



Cook

Prepare a Moroccan feast, make udon noodles from scratch, and learn the secret to the world's best butter-scotch pudding. These 12 hands-on cooking classes will help you make the cut in the kitchen.

EDITED BY JAN NEWBERRY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MITCH TOBIAS



sharp



Preserving with June Taylor

Several times each year, June Taylor, Berkeley's own ambassador of artisan jams and jellies, invites students into her Still-Room production kitchen to learn the timeless art of "putting up fruit." In the winter, the focus is on marmalades. But once summer's stone fruits and berries come into season, the theme switches to conserves.

Instructor: With no culinary training other than what she gleaned from her high school home economics classes in England, Taylor has become this country's most respected maker of preserves. Her approach is both scholarly (she is a student of food history) and aesthetic (she cites the visual artist Andy Goldsworthy as an influence). Don't come looking for shortcuts or time-saving tips. For Taylor, it's all about the craft.

Curriculum: Taylor's traditional approach calls for hand-cut fruit, small-batch production, a minimum of sugar, and no commercial pectin. Classes begin with a fruit tasting (students are invited to bring samples from their home gardens) and a brief talk on the importance of seeking out heirloom varieties and supporting local farms. Then everyone gets to work while Taylor goes about the room demonstrating the correct way to slice the rind and section the fruit while sharing stories of her work and life. Everyone gets a chance to stir the pots while the fruit cooks and to ladle it into jars. At the end of the four-hour class, each student goes home with freshly made preserves.

Philosophy: A cook's most important tools are his or her senses. A recipe is only a guideline, sugar and fruit ratios are simply a starting point, and observation is the key to success in the kitchen.

Write it down: "If you make a mistake, call it by another name and move on."

Worth the tuition: Rather than boiling jars to sterilize them, Taylor recommends warming them in a 250-degree oven while you work. When the fruit mixture is cooked and still hot, simply ladle it into the hot jars. If done properly, she insists, the process will be sufficient to seal the jars safely—and it eliminates what is often the most tedious part of making preserves.

Extra credit: A spread of cheeses and samples of Taylor's preserves are offered for students to enjoy while they work.

Tuition: \$140. To register, go to www.junetaylorjams.com.

JAN NEWBERRY



In June Taylor's preserving classes, students learn the importance of selecting the best fruit and how, with just a bit of sugar, some patience, and a watchful eye, they can turn it into marmalade.

Tapas and seviche with Penelope Alzamora

To the home cook, tapas may seem time-consuming and seviche intimidating. But by the end of this information-packed class at San Francisco's Tante Marie cooking school, Peruvian restaurateur Penelope Alzamora will have you convinced that they're neither.

Instructor: As a young girl growing up in Lima, Alzamora learned to bake from her grandmother and to cook from her nanny, and she's been at it ever since. A co-owner of Bohemia Café y Mas restaurant, which has three locations in Peru, Alzamora leads culinary tours of that country and also works as a caterer in the Bay Area.

Curriculum: After a brief introduction, Alzamora doles out recipes for eight seviches and eight tapas. A bonus is learning how Italian, Chinese, and Japanese immigrants have contributed to nouvelle Andean cuisine.

Philosophy: Variety is the key to a great party. Alzamora's perfect menu includes fish, chicken, beef, and vegetables, and she likes to bake, fry, and grill for each meal.

Write it down: The secret to good seviche is using fish caught that day and serving it very cold. Let the fishermen's catch dictate what you're making.

Worth the tuition: Learning the difference between Peruvian and Mexican seviche. Peruvian style uses Key limes, thinly sliced red onion, and Peruvian chilies (red rocotos or yellow hot peppers called aji); it marinates for no more than five minutes—any longer and the juice will turn sour. Mexican seviche marinates for at least one hour and is made with regular limes, finely diced white onion, and jalapeño or serrano chilies.

Extra credit: There's more than enough wine to go around, and you try more than a dozen new dishes throughout the day, so don't make dinner plans for that night.

Tuition: \$175. To register, go to www.tantemarie.com.

NATASHA SARKISIAN

Custards with Shuna Fish Lydon

Longtime local pastry chef Shuna Fish Lydon has a second career as a roaming cooking teacher, with classes held all around the region. In Custards, she offers a revealing look at the marriage of eggs and cream. With an emphasis on the basics, Lydon structures her classes to give home cooks a solid grounding in the hows and whys of the sweet side of the kitchen.

