

Times Union (Albany, N.Y.)

Section: Life-Food

Page: E1

Date: Thursday, July 5, 2007

A taste of cooking

Mezzo shows students their way around the kitchen, and a good time

By Anne Miller

Special to the Times Union

ALBANY - Clutching tongs, Kate Murray stands next to the charcoal grill and muses that this isn't at all what she expected from an after-hours cooking class at a European-style market and cafe. "I thought he'd cook and we'd watch," she says of instructor Jay Marsteon.

Several nights a month, Mezzo Marketplace & Eatery on Hamilton Street in Albany hosts Mezzo Cooks, a \$60 class that includes wine and cheese, instruction and participation in the commercial kitchen, and lots of lively conversation.

"It's your appetizer, your entertainment, your meal and your takeout," says Deena Ecker, the 27-year-old partner who runs daily operations at the business, a catering company, gourmet lunch spot, takeout counter and bakery (she's the baker; try the ciabatta loaves).

Ecker learned to cook at her family's local Italian restaurant, Pino's, which has since been sold. She and Marsteon met as co-workers at Different Drummer's Kitchen, a kitchenware store in Stuyvesant Plaza. "We'd hear from people all the time investing in all this equipment, 'Oh, I wish I had a place where I could take cooking classes,' she says.

Classes have been an intrinsic part of Mezzo since the doors opened in 2005, says Ecker, who modeled them after a class she took at a New York City culinary institute. Since Mezzo Cooks began, classes have filled weeks in advance, and Mezzo now may

host as many as three classes a week for private groups in addition to the public class. Classes are usually capped at eight people per evening and include such topics as Thanksgiving menus in the fall and farmers market excursions in the summer. The most popular: summer grilling, which was on the menu the Friday of Memorial Day weekend.

Marsteon, a closet gourmand with a day job in the state budget division, is part chef, part ringleader. He finishes prepping as students trickle in and begin to nosh on Gouda, brie and wine. By 7 p.m., everyone has claimed one of the bar stools that line the kitchen island. Each has a copy of the night's recipes and a pen. Many take copious notes.

Marsteon starts with a discussion of the theme and the night's recipes, which are often inspired by or variations of dishes he has seen on Food Network or Epicurious.com. He demonstrates key techniques before dividing the guests into cooking squads, assigns recipes and tells them the kitchen is theirs.

Classes usually last about three hours, although an epic St. Patrick's Day "Sin" class ran until 1:30 a.m., Marsteon says. One man brought seven bottles of a wine and a bottle of Irish whiskey.

"It was like cream and butter and booze and chocolate," he says. "We had a class of eight. We were trashed."

Marsteon understands that students have different interests and paces. Those there for eating might only stir pots, chat and sip wine, while Food Network fanatics back for a second or third class coo over the professional knives they wield on choice cuts of meat. Marsteon lets participants work at their own pace, offering suggestions when he spies a better way or nudging things along when timing runs tight.

The grilling class includes a woman who first sampled Mezzo at a Chamber of Commerce event in Colonie; another woman who has brought her new neighbors six weeks removed from Seattle, plus his sister visiting from Alaska; and an engineering student from Troy and her boyfriend, who already have a reputation as foodies from a previous class.

First, Marsteon parses the differences between grilling and barbecue. Grilling means fast cooking on high, direct heat, while the indirect heat of barbecue cooks meat slowly amid the smoke. Alter grilling temperatures for different foods by placing them closer or farther from the heat source, he says. His key grilling tip: keep food from sticking by folding a paper towel tightly, gripping it with tongs, dipping it in oil and running it over the hot metal grill.

Marsteon splits the class in two and divvies up the dishes. A grilled vegetable salad, grilled pizza and skirt steak go to one group; the other juggles maple-glazed, cedar-plank salmon and ribs with a spice rub and sauce.

In one corner, Murray - the participant from Anchorage, Alaska - clearly knows her way around a kitchen. She holds forth at a corner of the island, an easy reach from the pots, graters and such hanging from the vent above the stove. She offers others tips on juicing a lemon and mincing garlic.

"I watch a lot of cooking shows," she says.

Meanwhile, Erika Choi of Colonie grates garlic, then stirs a glaze and chats by the stove.

Two grills - one gas, one charcoal - throw heat into the warm May night on the brick entranceway that doubles as Mezzo's dining patio.

Choi and Barb Weiler, who lives in the Albany area, march the salmon out to the grill. They gently poke the fish to test doneness. It needs a few more minutes. Choi licks her fingers and renders a verdict: "Mmmm, that is good!"

Just what every cook likes to hear.

Anne Miller, a former Times Union staff writer, is a freelance writer in Albany.

Factbox:

Tricks of the trade

The dishes may change, but the basics never vary, says Jay Marsteon, who teaches the Mezzo Cooks classes. Here are a few lessons he hammers home:

- Mise en place is the practice of preparing and measuring every ingredient before cooking. Always, always practice this, Marsteon says, to keep kitchens clean, have dishes prepared on time and meals organized.
- Clean as you go. Don't leave things where they take up valuable work space and could easily be knocked over.
- Invest in a good chef's knife and learn to use it. Hold it high on the handle by the blade. Cut finer ingredients, like minced garlic, near the handle where the most control lies. Dice ingredients with a clean, round movement, never letting the blade leave the cutting surface.
- The more water a food holds, the less likely it is to brown. That's why cooks dredge ingredients in flour before frying, he said. That's also why some meats are best oiled before grilled and some fresh vegetables are better after they've been salted to draw out moisture.
- A pinch of salt in a mortar and pestle increases the abrasiveness. Homemade rubs and barbecue sauces depend on contrasting sweet and spicy flavors. For rubs, Marsteon starts with brown sugar and the paprika favored by his Portuguese background, then adds thyme, cardamom, curry and other "bit players" to taste. For sauces, coffee, honey, brown sugar, molasses and beer are all fair game. Play, taste, repeat as needed.

Mezzo Marketplace & Eatery is located at 340 Hamilton St., Albany. For information, call 463-6240 or go to <http://www.mezzomarket.com>. -- Anne Miller