



School's In

Cooking classes are hugely popular – but homework is another matter, of course...

By Ardyn Bernoth

WHEN STUDENTS OF THE Sydney Seafood School finish a cooking class, their bellies full of food, a clutch of recipes in their hands, they are handed an exit poll. One of the questions they are asked is, "Will you cook the recipes you have learnt tonight?" An enthused 97 per cent say they will cook at least one recipe at home.

But is this true? Sydney

Seafood School manager Roberta Muir does not believe the number is really that high. "I don't believe they all follow through with it. But I think a large percentage do."

People are pouring into cooking schools around the country in ever-growing numbers. Muir expects 1000 more people this financial year than last. That means 13,000 people will gather in the polished Pyrmont kitchens to

tie on aprons and whip up the likes of fried garfish with salsa verde and shellfish bouillabaisse. In Melbourne, the William Angliss Institute has seen attendance at its short cooking courses jump by 30 per cent in the past 15 months. "And people don't just do day courses – we are seeing a greater commitment to do courses that cost \$3200 and run for three months," says its short courses manager, Pauline Dine.

But what do students actually get for their money (day courses cost from \$75 to \$300) and time (between two and eight hours)? If they don't cook the recipes, what exactly is to be gained from these courses? I contacted five of the country's best-known cooking schools and spoke to two students from each school who had done classes last December to see what

they'd cooked since and to gauge, several months down the track, whether they have learnt anything of lasting impact.

Nine of those 10 people say they had cooked at least one recipe – but most say the recipes are not the most important things they gleaned from the courses. The chef's inside information imparted, the hands-on guidance, the demystifying of produce and knowledge about where to source ingredients are among the elements all of them mention. But the loudest feedback from students is that cooking classes are simply "a great night out".

The rise of cooking classes as a fashionable form of entertainment and socialising started in the noughties. "It's like going to a fabulous dinner party but you watch the preparation and the

Always learning: Chris Williams, left, has done 50 classes at different schools in the past five years

other guests are strangers," says Chris Williams, 31, who did a Tony Tan cooking class in Melbourne in December (the class was called Tony's Favourites). Williams has done 50 classes at different schools in the past five years. Out of several hundred recipes he has been handed, there are 15 he has incorporated into his culinary repertoire. He enrolled in his first cooking course out of a desire to expand on his modest list of six recipes he cooked all the time. But he and another regular Tony Tan student, Susan Tuyau, 49, say not everyone is there to bolster their recipe collection. "There are people who come just to eat," says Tuyau. This appetite is astutely catered for by the schools, which follow the tuition component with a sit-down, multi-course meal including wines.

Amanda Sacco, 29, has done 20 courses in the past five years, one of her most recent a Vietnamese course at the Sydney Seafood School in December. She has only cooked one dish from that course, a single time. "But for me it is the experience, the fun you have on the day," she says. "I went with my sister, we had a lovely night together. And I love meeting new people."

Muir says she stops short of running singles nights, but exit polls leave her in no doubt that "meeting new people" is a drawcard of the classes.

Sue Robb, 61, a fan of the classes at Black Pearl Epicure in Brisbane, puts a slightly different spin on it. "I have a full-on job and I get tired. Doing classes takes me from that into a world of tastes and smells. You get lost in what you are cooking, you concentrate on what you are doing – if you don't, you could chop off a finger." Robb values the courses for the fact that culinary techniques are explained and demonstrated.

As Rodney Dunn from the Agrarian Kitchen cooking school in Tasmania says: "There are some things in cooking you just need to be shown." This could be, as Robb points out, how to knead bread. "I never had any luck making bread

because I did not know how to knead," she says. "Then someone showed me; took my dough, gave it a few flicks and twists. I saw how it was done and it changed my bread-making. A lot of cooking is about technique. The teachers correct us. This is much more important than the recipes."

Technique will determine the success of making something like mayonnaise, says Williams, or filleting, pin-boning and skinning a fish. "I could not make mayo, it never worked, but I watched someone do it and now it works. You can see these things on TV, but you can't ask the stupid questions."

Babak Hadi from Black Pearl Epicure says the demand from students, many of whom are not given a grounding in cooking at home, is for fundamentals such as how to use a knife, sauté onions and make pasta. "When we started the school we offered lots of complicated celebrity chef classes," Hadi says. "But I reckon a third to a half of the students would never cook these recipes again. So we have easier classes now – the reality is many people want to spend no more than 15 to 20 minutes in the kitchen."