Instructor: Over the course of her 15-year career, Lydon has worked in some of this country's top pastry kitchens, including those of New York's Gramercy Tavern and our own Citizen Cake, as well as a certain restaurant by the name of the French Laundry.

Curriculum: Pot de crème. Pudding. Panna cotta. These rank among the most tempting desserts. For the home cook, they can also be the most daunting. Lydon demystifies the process as she describes how eggs leaven and add richness and why a water bath is crucial—she answers questions so thoroughly your head may spin.

Philosophy: Baking is a strict form. But Lydon believes that if you understand—and follow—the basics, there's plenty of room for improvisation.

Write it down: "Don't toss out vanilla beans once you've used them to infuse a custard. Instead, rinse the pods, let them dry until brittle, and pulverize them in a spice grinder with some added sugar. Use this vanilla sugar in your next custard or dessert for added flavor."

Worth the tuition: Lydon has every member of the class taste the chocolate pudding base before adding salt. Then she has them do the same once she has. The difference is so striking it will forever change the way you bake.

Extra credit: Gorging on real-deal butterscotch pudding and Lydon's superb goat's milk yogurt panna cotta with poached rhubarb.

Tuition: \$100. For more information, go to www.eggbeater.typepad.com.

SCOTT HOCKER

Japanese cooking with Ayako Iino

Or you could call it Beyond Sushi and Tempura. Ayako Iino expands her students' experience of Japan's varied cuisine as she teaches them to make such dishes as chawanmushi, yaki aburaage, and handmade udon noodles.

Instructor: Ten years of nearly self-sufficient living in rural Japan—growing rice, harvesting edible plants, and learning traditional ways of cooking—left Iino with a deep appreciation of her native cuisine. After moving to the Bay Area in 2000, Iino attended culinary school and worked for four years in the kitchen at Oliveto before leaving to focus on teaching.

Curriculum: Classes, held in different commercial kitchens in the East Bay, are typically built around a single seasonal menu. Grilled salt-cured salmon with daikon radish is featured in the late summer, for instance, and traditional New Year's dishes, such as sticky rice cakes and dried anchovies with sweet soy seasoning, are taught in January. After a brief explanation of recipes, ingredients, and techniques, everyone gets to work. Iino moves about the room, stopping to demonstrate how to swiftly cut udon noodles or to dip her spoon into the dashi to check the seasoning, all the while answering questions and sharing tales of her life in Japan.

Philosophy: Seasonality and a focus on ingredients may be a very Bay Area ethos, but according to Iino, the same values are essential to the Japanese kitchen.

Write it down: "There's no such thing as a traditional recipe. I lived in the Japanese countryside for years, cooking alongside the grandmothers there. No two people ever made the same dish exactly the same way."

Worth the tuition: After one class, Iino sent students home with jars of her pickled Napa cabbage.

Extra credit: BYO sake to enjoy with the meal at the end of class.

Tuition: \$70. To register, go to www.ayakoiino.com.

J.N.

Mastering knife skills with MikeC

In a persimmon-colored demo kitchen at Berkeley's Epicurious Garden, Kitchen on Fire cofounders MikeC and Richard Chapman host a calendar's worth of cooking classes with a touch of party atmosphere. (All classes are BYOB.) Watch the schedule for the three-night series on knife skills designed to retrain your hands into an efficient blur.

Instructor: Spiky-haired and prodigiously tattooed, MikeC wears a jacket that dubs him "Jedi Chef." Part stand-up comedian, part home-ec teacher, he delivers bits of shtick while chopping without looking at his hands and then explains why he can do this without losing a digit. Just don't get him started on Rachael Ray: "Every time that woman wields a knife, I cringe."

Curriculum: Part one of the knife series features a few of the so-called French cuts, known in some circles as allumettes, batonnets, and brunoises, but called "slices," "sticks," and "cubes" by MikeC. Starting out with some no-duh advice, like how to carry a knife in the kitchen, MikeC draws infomercial-worthy oohs and aahs once he goes to work on the cutting board.

Philosophy: "If these two clowns can cook, so can you."

Write it down: "Hate peeling garlic? Twenty seconds in the microwave and the skin will puff right off!"

