

CLASS ACT
BY JACKIE LANTRY
PHOTOS BY CASSANDRA BIROCCO

CHEZ NICOLE
Home Cooking with a French Twist

When asked if I would enjoy attending a home cooking class taught by a woman born and raised in France, I thought to myself, “Is a bean green?” Who wouldn’t want to learn the tips and techniques of a woman steeped in a tradition of food excellence?

Nicole Spaulding was raised in a lively provincial town in the southwest part of France and has lived in the U.S. for many years. In fact she raised her children here, yet her food sensibility is still strongly rooted in French tradition. She has a reverence for food—a reverence for where and how her food is grown, conveyed to market, prepared and finally—a reverence for how it is consumed. So of course I jumped at the chance to take a cooking class at Chez Nicole.

Despite the rain and crazy drivers on I-95, I was excited as I made my way to her Wakefield home. Alas, rain, driving and maps do not a good combination make. By the time I pulled into her driveway my shoulders had crept up toward my ears and my knuckles were white on the steering wheel. I was relieved to be at my destination.

As I opened my car door I heard a woman call out “Allo, Allo.” As if by magic the rain had turned to a refreshing mist. The air was perfumed with herbs. After snipping fresh thyme from her herb garden (for our cooking class) the woman straightened up and shook my hand. “I am ‘Necole,’” she said.

Continuing in her charming Brive accent, Nicole told me about a life steeped in the tradition of fresh local foods. “One of my favorite things to do is go to the Saturday market at dawn to see what wonderful treasures I will discover. Brive-la-Gaillarde is known for its extraordinary geese, ducks, wild mushrooms and black truffles.” In other words, earthy, hearty foods perfect for a winter menu.

Nicole’s cooking philosophy seeps through her classes like a bouquet garni through broth. Conveying the pleasure of cooking—“it should not only be easy but fun and even relaxing”—she believes that it’s possible to prepare a healthy, delicious meal in about 30 minutes. Lest you think this is a Rachel Ray kind of thing, it is as far from *30 Minute Meals* as you can get. The can opener is not a primary tool in Nicole’s kitchen. She goes for fresh and *fresh* to Nicole means *local*. Her cooking is informed by market availability.

“I eat asparagus in the spring, corn in early August and apples in the fall,” she told me. Local resources include Carpenters Farm and the University of Rhode Island farmers’ market. She buys her fish at Champlins in Galilee and her meats at Stoney Hill Cattle Company in Charlestown. A friend plants and maintains a huge garden on land owned by Nicole and her husband. True to her fresh local philosophy, they’ve made an arrangement to pick what they need in lieu of rent.

Boeuf Bourguignon, a classic French stew of beef cooked in red wine with mushrooms and onions, was the centerpiece of our class. Appetizers included salad with warm goat cheese and walnuts, roasted red peppers, as well as a potage parmentier (potato leek soup). Steamed vegetables would accompany our stew and for desert we would prepare pear clafoutis topped with yogurt and fresh raspberry coulis (the raspberries were picked from Nicole’s garden).

My classmates and I donned our official chef’s aprons—with Chez Nicole merrily splashed across the front—and got to work. Nicole went over some basics, like where to find things in her kitchen and how to carry a knife so it doesn’t become a weapon. Then we were on our way. In no time the room was warm with cooking and friendship.

I cut chunks of salt pork and helped to peel cooking onions. I cored and sliced pears then sprinkled them with sparkling crystals of tawny brown sugar. I pressed walnuts into discs of velvety goat cheese while watching my classmates roast red peppers, sauté mushrooms and brown sizzling pieces of beef. Red wine billowed into purplish clouds as we deglazed pans.

RECIPE

PEAR CLAFOUTIS

By Nicole Spaulding

2 ripe pears, peeled, cored and cut in small chunks
4 Tbsp granulated brown sugar
4 eggs
¼ cup flour
1 pinch of baking powder
1 cup light cream
butter to grease dish

Pre-heat the oven to 400 degrees. Butter the bottom and sides of a small baking dish, 10 ½ inches in diameter and 1 ½ inches deep.

Place the cut up fruit at the bottom. Sprinkle 2 tablespoons of the sugar over the fruit.

In a small bowl, break the eggs, add the other 2 tablespoons of sugar and beat thoroughly. Add the flour and the baking powder and mix again. Finally add the cream and pour mixture over the fruit. Bake for 30 minutes or until the top is nice and brown and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.

Serve warm or at room temperature. Serves 6.