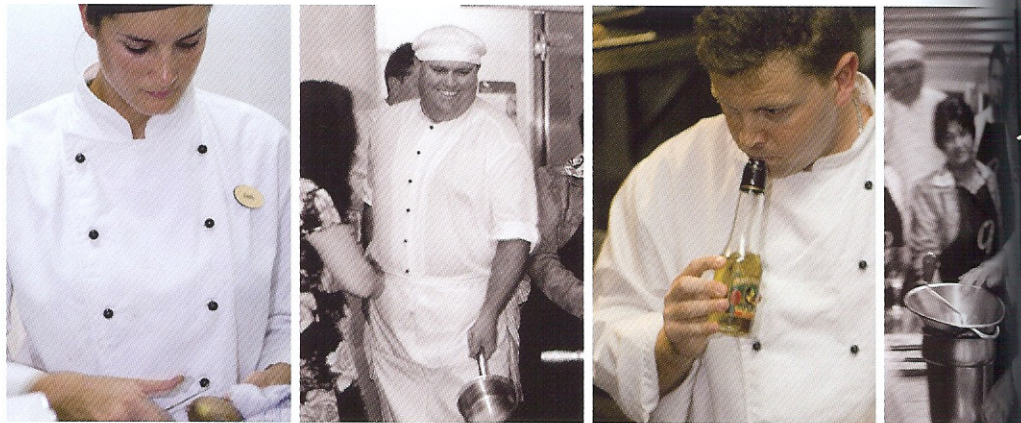




"In Europe, the table is life, it is the centre of things."



Hot work: Eager students warm to the topic with a glass or two while kitchen staff get on with the serious art of cooking.

eight-week course at TAFE – "too slow, too boring" – but the immediacy of this, together with the payoff of a great meal and the opportunity to sit around and talk about it with other people, suits her perfectly.

Nico Moretti conducts classes for his Cooking Passions cooking school from his own gourmet kitchen in Leederville. His background is in chemical engineering but his heart has always belonged to food. His father Vito started the first Italian restaurant in London, Canada in the 1950s. Nico worked in the oil industry in Australia for 10 years until a redundancy allowed the germ of an idea to grow into a thriving business. He runs themed "dinner party" cooking classes from his glorious open plan kitchen, which overlooks an impressive Bali-influenced garden.

Classes are demonstration style and limited to 10 people who are comfortably seated around an expansive kitchen bench. You can book into a scheduled class as a single, couple or group or, if you have the numbers, make a request for a special scheduling of one of his 14 different themed nights, which range from Spanish tapas to Thai through to barbecue nights. Bring along a bottle of wine and enjoy the ambience.

The dishes are cooked and served immediately. The environment is a family home and the vibe is fun and informal with various family members occasionally making an appearance. Nico is basically self-taught but travels extensively in order to learn authentic cuisine. His cinematic Canadian drawl and amiable personality add to the laidback feel.

"When I first started the classes I thought the demographics might be 80 percent female and 20 percent men, but it is probably more 60/40 now," he says. "Sometimes the guys might come in sheepishly thinking that they might have to chop or do something that they may not have done before, but once they get to a class and see it is nice and relaxed they think it's great.

"We get a lot of couples coming along and the

beauty of it is that it is like going out to a restaurant. You have a meal but you get the recipes to take with you so that you can create the same thing at home."

I attend a Thai night and, as Nico predicted, I'm surrounded by a 60/40 mix of participants. I appear to have wandered into an alternative universe after a chat reveals that two of the male participants, both serious foodies, attend courses because they like to cook for their wives. It temporarily stuns me but I am brought back into the moment by the best Thai fish cakes this side of Bangkok.

In short order and without breaking a sweat, Nico also creates and serves tom kah gai (chicken in coconut milk soup), som tam (green papaya salad), guay taew paad Thai (vegetarian noodle dish) and a coconut cake with passionfruit and pandanus syrup.

Nico's mantra is simple: dishes presented well maketh a great dinner party. "You can create a very simple menu but plate things up in a way that your guests say 'oh you have gone to a lot of trouble here'," he says. Put it this way, if I had created this menu for my guests, I would want them to shower me with frangipanis and anoint my feet with perfumed oils. I leave clutching the coconut cake recipe to my heart and a grand plan to locate and grease up the cake tin.

Xavier Pique is the chef de cuisine for Origins restaurant at the Sheraton Perth. Born and bred in Normandy (northern France) but influenced by the more Mediterranean style of the south, Xavier's style is modern but with a very traditional approach. For him stock never comes in a cube and sauces arrive at their consistency through reduction, not by being plumped with flour. When it comes to food he believes there are no short cuts worth taking.

Xavier has run chef's tables in different establishments and believes an interactive experience works best. "I take people by the hand to come and help me and get everyone involved," he says. His mission is to bring Australians back to the