Worth the tuition: Most of the flavor in cilantro is in the stems, so there's no point in tediously removing each leaf. Just lop off and discard the very bottom of the stems before folding them in half and chopping up the whole shebang.

Extra credit: Pizzas pop out of the oven just before class, with more to come at the break.

Tuition: \$60 (\$165 for the three-week knife skills series). To register, go to www.kitchenonfire.com.

LISA TROTTER

Southern Italian cooking with Rosetta Costantino



Rosetta Costantino specializes in the kind of simple, heartfelt southern Italian fare you might be served if you were invited into a private home, minus a course or two. But simple doesn't mean short on flavor: Costantino draws on traditions that have stuck around because they're so darn delicious.

Instructor: When Costantino was growing up in Calabria, Italy, her favorite spot was at her mother's elbow in the kitchen. They relied on cheeses, wines, and olives made by her father, and when they moved to the Bay Area, the family continued making fresh ricotta and growing produce. "My father would have butchered a kid [as in baby goat] for us for tonight," says Costantino before the class, "but I wasn't comfortable with what the health inspectors might say."

Curriculum: You'll feel like you're in America's Test Kitchen as you move from station to station in the spanking-clean, well-equipped space in Emeryville. Students first scrub up like surgeons and then trail Costantino in a little herd as she demonstrates the evening's techniques. "All right, we've got to get going," she suddenly announces, and everyone begins chopping herbs, simmering bones for a sauce, cleaning artichokes, and grating lemon rind. After about an hour, many break into the bottles of wine they've brought to aid the learning process.

Philosophy: Keep it simple. "If one herb will do, there's no need to use a second one," Costantino says. The essential flavor of the food should shine through.

Write it down: "Frozen organic peas make an excellent substitute when the fresh ones at the market are starchy."

Worth the tuition: Witnessing the wild abandon with which petite Costantino slings that big bottle of olive oil.

Extra credit: To hook students on a future Calabrian class, Costantino offers a zippy snack of pickled zucchini crostini to kick off the lesson. Plus, naturally, you get to eat the lavish meal you've spent the evening cooking.

Tuition: \$85. Bring your own wine. To register, go to www.cookingwithrosetta.com.

PEGGY NAUTS



Rosetta Costantino explains the ingredients as well as the techniques essential to a southern Italian feast before the class sits down to enjoy the meal they've prepared together.

Moroccan cooking with Paula Wolfert

It was over 30 years ago that Paula Wolfert wrote *Couscous and Other Good Food from Morocco*. Today that book is considered one of the essential texts on the topic, and Wolfert has gone on to become one of the most respected cookbook authors of our time. Opportunities to take a class from her don't come along often—these days she teaches almost exclusively at Ramekins Cooking School in Sonoma—so when her name appears on the schedule, pull out your credit card. Her classes inevitably sell out.

Instructor: As much an anthropologist as she is a cook, Wolfert learned from traveling the world, knocking on doors to find each region's best cooks, working alongside them, and taking notes on all she saw and tasted. In the process she became a stickler for authenticity. But don't be intimidated; Wolfert's eccentric style is irresistibly endearing.

Curriculum: Classes are limited to 11 students, who team up to take on individual recipes incorporating traditional techniques, equipment, and ingredients. Throughout the class, Wolfert explains how to handle phyllo dough so it doesn't dry out, why a true tagine tastes best when cooked in a clay pot, and how to shape a loaf of khobez, a Moroccan bread flavored with sesame and anise.

Philosophy: "Take the time to make food in traditional ways. Authentic recipes have more nuance."

Write it down: "Save your tears when cutting onions and sprinkle them and the cutting board with vinegar. Just remember to rinse them both when you're done."

Worth the tuition: The opportunity to roll couscous by hand.

Extra credit: The school provides a couple of Sonoma Valley wines to accompany the feast. That's not how they do it in Morocco, but it's one instance when Wolfert is willing to break with tradition.

Tuition: \$195. To register, go to www.ramekins.com.

KATHLEEN HILL

Vietnamese cooking with Andrea Nguyen

Andrea Nguyen just might be the person to finally bring Vietnamese food into the lexicon of the American home cook. In her classes, held at locations throughout the Bay Area, she uses common ingredients like Dungeness crab and cilantro alongside less-familiar ones such as Chinese sausage and fish sauce to demystify Southeast Asian cuisine without dumbing it down.

