

I ATE MY HOMEWORK

BY ANDREA PYENSON • PHOTOS BY KRISTIN TIEG



I grew up in a Boston suburb in the heyday of “The French Chef.” My mother, already a superb cook, was fully on the Julia bandwagon and I watched intently as that particular French wave washed over her. The groundbreaking television show was appointment TV in our house, owning the cookbook de rigeur, but the real fun started when my mother took a series of French cooking classes at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education (where else?!). My father, sister, and I were the happy recipients of her between-class experiments—the exotic quiche Lorraine, mousse au chocolat, and what all of us only ever knew as the lamb dish. This last one was a sort of layered casserole of ever-so-thinly-sliced potatoes, onions, shredded Gruyère (which sent my mother shopping for the Mouli grater she still occasionally pulls out of its faded box), and, of course, lamb. It was the only time in my life I willingly—and happily—consumed ovine flesh.

French cooking classes continue to be popular at venues around the greater Boston area (though a recent perusal of the Cambridge Center for Adult Education course offerings turned up Croissants and Crepes, rather than a more comprehensive overview of that country’s cuisine). But food television, international travel, the internet, and the wealth of ethnic restaurants in our backyards have brought a world of cuisine to us, expanding curiosity about how to do more in our own kitchens. To fulfill this seemingly insatiable desire, cooking classes are sprouting up in new and increasingly original venues, offering demonstration classes and hands-on instruction for people with skills at all levels. We researched offerings in the local area to see what’s available, and present some highlights here. Without making any judgment calls, we chose to focus on hands-on classes held in less-than-traditional classrooms. They take place in locations as diverse as a farm in Concord and an artists’ studio building in Somerville, and teach skills from how to maximize your CSA box to cooking vegan Thai food. Get out your notebooks.

If students attending a cooking class at Saltbox Farm in Concord have even half as much fun as the staff appear to be having just being there, then everybody should sign up. Proprietor Ben Elliott, a chef and now farmer, admits to feeling “stupidly lucky” to be where he is—living in his mother’s childhood home on the farm his maternal grandparents built, where he spent countless happy hours when he was young. He and his wife, Julia, a registered dietitian, moved there seven years ago shortly before their first child was born.

“I love getting my hands in the dirt and I love being at the stove,” Elliott says. At the same time, he admits to feeling an obligation to maintain the land his grandparents cultivated. Though his farming experience was limited when he was growing up, “I got a great taste of it. That was a great motivation.” Three years ago, after 20 years as a chef in kitchens from former Boston dining spots Ambrosia and Locke Ober to No. 9 Park, Elliott changed direction so he could, as he says, “decompress” and spend time with his family. “I wanted to combine my pas-

sion for cooking and food with what’s growing—not only here but at other farms in New England.”

Elliott and his three-person staff offer cooking classes in the recently refurbished Little House that his grandfather built in the 1960s in the style of an English country cottage. The kitchen now boasts an eight-burner professional range and a center island long enough for eight people to work together comfortably in a hands-on class. Out the back door is a cutting garden with herbs and vegetables, where students can gather ingredients to use in their recipes. Beyond that are two one-acre vegetable plots that are rotated seasonally. The farm’s total area is 10 acres. The Elliotts also keep eight beehives, which yield roughly 100 pounds of wildflower honey annually; two dozen chickens, for eggs; and sheep, acquired last spring and scheduled for slaughter in October.

Spring 2013 was the inaugural season for classes. “We feel we’re on the precipice of something beautiful,” says Aran Goldstein, one of the chef instructors. “We feel like if people can see cooking dinner as not a daunting task, they can take more ownership of their health. There are a lot of layers to why we’re trying to do this.”

Class schedule is extremely flexible, depending on students’ interests. During the first season, “Cooking from your CSA box” was very popular. (Saltbox Farm also runs a small CSA and a catering business.) Or students can pick what’s ready to be harvested from the garden and create a menu from that. “Not many people are used to doing that,” notes Elliott. “We’re having a lot of fun trying ideas,” Goldstein adds. “People want to come in here and get their hands dirty.”

This fall, the gardens will be planted with three varieties of cabbage, an array of winter squash, lettuces, radishes, kale, potatoes, onions, and braising greens. During the early part of the season the earth should still yield eggplants, tomatoes, and peppers. Classes will include another round of CSA box cooking, sweet and savory fall pies, game meat (featuring elk chops), farm egg cookery with eggs from Saltbox chickens, and, after the sheep are slaughtered, lamb cookery with Saltbox meat. Elliott and his wife will teach a class focused on healthy cooking and eating.

While being careful not to sound like he’s preaching, Elliott notes that the school, because it is set on a working farm—in historic Concord no less—presents “an opportunity to preserve culinary traditions; cooking simply from what you grow.” To that end, Goldstein, who makes pickles and jams, will offer a jarring and preserving class, which he hopes will impress on students “how simple it is, and how cool it is.” A professionally trained chef who has worked in kitchens around the world, Goldstein is currently working toward a degree in nutrition.

Ralph Fiegel, another member of the Saltbox kitchen staff, introduced a beer brewing program at the farm, setting up shop in a small room off the dining room. His repertoire currently includes five varieties that his colleagues deem pretty impressive. While the farm is not licensed to serve the beer, students will be able to use it in cooking. It will be featured in a “Celebrating beer in the kitchen” class, used to braise sausages and make fon-





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due. And students will use spent beer grains to make bread.

