

KNEADING THE DOUGH

IS COOKING THE NEW SHOPPING?

The latest trend is taking place in the kitchen. Amanda Vaill on why members of the social brigade now think cooking is cool. Photographed by Frederik Lieberath

Alexa Hampton, president of Mark Hampton Inc., an upscale interior design firm, is wearing a black Calvin Klein pantsuit and Chanel shoes. She's standing in the galley kitchen of a Manhattan high-rise, but she's not holding a fabric swatch or checking a paint sample. She's stir-frying a filling for spring rolls under the watchful eye of Karen Lee, noted cooking instructor. "For the first time in years, I cooked for myself the other day," says Alexa. "I was feeling creative. I sautéed artichoke hearts in wine and butter, grilled chicken, and made pasta sauce. I meant well. But then I woke up in the middle of the night and felt terrible. I'd given myself my first case of heartburn! So I figure I've got everything to learn in a cooking class. When I do, friends will have a reason to come by and visit more."

Alexa is one of five women—all more skilled at making restaurant reservations than cooking—who have shown up to take one of Karen's famous classes in low-fat fusion cuisine

(Sigourney Weaver is an alumna). What's going on? Has cooking become the new shopping? Is it now one of those things—like getting a facial or going to Lotte Berk—that is both bonding exercise and balm to the body and spirit?

Apparently, yes. People who used to eat out for a living are now tending the home fires. Perennial social partier Nan Kemper confesses: "Compared with a year ago, my engagement book looks like the Sahara desert." Not that she'd have it any other way. Since September 11, "I just want to gather my loved ones around my own table," she says.

Not only are enrollments for cooking lessons way up across the country, but now they are the splashiest themes for bridal showers: Janet Weissman of Scottsdale, Arizona, is giving one for her daughter, Shari, 25, this month. "The class will be a great learning opportunity," says Janet. "But it is also something more. I think it's the perfect time to bring together all these women and not just open presents. We will be doing something interactive *and* productive. Most important, >

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we'll have an opportunity to talk and laugh."

Sales of gift certificates from cookery schools have also skyrocketed. For Christmas this year, Vivian Liu, a marketing events planner from Foster City, California, gave them to three good friends. "We're single and go to trendy restaurants for dinner almost every night," says Vivian. "That scene is getting old, so I figured it's time for us to learn to cook and to relax at intimate dinner parties."

You don't necessarily need something to celebrate to host a girls' night of cooking, however. Deborah Miller, a psychotherapist from New York, recently arranged for a cooking teacher to give six of her best friends—and their husbands—a class on Italian cuisine in her kitchen. "These are working women with successful careers," says Deborah. "They have housekeepers to prepare their meals for them when they are running late or have an appointment after work. But they threw themselves into making a menu of bruschetta, guinea hen, and risotto. It was fun to see how some women really got involved in the experience while others were more concerned about not getting dirty," she says. "One of my friends was wearing a Barbara Bui suit with her new Prada slingbacks, and she insisted on taking part only in the dishes that wouldn't involve breadcrumbs or flour, so she wouldn't ruin her clothes."

Even Fortune 500 CEOs have caught the cooking bug. Executives from firms such as Merrill Lynch, Microsoft, and Estée Lauder have all recently entertained clients at classes organized by the Institute of Culinary Education's Special Events department. Daniele Menache, director of marketing events at Bernstein Investment Research and Management, thinks cooking classes now work better than Broadway shows as entertainment for her clients. She recently brought 50 of her firm's

The cooking instructor sends her students out into the world with the knowledge that they can call her at any time for advice, technical support, or disaster counseling.

clients—people who "probably go out to dinner every night or have their own private chefs"—together for an evening session. "They had no clue what they were doing," says Daniele. "Many of them didn't know how to measure half a cup of flour. They were incredibly surprised they could actually create something edible. I've never seen such stiff-looking people appear so comfortable. At the end of the event, they didn't want to leave."

Why the sudden popularity of cooking? Deborah Miller believes one reason is that it can be extremely therapeutic. "In infancy, food and nurturing are intimately connected," she explains. "Therefore, gathering with friends and family to share good food is a powerful ritual that promotes interpersonal bonding. People are seeking companionship right now and want to regain a sense of warmth and familiarity, which cooking offers."

This seems to be what has brought a parade of Jimmy Choo and Manolo Blahnik shoes to the door of Karen Lee's Lincoln Center apartment today. Alexa Hampton and the other four students will learn to prepare a butternut squash soup with five-spice powder, spring rolls filled with porcini-and-leek duxelles, filet of sole with a red pepper sauce, steamed rice, and for dessert—or as a reward for all that hard work?—delicate, buttery almond cookies.