Instructor: At the age of 6, Nguyen escaped Saigon with her family a week before it fell to North Vietnamese troops. They settled in Southern California. After a number of careers, including banking, Nguyen turned to food writing and cooking instruction. Her first cookbook, *Into the Vietnamese Kitchen*, has been nominated for multiple awards.

Curriculum: Nguyen gives an overview of the dishes to be prepared and then divides students into groups. Some tackle bean sprout and rice flour crepes, others beef and jicama hand rolls or grilled bananas with coconut sticky rice. Nguyen is unafraid to get her hands dirty—watch her guide squeamish students through cooking live crabs and dismantling them before wok-searing the parts with egg, scallions, and pepper. She makes it look so easy, you become convinced it is.

Philosophy: At its heart, Vietnamese cooking is simple and intuitive.

Write it down: "Pho is great, but it's time-consuming to make, so we're going to make a chicken and cellophane noodle soup instead. It has similar qualities as pho, but with a lot less work."

Worth the tuition: A huge tub of Vietnamese herbs she passes for show-and-tell and has everyone taste.

Extra credit: Get Nguyen to sign *Into the Vietnamese Kitchen* before she gets swept away by the buzz—her cookbook is certain to become a classic.

Tuition: Varies. For a class schedule, go to www.vietworldkitchen.com. S.H.

Pizza al forno with Mary Karlin

The wood-burning oven has a transformative effect on a pizza, lending it a slightly smoky flavor, a char around the edge, and a crust that's perfectly crisp. An afternoon spent learning to use one will have a similar effect on amateur pizza makers. For good measure, Mary Karlin also demonstrates how to make grilled pizza, a ridiculously easy—and brilliant—technique.

Instructor: A founding staff member of the Sonoma cooking school Ramekins, Karlin has been teaching there since 2001, covering such topics as cheesemaking, brunch, and, of course, pizza, calzones, and focaccia. Her eyes light up when she turns her attention to the wood-burning oven. She clearly has a soft spot for it, and her excitement is infectious.

Curriculum: In the course of the three-hour class, students work with four styles of dough—some made with high-gluten flour, others with olive oil and a bit of sugar, and each appropriate for a different style of pizza. Students prepare the doughs from scratch and then go on to use premade versions of the same—so no one has to wait for them to rise—to make grilled pizza as well as focaccia, a sweet and a savory calzone, and a cheese pizza in the wood-fired oven.

Philosophy: Keep it simple and use a light hand with the toppings. The soul of pizza is its crust—don't hide it.

Write it down: "Focaccia likes olive oil. Don't be afraid to use a lot."

Worth the tuition: Grilling pizza in the insulated ceramic grill known as the Big Green Egg is an eye-opener. A fetish item among grill nerds, the Egg locks in heat like a sauna on overdrive. And for anyone who's never had grilled pizza, the soft, blistered crust is a revelation.

Extra credit: The barrage of pizzas at the end of the class. The free wine is a nice perk too.

Tuition: \$80. To register, go to www.ramekins.com. S.H.

Thai cooking with Kasma Loha-unchit

Those lucky enough to slip into one of Kasma Loha-unchit's perpetually booked four-week series are greeted by a scene that feels more like an evening spent in your aunt's kitchen than attending a class. As you talk, chop, cook, and eat your way through four dinners at Loha-unchit's Oakland home, she readies you to fire up your own wok with confidence.

Instructor: Loha-unchit learned to cook by helping her mother in the family's kitchen in Thailand. She teaches in the same manner: inviting small groups to cook and taste alongside her. Those who get starry-eyed listening to her tales of the food back home may want to join one of Loha-unchit's occasional culinary tours of Thailand.

Curriculum: Loha-unchit first goes over the menu while handing around fragrant Kaffir lime leaves, offering whiffs of an eye-popping red curry paste, and giving the coordinates for the one market on Oakland's International Boulevard that has the right basil for spicy basil chicken. Then she gives the signal, and hands fly into a blur of slicing and dicing. Meanwhile, she wanders the room correcting chili rounds cut a bit too thick and showing how a salt bath can bring frozen shrimp back to life.

Philosophy: Recipes are no better than a rough guide. You need to use your senses in the kitchen. By tasting a dish at every stage, you learn to balance the flavors yourself.

Write it down: "It's fun to bang on garlic after a long day at work. It's your kitchen—you can do whatever you want."