But accomplished cooks attend courses as well, to hone technique in unfamiliar areas. For Tuyau, who did Tan's Banquet course in December (she has since cooked Korean beef ribs and jewelled rice congee with corn and crab fritters), the class let her observe a chef at close quarters to "see how they plan and organise themselves and juggle preparing different dishes at the same time".

In the know

WARREN HOWLE, 50, HAD NEVER attended a cooking class before turning up to a seafood tapas night at the Sydney Seafood School in December clasping a voucher his wife had given him. He had never cooked seafood before and was slightly nervous. As well as enjoying several glasses of grenache rosé, what he valued most were the tidbits of information he gathered. "They told us things that cookbooks don't – the information that is assumed or no one thinks to tell you," Howle says.

It's a long way from molecular



JOHN LETHLEAN

Mates on the plate

IT HAS NO ASSOCIATION with a television series. No "name" on the cover. No cross-promotional media network, product endorsement matrix, or series of associated personal appear-

ances with signings and competitions to win a dinner, cooked in your own home.

So in a nation as obsessed with celebrity as ours, it's no wonder *The Flavour Thesaurus* has flown completely under the radar. But thankfully, this rather unusual little hardback is in the shortlist for the Andre Simon Food & Drink Book Awards in Britain. (It's worth noting that among the seven shortlisted is also Greg and Lucy Malouf's *Saraban*, the only Australian title.)

The Flavour Thesaurus is unlike any other food book I've seen. It is a manual for exploring the links between flavours. No pics, no shots of the author (Niki Segnit), no creative white space. Just lots of information.

"I needed a primer to help me understand how and why one flavour might go with another, their points in common and their differences," she writes. "Something like a thesaurus of flavours. But no such book existed and so, with what turned out in hindsight to be almost touching naivety, I thought I might try to compile one

"Adding fish sauce to coconut milk is like giving your curry a central nervous system"

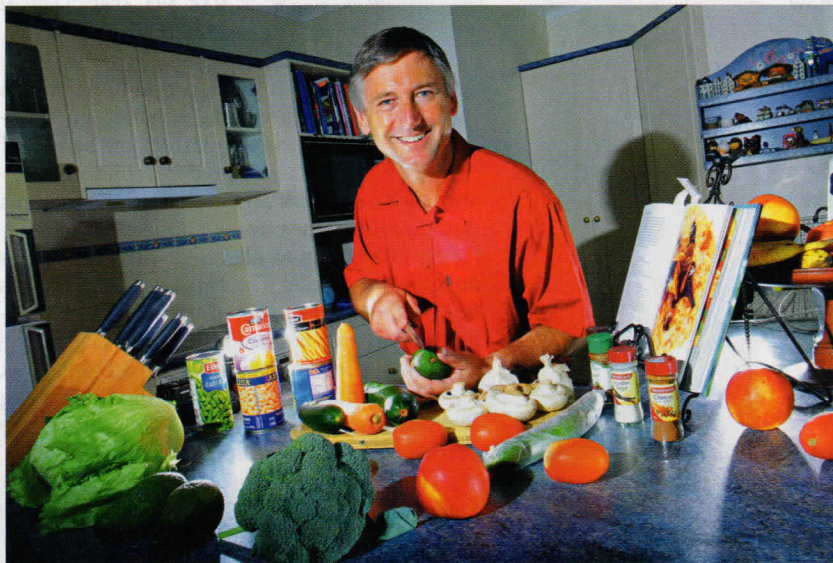
myself." And so, having bracketed some 99 flavours into 16 broader categories (woodlands, spicy, brine & salt, earthy etc), Segnit sets about explaining the obvious flavour companions (basil and tomato), the less so (rhubarb and oily fish) and the occasionally provocative (caviar and banana, anyone?)

And so it is that, for example, under the bracket of "Creamy Fruity" (banana, melon, apricot, peach, coconut, mango) you will find an entry such as Coconut & Anchovy: "In southeast Asian cooking, adding fish sauce to coconut milk is like giving your stew or curry a central nervous system." Did I mention Ms Segnit has a delightful turn of phrase?

But there is so much substance to go with her style. Smoked Fish, for example. "Smoked flavour is imparted by compounds including guaiacol, which has an aromatic, sweet, smoked-sausage taste, and eugenol, the main flavour component in clove. (Incidentally, both guaiacol and eugenol are found in barrel-aged wines, which is why fish pie and oaked chardonnay are such natural companions.)" See what I mean?

I'm not quite sure yet how I'll use the book, other than to scratch the curiosity itch. But it could lead to some rather interesting lateral cooking experiments. Strap yourself in. No pictures required.

