

Lessons in Taking It Easy

Culinary Arts, for the C-Suite Crowd

By Patricia Crisafulli

Chef Sharon Oddson pushes her bicycle through the front door of La Cucina del Garga, a trendy restaurant in Florence, Italy, just as her son and fellow chef Alessandro Gargani brings in crates of arugula and kale from the market. She fingers the intensely green leaves and inhales the herbal *profumo*. “The quality and variety of food in this region are unsurpassed,” says Oddson, a Canadian expat who has made Florence her home since the 1970s.

Oddson is here, hours early at her restaurant not far from the Museo Leonardo da Vinci, to offer us some of the finer points of Tuscan cooking—and to tell us about



From Silicon Valley to Tuscany, time-pressed executives are discovering a host of reasons to join cooking boot camps.



What I know to be true...

“Sauces can be made in less than five minutes with fewer than five ingredients.”

—Sharon Oddson, chef and instructor of executives/aspiring chefs, at La Cucina del Garga



a rather curious trend in the Great Foodie Movement. Certainly, the movement, spurred by one cooking show after another at outlets such as the Food Network, has attracted more than its share of longtime devotees. Joining them now are also high-level executives, a group whose idea of gastronomy is typically a succulent meal cooked by someone else. In small but growing numbers, they're showing up at one-day programs and weekend boot camps taught by some of the world's best chefs.

Oddson herself has taught groups from the Young Presidents' Organization how to prepare four-course meals. According to her, virtually every one of her dishes can be prepared pretty quickly, in less than 10 minutes (not a bad selling point to the busy C-suite/would-be-chef crowd). “Sauces can be made in less than five minutes with fewer than five ingredients,” she says.

However long the recipes take, many newbies come determined to learn firsthand how to whip up showstopping meals. But there is a practical aspect of all these classes, too: Knowing ingredients and how to combine them provides more options for those who want to eat healthier while traveling or those who have dietary needs. For example, one can reduce salt and fat by substituting creamy salad dressing with splashes of olive oil and balsamic vinegar, or by squeezing a lemon wedge to enhance flavors instead of reaching for the salt shaker.

In its purest form, the culinary art was once the purview of only professionally trained, high-hatted chefs. Today, even Le Cordon Bleu in Paris offers a smorgasbord of programs, from a two-day workshop on “The Art of Making Sauces and Jus” to a three-hour demonstration of “The Art of Cooking Like a Chef.”

Halfway around the world, Executive Chef Events teaches cooking to executives at a who's who of technology firms—Google, Facebook, Yelp—as well as pharmaceutical and energy companies in Silicon Valley, Southern California and Dallas. And business is booming. Chef teams will

go anywhere to put on cooking programs for corporate off-sites, which companies in multiple industries use for team building. “Collaborative-cooking classes bring people together,” says Charles Gall, event producer for Executive Chef Events. “Cooking is more accessible to people than it used to be.”

And it isn’t just entertaining; cooking teaches business and life skills such as patience and precision. “When people come together to cook, they learn things such as adding ingredients at the right time and time management,” Gall adds. Then, there is the ultimate payoff: Seeing—and tasting—what you’ve cooked is a tangible and tasty way to express and experience creatively.

For her part, Oddson says some of her students quickly join the ranks of home chefs who enjoy cooking for family and friends. But there will still always be others who prefer sipping to simmering—the “culinary Peeping Toms,” as she describes them with a wry smile. They don’t really cook, but love watching artful prep and savoring the results. ●



In the kitchen with Executive Chef Events, professionals learn cooking—and team building.

WORLD-CLASS COOKING SCHOOLS

LE CORDON BLEU (Paris)

Famed cooking school (where Julia Child studied) offers short courses and workshops in the culinary arts and wines.

CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA (New York, California, Texas)

Full-fledged culinary college offers boot camps on cooking, baking and tips from professional chefs.

LANGLOIS CULINARY CROSSROADS (New Orleans)

With full immersion in the style of Louisiana cooking, it offers culinary entertainment and private cooking classes.

MIETTE CULINARY STUDIO (New York)

Small classes focus on seasonal produce and farmers-market specialties.