Worth the tuition: The \$3 knife Loha-unchit sells will make your fancy set seem clumsy and redundant.

Extra credit: A snack of sticky rice around banana keeps your blood sugar up until the multicourse dinner is served at the very Continental hour of 9:30 p.m.

Tuition: \$160 for the four-week series. To register, go to www.thaifoodandtravel.com.

L.T.

Knife sharpening with Eric E. Weiss

A dull knife in the kitchen will do you about as much good as a bowl of plastic fruit. Eric E. Weiss, a quiet, knowledgeable expert, offers the knife-phobic the skills to sharpen their blades—and go home with all 10 fingers intact.

Instructor: Weiss has been bringing knives back to life for more than 30 years. He has a booth at both the Berkeley and El Cerrito farmers' markets and has sharpened over 7,000 knives since he set up shop in 2004.

Curriculum: Students bring a chef's knife and a paring knife with them to class in Emeryville-based Paulding & Company's commercial kitchen. To begin, Weiss whips out his show-and-tell box, waving around a collection that includes serrated knives and the diamond sharpening stones used to hone them (who knew?). Then he gets down to it. Everyone is given a soft Arkansas stone and a vial of mineral oil. Weiss demonstrates two styles of sharpening: one has you draw the knife in an arc from guard (that's the end of the blade by the handle) to tip, turn the knife over, and reverse; the other has you do much the same but switch hands after each stroke. Each person then finds the approach that's most comfortable.

Philosophy: With just a few basic skills, home cooks can care for their knives themselves and have them professionally sharpened just once or twice a year.

Write it down: "When using a steel, keep the steel straight up and down and run the blade over it two or three times. Any more and you'll dull the blade rather than hone it."

Worth the tuition: Weiss is full of factoids and knife lore. He debunks the notion that cutting paper is a good way to test a knife's sharpness. In fact, it dulls the blade—horribly.

Extra credit: Weiss's wife, Janet S. Jacobson, wanders the room offering tea and encouragement.

Tuition: \$60. For information on future classes, go to www.pauldingandco.com.

S.H. ▶



Students sharpen their honing skills as Eric E. Weiss explains the basics of knife maintenance, including how to use a diamond sharpening stone on a serrated knife.



Yeast breads with Richard Chapman

Wannabe bread bakers will gain a solid foundation in managing dough at this lively class. Part of the 12-session Basics of Cooking series at Berkeley's Kitchen on Fire, it demystifies bread baking with a dash of science and a lot of hands-on practice in kneading and shaping.

Instructor: Richard Chapman taught himself to bake by working his way through every recipe in Carol Field's seminal cookbook, *The Italian Baker*. Though he's no stickler for measuring cups and perfectly calibrated ovens, Chapman is a walking encyclopedia of bread, ready to respond to any question with his Midwestern accent and a smile.

Curriculum: MikeC, the Food Network–ready cofounder of Kitchen on Fire, sets the tone with a cheeky introduction; then Chapman begins a lecture on bread varieties and baking methods. After a brief question-and-answer session, the class breaks into four stations: brioche, pane all'uva, pan bigio, and Chapman's mom's dinner rolls. Students rotate among the assistant-guided stations while MikeC and Chapman help with trickier kneading techniques. Don't be surprised if an impromptu brioche fry session or flour fight breaks out. MikeC likes to keep things lively. At the end of the three-hour class, there's a bread tasting, and students pack up leftover dough to bake at home.

Philosophy: While most types of baking require exacting attention to detail, home cooks can relax when baking bread. Although minor variations in temperature, sugar content, and time affect the finished product, Chapman insists that any bread will taste great if it's made with love.

Write it down: "You don't need all day to bake bread. You just need a few intervals of time and some patience."

Worth the tuition: Thump a loaf of bread with your finger to test for doneness. If it sounds hollow and it's lighter than when you started, remove it from the oven.

Extra credit: Kitchen on Fire offers a 10 percent discount on its gear, knives, books, and such, and students can also get 10 percent off wines at Vintage Berkeley and Taste Global Wine & Food Bar.

Tuition: \$65. To register, go to www.kitchenonfire.com.

CAROLYN ALBURGER



In this lively class, the instructors stress that fun is as essential to breadmaking as flour and water are. At right and below, pane all'uva are readied and put in the oven.

