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Cooking at home becomes hot, classes filling up

By Amy Martinez and Melissa Allison
Seattle Times business reporters

While banks and restaurants continue to fill the recession graveyard, cooking schools appear to be thriving. Seattle is getting two new classrooms this fall, and more chefs are offering classes as a way to lure people out.

Cooking classes let cost-conscious consumers combine the thrift of domesticity with the thrill of going out, often with a glass of wine tossed in. In the U.S., restaurant eating is down by 17 meals a year from a high of 211 in 2001, according to the research firm NPD Group.

Many of the meals people eat at home are frozen rather than made-from-scratch, NPD found, which fits with a theory that chef Jordi Viladas at Cafe Lago has about students in his pasta classes.

"Jordi thinks a lot of people who come to the classes don't actually cook what he teaches. They just like the entertainment," said Carla Leonardi, the wife of Viladas and co-owner with him of Cafe Lago in Montlake.

Their free pasta classes in October attracted about 100 phone calls for every 25 seats, causing them to consider continuing the classes at a nominal charge in November.

The classes have been a bright spot in an otherwise bleak year â€" "probably our worst year since 1990," when Cafe Lago opened, Leonardi said. "For 20 years, we grew every year until two years ago, when it became pretty steady. It started going down last March and hit a low this past July and has been building up slowly since then."

Other popular Seattle restaurants that offer classes include Flying Fish, Serafina and Cicchetti.

Some chefs, including Viladas, teach at the kitchen store Dish It Up! on Magnolia.



ERIKA SCHULTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES
From left, Ryan McMinn, Carla Bevilacqua and Erin Cranston sample mango lassis during the "Shortcut to Nirvana" Indian cooking class Wednesday at Hipcooks in downtown Seattle.



ERIKA SCHULTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Hipcooks instructs students on Indian ingredients.

Dish It Up! is adding a larger classroom at its second store, which opens in Ballard next week.

In addition to its usual chef-led classes, which tend to run \$75 and up and often sell out, the new store will offer a \$30 class that includes choosing ingredients at Ballard Market and cooking them several ways. It includes a \$10 credit to Ballard Market.

Besides reacting to the changing economy, Dish It Up! is catering to a new client base, said owner Andrea Reith.

"In the beginning, a lot of people were empty nesters who wanted something fun to do," she said. "Now it's the younger, less experienced career moms who didn't have grandma around to teach them these skills."

The person helping expand classes at Dish It Up! is Heidi Kenyon, who co-owned a Seattle cooking school that went under as the economy began to sour.

After years operating out of Kenyon's home, Culinary Communion tapped out investors and cash to create its first commercial space on Beacon Hill in 2007. It became profitable again a year later, just before the banks started failing, Kenyon said.

Sales dropped 90 percent in November 2008, she said. Not long after, the city said the school needed to build an emergency exit; out of resources, Culinary Communion stopped taking reservations.

Another cooking school, Hipcooks, opened its fourth West Coast location in September near REI's flagship store downtown.

Its three-hour classes cost \$65 and encourage students to toss out measuring cups and spoons and use their instincts to create flavors.

Monika Reti, who started Hipcooks in Los Angeles in 2004, has a master's degree from the London School of Economics and has thought a lot about how the recession affects her business.

Attendance remains high, she said, but no-shows are more likely to reschedule now rather than forfeit their payment.

Each of her cooking studios brings in about \$300,000 a year, not including sales from the attached retail stores.

Like many cooking schools, Hipcooks ends each evening with a dinner party with wine. An exception is "Brown Baggin It," in which participants learn to make lunch and take their dishes in containers marked for each day of the workweek.

One of Seattle's oldest cooking schools, run by PCC Natural Markets, has grown rapidly during the recession. After a lull last winter, 27-year-old PCC Cooks is selling out classes months in advance.

Attendance is up about 14 percent this year, and the program has more than doubled its number of classes to 1,000 since late 2004.

Its class prices are low, many of them \$35 to 40 for members and \$5 more for nonmembers. Some prices will increase by \$5 in January, but PCC will continue to underwrite part of the cost as part of its nonprofit mission to improve nutrition education, said PCC Cooks Manager Marilyn McCormick.

The classes began on tables at the back of PCC markets, where a teacher would cook with an electric skillet plugged in with an extension cord.

"We highlighted bulk foods, which didn't have instructions on them," McCormick said. "People would say, 'Tempeh,

what's that?' and 'What do we do with quinoa?' "

Lucille van der Hagen has taken classes at PCC for years, because they're affordable and fun. She particularly likes tips for inexpensive ways to use the same ingredients in different dishes.

As someone who spends about \$50 a week for a family of three, van der Hagen often finds herself with way too much of something that was on sale.

"If something's on sale like raspberries, I might spend \$70 on food that week and make everything with raspberries," she said.

â€” **Melissa Allison**

Tidbit

Dry Soda of Seattle has revamped the look of its packaging and added a new flavor, blood orange, to its lineup. Known for tiny bubbles and sophisticated flavors, Dry Soda's other soda pops are lavender, lemon grass, rhubarb, cucumber, juniper berry and vanilla bean. â€” *MA*

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