



FRENCH CONNECTIONS

A day at a French cooking school was not as intimidating as I expected. In fact, my day at the Côté Cours L'Ecole de Cuisine near Bordeaux, France, was more fun than a barrel of escargot. And I learned a few tips that have served me well in my own kitchen.

STORY: MARY ANN DESANTIS **PHOTOS:** MARY ANN DESANTIS AND CLAIRE GALLAM

Whenever I would talk to cooks at potluck dinners who just happened to mention they had been to a French cooking class, I would become somewhat intimidated. All of a sudden my little covered dish seemed a bit paltry and bland. How could my recipe even begin to compare to someone's whose skills were honed in France?

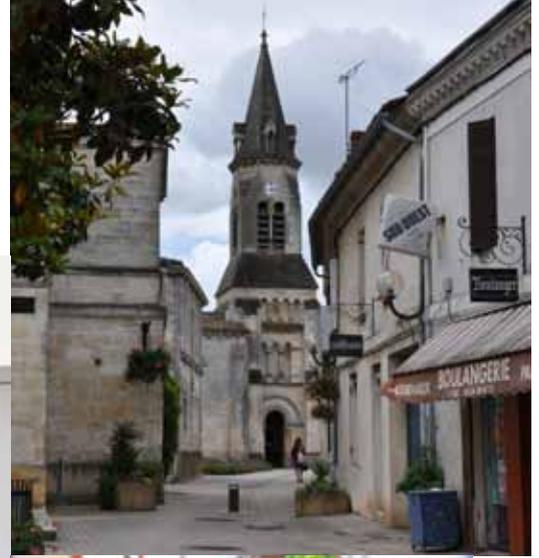
Last summer, I was invited to spend a day, along with several other

writers, at the cooking school at Le Saint James, a boutique hotel in Bouliac, France. The hillside town overlooks the Garonne River and offers a panoramic view of the city of Bordeaux. Not only is the scenery amazing from the town square, but it is even more breathtaking viewed from the guest rooms in Le Saint James. The hotel is an architectural masterpiece by Jean Nouvel, whose goal was to design the former 18th century farmhouse into a place

where the natural surroundings were showcased along with artwork and fine food.

The first thing the group noticed as we entered the grounds of Le Saint James was the glass-enclosed cooking school near the hotel's entrance. Sleek and modern, the long rectangular room offered plenty of counter space for journalists more accustomed to keyboards than cutting boards.

The next morning, our eagerness to don Côté Cours aprons outweighed



our jetlagged conditions. Our instructor, Chef Benjamin Bonnay, greeted us with an enthusiastic smile and almost perfect English. His passion for French cooking was contagious — by lunch all of us were willing to taste new things with childlike curiosity.

And just as children start with basics, we were reminded that being organized is the key to successful cooking. “We need to work with organization in the kitchen,” Chef Bonnay said. “Keep your cooking area uncluttered. An organized cook is an efficient cook.”

Our menu included a watermelon and lobster appetizer with mozzarella “foam,” soft-poached foie gras atop a vegetable medley, and a simple chocolate dessert. One of our classmates could not eat lobster so the class had the added benefit of learning how to prepare a white fish “en papillote.” My husband and I have since replicated this technique many times at home with tilapia.

In fact, cooking with parchment paper was the most useful technique I learned. In the past, my experience with parchment paper was relegated to baking. Chef Bonnay demonstrated how to cover the vegetables with parchment paper so they would cook faster yet retain healthy nutrients. The small fish filet was pan fried with butter on top of a piece of parchment paper. The paper distributed the heat so evenly that the fish never had to be turned yet it cooked all the way through without burning.

Chef Bonnay started with simple tips, such as how to crack eggs by tapping the centers together. He also recommended organic eggs because “the eggs come from real chickens.”

“And do you know what a real chicken is?” he asked in French-accented English. “It’s a chicken that eats real grass and sees the sky.”

Other helpful hints included dousing blanched vegetables and herbs in ice cold water to keep them green and using the

water from fresh mozzarella cheese to make foam for a garnish. “The French use everything,” explained Chef Bonnay.