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ADAM KNOTT

< gastronomy: he's talking about advice on basics such as whether or not to wash seafood (no) and how to correctly de-vein a prawn. Out of the four recipes he learnt, he has cooked one – garlic prawns – three different ways. “The course demystified seafood for me,” he says.

Anne Dore, 58, took a class at Perth's Urban Provider cooking school run by Nico Moretti. “I did get some things from the course unexpectedly – I now buy whole fish and ask the supplier to fillet it for me because Nico said it is the most certain way to know you are getting fresh fish,” Dore says.

So it's the little things you learn about sourcing, choosing and preparing ingredients that can make a big difference, the students report – like knowing which is the finest brand of red wine vinegar to buy, the most aromatic Chinese five-spice powder, or where to buy a ginger flower for a Malaysian dish.

Moretti sums it up when he says home cooks now have the same access to quality ingredients as chefs do. “They want to learn how to use them,” he says.

All about confidence

ROSS SALVARIS, 25, IS A DOCTOR AT Royal Perth Hospital. He did his first cooking course in December at Urban Provider (his mum gave him the voucher, for a class called Nico's Favourites) because he is an

First-timer: “They told us things that cookbooks don't,” says Warren Howle

“avid cook and foodie”. He has not used the recipes to the letter but has adapted them. “I have now got the confidence to try meals and dishes I would not have tried,” he says. “I am definitely now more willing to experiment with food. I just followed before, now I take the ideas and play with them.”

Shilotma Batenberg, 51, uses the recipes she learns at Black Pearl Epicure as a springboard to create her own dishes. “The courses free you from slavishly following recipes,” she says. She did a Christmas barbecue course in December because “I had a weakness in this area” and says she has picked up barbecue tongs once a week since.

Dr Michael Vaughan, 49, is a urologist from Hobart Private Hospital. He makes chutneys, jams and cakes as a way of relaxing after surgery. He took seven of his theatre nurses to the Agrarian Kitchen in December as an end-of-year treat. While he admits to not having cooked a single recipe, he says the course has made him a better cook. “We immersed ourselves in food that day. And I saw that you must cook with confidence and with attention to detail,” Vaughan says. And the proof of his new-found confidence? The other night, he says, he made “a perfect sponge”.



MAX ALLEN

Collateral damage

COLES AND WORTH'S haven't been waging a count war in the milk recently. The fighting has been fierce in the wine at their liquor chains, t

Dan Murphy's (“Lowest Liquor Price Guarantee”) and 1st Choice (“We Beat Every Price”) went head-to-head a couple of ago with the new vintages of the Penfolds Range – Bin 28 Kalimna Shiraz, Bin 389 net Shiraz, etc. These wines are perennial fites among red drinkers; their launch in March is eagerly awaited and demand is high. Nevertheless, Dan's and 1st Choice do to apply the doctrine of Mutually Assured counting (MAD for short) and a frenzy of slashing ensued that will go down in history as the Battle of the Bins.

The MADness kicked off with full newspaper ads from Dan's and 1st Choice Penfolds Bin wines. Unusually, none of the included prices for the wines. I asked the markets why. The answer from 1st Choice Rumsfeldian in its Zen-like weirdness:

Buying Bin 28 for just over \$15 is the vinous equivalent of milk for \$1 a litre

our price guarantee, no need to guess what market price will be.”

So I checked out the prices of one of my sentimental favourites, Bin 28, proudly celebrating its 50th commercial release this year. Or perhaps not so proudly: according to Penfolds, the \$33.99 – which is fair, considering its popularity and pedigree. But 1st Choice took it off the Mutually Assured Discounting by offering it for \$19.40. That's less than wholesale cost. Smaller independent wine merchants who have the same buying clout. Dan's response: dropping its price to \$17.85. And 1st Choice upped the ante with a seven-for-six offer, took its \$17.90 bottle price down to \$15.34.

You could, of course, argue that this is a deal for consumers. Being able to buy a Bin 28 for just over \$15 is, in many ways, the vinous equivalent of buying milk for \$1 a litre.

But that, I would argue, is precisely why such a worrying development. Don't think for a second that the supermarkets were flooding these wines so cheaply out of the goodness of their hearts. They both sold Bin 28 below cost for the same reason they're selling milk at an unsustainable price: just to drag more people through their stores than their competitors.

And if they're prepared to treat venerable wine brands like Bin 28 as collateral damage in their war over market share, I shudder to think how they might treat the thousands of lesser brands that don't have 50-year track records.

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