In addition to Alexa, the novices are Courtney Pulitzer, a willowy blonde who is president of Courtney Pulitzer Creations, a dot-com networking service; and Talila Gafter, a birdlike brunette in Italian couture who runs Fifth Avenue jewelry boutique Ellagem, speaks eight languages, and is studying for a Ph.D. in philosophy. Despite their chic, both women sound positively domestic when they describe their reasons for coming. "After September 11, it became really important to me to see the people in my life who I care about," says Courtney. "There's something more comfortable about being able to invite a friend into your home—it's like a warm, fuzzy gift you can give someone." Echoes Talila: "I want to connect in a more personal manner, and people really appreciate a fine dinner at home, a lengthy evening with good food and good wine."

Samantha Strauss, a stylist for celebrities like Johnny Depp, Marcia Gay Harden, and Hugh Jackman, has previously taken one of Karen's classes and is back today for more. She says she's learning to cook because she "can't stand eating takeout anymore." Furthermore, she adds, "I want to have Ian [McKellen, the actor, another client] over for dinner. I'd much rather cook for him than take him to a restaurant." The veteran cook is Cindy Edelson, a Missoni-clad Upper East Side mother of three who used to eat out "always," until she became a student of Karen's; now she throws monthly dinners for 12, and she does all the cooking.

Karen, a five-foot-two-inch blonde dynamo in a crisp white double-breasted cotton chef's shirt from Bragard and white trousers, has a manner somewhere between drill sergeant and best girlfriend. She sizes up the recruits. "Courtney and Alexa," she says, "I want you two to stand at the stove like this: feet shoulder-length apart, knees bent, pelvises tucked in. Those are the proper body mechanics for cutting and cooking."

Talila takes her place before the stove, and Karen gently corrects her stance. It isn't easy to really get down in stilettos; Karen herself wears lace-up chef's shoes with steel toes. "I'm going to get a pair of those," declares Talila. "For my husband."

FASHION EDITOR: JILLIAN DAVISON; HAIR: REBEKAH FORECAST; MAKEUP: LORRAINE LECKIE; PROP STYLIST: NOEMI DICORCIA-BONAZZI; FROM LEFT: JACKET: CHANEL; BROOCH: ELLAGEM; HARRY WINSTON; TOP: GAFTER'S OWN; JEWELRY: ELLAGEM; JACKET: VERSACE; SHIRT: HENRI BENDEL; JEWELRY: HENRI BENDEL; BROOCHES: ELLAGEM; SHIRT: RALPH LAUREN COLLECTION; JEWELRY: ELLAGEM; BLAZER AND SWEATER: CALVIN KLEIN; EARRINGS AND BROOCH: ELLAGEM. SEE WHERE TO BUY FOR DETAILS.



Cindy Edelson, Talila Gafter, Courtney Pulitzer, Samantha Strauss, and Alexa Hampton (from left) learn to whip up dishes in Karen Lee's kitchen. Photographed by Donald McPherson.

Finally, after three hours spent making appetizers and the entrée, they get to the almond cookies. "It's not easy to stir something solid," says Talila, out of breath from trying to agitate the glutinous mass in her bowl. "I'm not putting my hands in it with this ring on," adds Courtney. Alexa gets flour on the lapel of her Calvin Klein jacket, but rolls with the punches. "You just brush it with the same fabric," she says, demonstrating. It works.

In fact, everything works. The spring rolls are crunchy; the soup velvety; the fish delicately sauced; the cookies crumbly and sinful. The talk is warm and full of laughter. The afternoon is a success. Karen sends her students out into the world with printed recipes for the dishes they made and the knowledge that they can call her at any time for advice, technical support, or disaster counseling. Will they? Cindy and Samantha are already hooked, but Talila and Alexa are also impressed. "I won't cook by following recipes. I'm not interested in that," says Talila, "but I will have more respect for the process and the technique." She won't give up her dinners at Daniel or Jean-Georges, either, but

"knowing how to cut with those knives, how to pick squashes—I'm enriched by that." And Alexa says: "I want to have a small repertoire of dishes so I'm not at the mercy of ordering in." Only Courtney seems doubtful. Though she has plans to take more classes from Karen, "the thought of cooking for more than four people—well..." she says, her soft voice trailing off. "I'd probably just have it catered."

Additional reporting by Jennifer Bett Meyer

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