demonstrations.asp).

--*P.L.H.*

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