

COOKING: Tricks of the trade for home chefs

By Tom Haines

GLOBE STAFF

ESSEX, Vt. — The celery has been peeled and blanched in boiling water.

This is a small detail; a short step toward the end, when the celery, mixed with diced pork and a combination of sherry, sugar, chili garlic paste, and more is fried in dough and served alongside a dipping sauce of vinegar, soy sauce, ginger, and sesame oil.

But it is the little things, after all, that matter when learning to cook.

See photos of the culinary creations at explorenewengland.com.

Gerry Nooney, all decked out in chef's white shirt and matching chef's hat in the demonstration kitchen of The Inn at Essex, turns from behind the range of burners and raises a single narrow leaf in his hand.

"One of the great spices I could not live without," Nooney says. "Bay leaf"

He drops it into risotto simmering in a hearty stock made with yesterday's leftover lobster bodies and the trimmings of carrot, celery, onion, and more.

Nooney, who traded years running a restaurant near the slopes of Sugarbush to give demonstrations and serve the result to paying customers in a secluded kitchen at the inn, begins wrapping thick salmon filets with prosciutto.

"My original plan was to do this with sea scallops," says Nooney, as casual with a menu as he is at the range. "But the fish guy comes tomorrow, so . . ."

Nooney's class is a quick, late-afternoon taste among the offering of vacation cooking schools, getaways that last hours or a long weekend, catering to well-seasoned foodies or those who just want to learn about the Tuscan chicken or maple confections that end up on a plate.

The Chef "Inn" Training program at the Inn at Essex lasts but a couple of

hours and tends more toward luxury, with participants doing more talking and wine sipping than chopping and basting.

Others, such as a three-day course at the White Mountain Cooking School at the Snowvillage Inn in Snowville, N.H., are designed for participants to get their hands dirty. Class members roll up their sleeves Saturday morning and chop and dice their way toward lunch.

Of course, part of the point is relaxation and escape for those in the class, or their partners or friends who tag along to reap the rewards of their labor.

Often, says Karen Galat, innkeeper at Snowvillage, "One dozes in front of the fire and reads a good book while the other does a cooking class."

Whether through demonstration or participation, most classes focus on a particular theme. The Pond House in Brownsville, Vt., will host a class on Northern Italian cuisine in April; the Bernerhof Inn in Glen, N.H., will explore the delicacies of rhubarb, fiddleheads, radishes, and mint this spring; and in Westerly, R.I., visitors to the Woody Hill Bed & Breakfast can learn to cook corn bread and roast turkey at an open hearth.

Food pairs naturally enough with relaxation and escape; good meals are often a key part of getting away from the routines of daily life. But helping to cook that food, rather than having it arrive at a crisply-lined table, offers more: a chance to reconnect to what and how we eat.

Before getting the risotto under way, Nooney turns to another burner and adds eggs, butter, sugar, lemon zest, and lemon juice in a shallow saucepan. He stirs.

"Oh my god, it's starting to get thick," he says, joking about the process that combines the protein from the eggs with the fat of the butter. "The miracle of heat."

Before class, Nooney had prepared most of the ingredients, taking care of peeling and measuring. He sets his three guests to rolling the wontons, then stirs risotto, sharing secrets for the home.

Use canola oil for frying, not olive oil; canola can take more heat. Always toss rough edges of chopped vegetables in a bag in the freezer; they're great for making stock. Szeged is the best place for Hungarian paprika; and the best of that comes from the west side of the Tisza River.

"Costco's got good fish," Nooney says. "They blow it in and out of the door."

As he wraps the salmon, Nooney recommends prosciutto, but not pancetta, for grilling.

"Pancetta will just explode," he says. "You'll just have a greasy ball of pork fat on your grill."

As the risotto thickens, conversation among Nooney and his customers wanders, to the woes of dining at Applebee's, or to the gems to be found in more authentic restaurants. He shares a tactic he has taught his son to use when looking for a meal in an unknown Chinatown: "Now let's find some old Chinese people and follow them."

Chinese food, by the way, is a natural for young eaters.

Coffee and radicchio, that's not kids' food."

Nooney directs his guests to a nearby table and serves the wontons; then the salmon and prosciutto, on a bed of garlic spinach, alongside the lobster risotto. Chopped tomato brightens the plate.

He tells tales of his days as a young chef at a lakeside inn in northwest Connecticut. There, the Austrian owner used macerated greens for his salad dressing. And it was there that Nooney turned out hundreds of cheesecakes.

He pulls another from the refrigerator and sets slices on plates, each brushing against a pool of the freshly made lemon curd.

"I never liked the idea of forcing somebody into eating something," Nooney says. "So I just put it on the tip of the plate and I just put the nose in. You don't like it, you don't eat it."

Minutes later, the curd and the cake are gone.

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Inns that simmer

With all things cooking much in fashion these days, many New England inns are offering beefed-up classes. A sampler:

The Inn at Essex

70 Essex Way, Essex, Vt.
802-878-1100, 800-727-4295
www.vtculinaryresort.com

The Chef "Inn" Training program, an afternoon demonstration and participation course with a New England Culinary Institute chef, costs \$125 plus tax and service fee for one person, \$60-plus for each additional person.

Snowvillage Inn

Stewart Road, Snowville, N.H.
603-447-2818, 800-447-4345
www.snowvillageinn.com

The White Mountain Cooking School, in operation for 12 years, offers weekend classes: \$349 per person, including meals and two nights lodging. May 12-14 Tuscan; May 26-28 Chocolate; June 2-4 Outdoor Apple Wood Grilling.

The Pond House Inn

325 Shattuck Hill Road
Brownsville, Vt.
802-484-0011
www.pondhouseinn.com

Northern Italian cooking workshops, with one April 22-23. \$450 double occupancy, with two nights' lodging and meals.

Bernerhof Inn

Route 302, Glen, N.H.
603-383-9132, 800-548-8007
www.bernerhofinn.com

Spring themes dominate classes April 28-30 and May 5-7. From \$349 to \$449 double occupancy.

Woody Hill Bed & Breakfast

149 South Woody Hill Road
Westerly, R.I.
401-322-0452
www.woodyhill.com

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