Classes at Saltbox last about three hours and include a sit-down meal after preparation—though Elliott notes that prep time includes “lots of eat-as-you-go.” The dining room boasts a walk-in-sized fireplace that will soon hold a spit for roasting whole animals.

Initially, most students came from the immediate area—Concord, Lexington, and Lincoln, a few from Newton and Brookline. As word gets out, the mix is sure to expand.

In Somerville, Mark DesLauriers holds a one-man culinary school, ArtEpicure, in the space he and his wife used to occupy in the Brickbottom Artists Building (they moved upstairs when he opened the school). When he was growing up, his parents owned a restaurant in Townsend, Massachusetts. DesLauriers says, “I always knew I’d probably become a chef but I didn’t know my path.”

The chef-turned-instructor left home in the early 1970s, when he was 17, and traveled the world, working in kitchens from Evansville, Indiana to Belize to Amsterdam to Tunis before returning to the Boston area in 1999 with his German wife, whom he met in Amsterdam.

In 2006, after working in a gourmet shop and helping open a restaurant and a gastro-pub, DesLauriers launched ArtEpicure, offering hands-on classes in a high-ceilinged, somewhat eclectic space with a basic oven, two induction burners, and a center island where students gather under an impressive collection of hanging copper and enamel pots and pans. One wall is lined with roughly half of DesLauriers’ 1,000-volume cookbook collection. The space is almost exactly as it was when DesLauriers and his wife lived there. It was important to teach in a home kitchen, he says, because the equipment, for the most part, mimics what most of his students have. Over the years, he has added extras, like the induction burners, a sous vide water oven, and a serious ice cream maker. He picks up top-of-the-line pots, pans, and tableware at discount stores and estate sales.

ArtEpicure offers classes for groups of up to eight, and private parties for groups of eight to 14, in which the person or group planning the gathering works with DesLauriers to set the menu. “I’ve been to more bachelorette parties than a lot of women,” he deadpans. Classes are four hours long. “Everyone works together,” DesLauriers notes. “Some people may work on lentils, while others sweat vegetables. In a pasta class, two people make the dough. Everybody gets a chance to roll it.” Students usually prepare three courses, then feast together on the results.

Between private and public classes, DesLauriers is in the kitchen about five times a week. People come from as far away as New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Skill levels of attendees are “all over the board,” DesLauriers says, ranging from skilled home cooks to neophytes. He has even had restaurant cooks who simply want to learn a particular craft or cuisine. Most classes are in the evening, but the Sunday brunch offering, fittingly, is held late Sunday morning.

The fall schedule includes classes on vegan Indian, classic

German, and country French cooking, all of which are popular topics. DesLauriers often plans a “couples date night” class. In October, that will feature duck. “Every month I try to add new [classes] to see how it works out,” he says. Because he has so many returning students, he receives a lot of requests. Recently, people have wanted to know how to cook for the Paleo diet, so Paleo Indian and Paleo Latin America classes were popular.

“Part of my job is a lot like doing stand-up,” DesLauriers says. “It’s entertainment.” He describes the classes as “a dinner party almost every night. I’m with people having fun.”

In a bucolic setting on 1,000 acres in Ipswich, the kitchen staff at Appleton Farms, one of the nation’s oldest continuously operating farms and the oldest working farm in Massachusetts (see *Edible Boston*, Spring 2013), launched Appleton Cooks!, a series of hands-on culinary classes and workshops, last June. Established in 1636, Appleton Farms was owned by nine generations of Appleton family members before it was given to the Trustees of Reservations in 1998. Four years later the farm established a CSA, which is currently one of the largest in the country. And in 2011, following completion of a dairy processing facility and creamery, farmers began producing cheese, butter, and Greek-style yogurt from the milk of its herd of Jersey cows.

A staff of five chef-educators leads the classes, which are held in the farm kitchen or outside, around the earth oven. According to Susan Wood, farm kitchen program manager, most classes last three hours and accommodate up to 12 people. Everything taught in class can be reproduced in home kitchens. Chefs use ingredients from the farm when they can and draw on the bounty of nearby farms as well.

Fall courses will include a late September wild fermentation workshop, holiday hors d’oeuvres, and Thanksgiving on the farm. An autumn harvest in New England class, featuring root vegetables, winter squashes, and fall fruits, will include an optional visit to the fields to harvest ingredients and see how they are grown. Wood notes that while the Appleton Cooks! staff plans the class schedule in advance, they are open to customizing classes.

Bon appétit!

Saltbox Farm, 40 Westford Road, Concord
978.610.6020 saltboxfarmconcord.com

ArtEpicure, 1 Fitchburg Street, Somerville
617.996.5334 artepicure.com

Appleton Cooks! Route 1A, Hamilton and Ipswich
978.356.5728
thetrustees.org/places-to-visit/csa/appleton-farms-csa/appleton-cooks/

Andrea Pyenson is taking a course on baking flatbread in a wood-burning oven as soon as she finishes this story. She writes about food and travel and has co-authored two cookbooks.

