



A Sizzling Trend

The Art of Cooking has Never Been More En Vogue

Not since the Swedish Chef made his debut with the Muppets has cooking been so cool. When the Food Network burst on to the scene in the late 1990s, it ushered in a previously unheard of transparency in the world of food. While Julia Childs, Martha Stewart, the Galloping Gourmet and Yan Can Cook had been on the airways for years, Food TV changed the way many of us

With more than a quarter of all Americans tuning in to the food channel at one time or another, it is apparent that viewers are more diverse than just the Martha wannabes. With a variety of different on-air personalities and styles (think "BAM!"), cooking had its lid taken off, no pun intended. Not only did it give single guys the hope of impressing their dates, it was oddly relaxing to

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looked at the kitchen. Last year alone, Food Network USA was available in more than 85 million households. And according to foodnetwork.com, five million high-tech food fanatics rank its website first among ad-supported cable networks and first among food websites. It seems our love affair with food has found a new medium of delivery.

watch. Disconcerting at first, but that soon passes.

It wasn't only on TV and the Internet that food and cooking were making breakthroughs in popularity either. The last decade saw more than its share of people talking about which diet they were on from a list of gimmicks including the South Beach, GI, Zone, no-carb, low-

carb and Atkin's diets to name a few. To help us limit our carbs or rev up our protein intake, Canadian and American governments put companies under pressure to do a better job nutritionally labeling their products. In 2006, we'll also see an increase in the size of fonts used on packaging as well as a requirement for manufacturers to provide information that is easier to read and understand on its labels, thus making it easier for us to follow those Food TV recipes or stay true to Mr. Atkin's.

Our interest in what we are eating has started to change the way we shop as well. Celebrity chefs now sell sauces, spices and ready-to-cook meals in the frozen food section. And not only can we try and copy them with real ingredients, if we mangle the meal, we can microwave its replacement! Chefs emphasizing fresh ingredients (their own frozen food selections aside) make cooking with environmentally friendly organic foods cool too. Not only are we in the kitchen, but we are in the kitchen with a clear conscience and political savvy. Small organic sections in supermarkets have grown into aisles, which have grown into entire stores. Even Dubai has seen growth as organic food stores start to pop up offering us options that are eco-friendly.

By now you've likely tuned in, picked a diet, read the labels, shopped for organics and are ready for the next step ... the actual cooking. This is when panic sets in. What do we do? Go out for dinner, of course!

Peaked by our new found voyeuristic enjoyment of cooking, many new restaurants are incorporating food preparation into your night out. Open kitchens are increasingly common in restaurant design, providing entertainment and something to talk about during appetizers. Our fascination has also brought about a resurgence of what's commonly known as the "chef's table".

Gone are the days when the table closest to the kitchen ensured that your wife stayed angry with you for days, the most chic chef's table is actually *in* the kitchen. Dubai's newest is at the Marina's Grosvenor House inside its flagship restaurant Mezzanine. Gary Robinson's hot ticket features a 4 to 7 course meal complete with running commentary from the chef himself. The table is by invitation only for regular patrons, or for those requesting a dining experience with a twist. Restaurants like Teatro in the Rotana Towers with its open kitchen or Benihana at the Al Bustan Rotana Hotel with its ultra-skilled live chefs are other options if you're not on the Grosvenor House A-list just yet.

If, instead of eating out, you feel that you really are ready to wield a big knife and chop, slice and julienne. You want to know how to get the shrimp out of his little suit of armor and you want to discover what "stock" does beside make markets rise and fall, help has arrived.

Cooking Sense is a newly launched Dubai Media City-based company that provides a spectrum of cooking sessions and interactive events. With a little something for everyone, they offer a full range of things to do in the kitchen including cooking, baking, creating natural cosmetics, cooking with and for children, cooking as a corporate event, table decoration, regional cooking, business etiquette over a meal and special diets for certain diseases including diabetes, obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. In conjunction with its chefs, physicians, beauticians and etiquette consultants, Cooking Sense is well positioned to tackle a host of cooking scenarios.

Invited to an evening session, I arrived with no idea of what to expect. Unsure whether I'd be expected to help prepare the meal or just watch the chef up close, I was greeted warmly at the door by Samira Rengert, owner and host. Located in a split-level loft, Cooking Sense exudes a welcoming feeling by using a combination of dimmed lights, candles and soft music. The kitchen itself takes up nearly two-thirds of the bottom floor, with a massive island dominating the space inlaid with five cooking ranges and ample counter space on which to work. The remaining space has a table for 12, the largest number that Samira would host in order to keep the experience "intimate". The other person in the room when I arrive is our chef and guide for the evening, Matthias Gfroerer.

Trained at a top hotel in Hamburg, Germany, Matthias has traveled around the world to develop his talent and came to Dubai just a few months ago in order to explore Middle Eastern cuisine. Having worked in award-winning restaurants and hotels including The Manor in New York, Margeaux in Berlin, Althoff Palace in Monte Carlo and Canfabes in Barcelona, his style reflects his travels by incorporating a bit of everything. Matthias is one of three chefs working with Cooking Sense to teach everyone from the intrepid beginners to the most confident of cooks.

Joined by a young couple, our team is complete and we are quickly at work. We are told that we can participate to whatever extent we feel comfortable, which to me means rolling up my sleeves and getting right into it. "Part of what we are trying to do is take away some of the fear in the kitchen to make cooking more enjoyable" explains Matthias. "We want cooking to be fun and healthy at the same time." All of the ingredients are incredibly fresh and more importantly, locally available. "If we showed you how to make a fancy meal and you couldn't buy everything at your local store, what would be the point?" he adds.

While cracking crustaceans and preparing tonight's main course, rabbit, we ask question after question, much to our hosts' delight. They're excited to be sharing their knowledge, and we're only too happy to take it all in. After all, the more we listen now, the better we eat later. "We want to offer a host of cooking solutions to Dubai,"



offers Samira. "In the morning we focus on healthy eating for the little ones with our Minichefs program, while in the afternoon we can offer corporate cookery events or private parties. The possibilities are only limited by the customer."

One program in particular leaves me wishing I worked a little closer to Media City. The "Cook your own in 30 Minutes" program offers a two-course lunch in which participants help put together a meal pre-prepped by the chefs at Cooking Sense. A quick call 30 minutes ahead of time is all you need to sign up and spend your lunch hour meeting a few new people and enjoying a healthy, sort-of-home cooked meal.

Our growing fascination with food is a good thing as far as I can see. We all know that eating well is important to our health, but it is even more important with fast food only a motorcycle delivery man away. Coupled with the summer's heat and a subsequent lack of exercise, it's easy to see why the diabetes and obesity rates in the UAE are near the worst in the world. Perhaps our preoccupation and culinary voyeurism with food will help us become more aware of what we put into our bodies. At least with the people at Cooking Sense around, it will certainly taste better. **By Jason McBride**