“The beauty of taking a cooking class is learning all the tips we can use later,” said Ceil Miller-Bouchet, a Chicago-based writer who also participated in the class.

Indeed the chef’s helpful hints may not have made me a better cook, but they’ve made me a more confident one. Potluck dinners are not quite as intimidating. After all, I’ve learned a few French culinary secrets of my own.



IF YOU GO: Côté Cours, under the supervision of Executive Chef Nicolas Magie, offers a variety of classes for students of all ages and abilities: beginners, skilled cooks, children, teenagers, couples, parents, and grandparents. The “themed class,” in which I participated, costs about 85 euros per person. For a schedule of classes and special packages, visit saintjames-bouliac.com/uk.



MOZZARELLA FOAM

Foams have become very popular in France as chefs are trying new textures and combinations of unexpected tastes. Our class used a 'chinois,' a pressurized conical siphon charged with N₂O, to make the foam. Some chefs say that a whipped cream dispenser also works. Here is an Epicurious recipe similar to the one we learned at Côté Cours:

INGREDIENTS:

2 bunches basil leaves, washed and patted dry
3 cups spring water; incorporate up to 1 cup of juice from real mozzarella cheese
8 pieces gelatin sheets
4½ tablespoons granulated sugar
Cold spring water with ice for ice bath

DIRECTIONS:

1. Soak the gelatin sheets in cold water.
2. When softened, drain and wick off moisture from gelatin sheets.
3. Mix mozzarella juice and water to a boil over high heat. Blanch the basil leaves for 30 seconds.
4. Shock and drain the basil leaves, carefully reserving all the blanching liquid, stirring in the granulated sugar until dissolved.
5. Transfer blanching liquid to a deep container that can be partly submerged in a deep bowl of cold water with ample ice to bring the temperature of the boiling water down sharply and quickly. Shock until it reaches 90 degrees.
6. Add softened gelatin. Stir to dissolve. Continue to shock until chilled (about 70 degrees).
7. When basil is cold, transfer to blender and purée until smooth, adding enough cold infused liquid to facilitate blending into a smooth purée. Strain through a fine sieve so that some flecks of basil are visible in finished product.
8. Combine basil purée and cooled basil-infused liquid in a chinois. Refrigerate between uses.

COOKING CLASSES CLOSER TO HOME

So maybe a trip to France isn't in your 2014 budget, but don't let that stop you from enjoying a culinary class or two. Here are a few places close to home where you can have a lot of fun while honing your cooking skills and learning new recipes:

Le Cordon Bleu/Orlando – *The legendary French cooking school offers Bleu Ribbon Kitchen Workshops for anyone who wants to take cooking skills to the next level. The Saturday Petit Workshops are just the ticket for cooks who want to concentrate on specific skills or special dishes. Taught by Le Cordon Bleu professional chefs, the school also offers five, three, or two-day hands-on workshops. Prices range from \$99 to \$1,875, depending on the workshop. For the current class schedule, visit chefs.com/CookingClasses/Orlando.*

KaDee Kay Gourmet Kitchen Products/Mount Dora – *Join Chef Alexander Gandia from Pisces Rising Restaurant for cooking demonstrations held at KaDee Kay.*

The 2014 schedule kicks off with a wine and food pairing lesson on Wednesday, Jan. 22. The price of this special workshop is \$48 per person to cover the costs of premium wines that will be showcased. Workshops are normally \$35 and advance registration is required. The new workshop schedule will be announced in mid-January at kadeekay.com/Cooking_Demo_Classes.

The CHef Andy Personal Chef Service, LLC, Clermont – *Chef Andy Williams is celebrating his 13th year in business in Central Florida, but he has been a professional chef for more than 30 years. In addition to offering private chef services and catering, Chef Andy also teaches customized classes for couples and individuals. He shares professional techniques, trade secrets, and helpful hints to help students build their culinary foundations. For information, visit thechefandy.com.*