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A Small World: Classes In Home Kitchens

By POLLY FROST

WITH all due respect to New York's great cooking schools, they are, for the most part, worlds away from home kitchens. They have space and equipment undreamed of in most apartments, but they lack the warmth of home and hearth.

A professional institution is fine for anyone heading off to labor in some restaurant dungeon. But for the rest of us, there is often a disconnect.

Once — and the tradition is nearly gone now — we could learn the secrets of home cooking alongside our mothers or fathers by helping them chop, mix and stir. Domestic cooking was not a formal art. And yet beautiful food often emerged from those informal settings.

Fortunately, in loco parentis, there is a small band of people who still offer latecomers a way into this domestic tradition by teaching fine cooking in real, home kitchens. You don't hear much about them these days. Once there were scores of them in Manhattan alone; now there are just a handful, and they are easily drowned out by the din of the big schools.

Henri-Étienne Lévy is one of those superb cooks and teachers who work at home. He has been imparting the techniques of classical French cooking for 20 years through classes he calls "La Cuisine Sans Peur" ("Cooking Without Fear").

He gives demonstration classes to a maximum of four students in the 16-by-9-foot kitchen of the Manhattan apartment he and his wife share. He has almost no counter space; his porch-green cupboards have not come from a catalogue. Eighteenth-century plates are lined up on the wall next to a modest butcher-block dining table. Patterned curtains hide a few essential cookbooks.

"I hate high-tech kitchens," Mr. Lévy said.

A few weeks ago, while Mr. Lévy was showing a class the

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SPACE EXPERTS

Karen Lee, at left, can teach cooking to 10 students at her Manhattan apartment, which has only a galley kitchen. **Henri-Étienne Lévy**, at far left, demonstrates French cooking in his 16-by-9-foot low-tech kitchen.

Dining Out

The New York Times

“One of the most established courses is taught by Karen Lee...”

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perfect way to make a roast with marchand-de-vin sauce, his young tabby cat jumped between his feet as he hurried onions over to the pan warming on the stove. And in the midst of rolling out delicately crunchy *pâte brisée* to top an earthy snail-and-mushroom soup, he fielded some fond teasing from his students. Then it was back to serious food advice.

“Whenever you use snails, you cannot go wrong by combining them with mushrooms,” he said. “They have what is known as a taste of the earth.” As for the snails: “Buy them in cans, and don’t overcook them or they’ll become tough.”

Mr. Lévy later took down a 1983 port to spritz the quartered figs that, along with Italian Gorgonzola dolce, would be the dessert — and all the while he was swearing eloquently at people who put wrappings on bottles that must be furiously whittled away to get at the cork.

The meal that this lord of the home fires produced in the midst of this bustle was sublime.

The prices at these home cooking classes can be far above courses at famous cooking schools like Peter Kump’s, but the experience is a different one — far more intimate, with four students at Mr. Lévy’s versus an average class of 12 at Kump’s, for example.

The sad fact is that even as the country becomes ever more food-savvy, there are fewer and fewer galley professors like Mr. Lévy.

But the happy news is that the handful of home-based classes that remain here are terrific, taught by devoted, first-rate cooks in real New York homes. Despite the celebrity of some of the teachers, they mostly remain a hidden part of the cooking-class scene, an underground that can be discovered only by word of mouth or careful research.

One of the most established courses is taught by Karen Lee in the galley kitchen of her modern high-rise apartment. In the ear-

ly 1970’s, she was a young divorced mother with five years of training in classical Chinese cooking behind her. By dint of charm, enthusiasm and entrepreneurial spirit, she began her teaching career by talking to other mothers in Central Park.

“They got the class for free in exchange for bringing four or five friends together who paid,” Ms. Lee recalls.

Her classes for up to 10 students have been attracting loyal followers since then: some of them have been coming back for 25 years.

These repeat students are a hallmark of home cooking classes. At Mr. Lévy’s Wednesday morning class, I recognized Lenore Kravitt, who had been in one of his classes with me almost a decade ago. As we got reacquainted, I learned that she had been taking classes with Lévy on and off for 19 years.

If these home classes inspire ardent devotion in students, why aren’t there more of them?

“It takes enormous preparation and concentration to do this kind of teaching,” said Julie Sahni, the cookbook author, who conducts small intense, hands-on classes in Indian cooking at her home in Brooklyn Heights.

It also takes much more: the flexibility to have strangers traipsing through one’s home, assistants to shop and help with prep work, and a large outlay for everything from food and wine to knives and aprons for students.

Even a teacher who charges \$1,445 for a 27-hour course, as Ms. Sahni does, is not doing it solely for the money. The career-sensible thing for a cook of this caliber would be to focus only on the fame game — concentrating on promoting cookbooks, endorsing products, doing personal appearances, maybe chasing after a slot on television. Though some of these teachers do all these things, they persist in their home cooking classes because they are devoted to passing along a tradition.

“If you want to learn home cooking, there’s no point to it unless you’re studying it in someone’s kitchen,” Mr. Lévy said.

Part of the fun of studying with these teachers is getting to peek into other people’s kitchens. Yet, even that faintly illicit Manhattan pleasure turns out to have a serious benefit. Anyone planning to break the bank on renovating a kitchen would do well to take one of these classes. A dazzling culinary setting, you quickly learn, is not a prerequisite for first-rate cooking.

Ms. Lee teaches morning and evening classes in a typical closet-size Manhattan kitchen. “People see my kitchen, and they think, ‘If she can do it, I can do it,’” Ms. Lee said. (She is a caterer as well as a teacher, and so she does have a six-burner stove and an additional refrigerator in the living room.) But the small space is actually a lesson in efficiency. Pointing at an entire dining room wall of pegboard festooned with woks, pans and utensils, several students murmured, “I should do this.”

Anna Teresa Callen holds her regional Italian cooking classes, with hands-on instruction for up to six students, in a friend’s Greenwich Village apartment kitchen. Her own is too small. Of the three home classes that I visited, here was the kitchen most likely to make a Manhattanite go green with envy: it’s almost suburban-size, with plenty of counter space and lovely cream-colored wood cabinetry. But it’s still clearly someone’s home: no angled mirrors here. And as Ms. Callen teaches, she gives advice on how to scale your efforts to your own place.

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While all these chefs drill home the basics and the techniques, they also answer questions that students in bustling cooking-school classes might never ask.

What’s the best way to wash sand from arugula and other dark greens? Ms. Callen showed how: pour kosher salt on them and cover them in lukewarm water: the grit will fall to the bottom and you don’t have to rinse over and over.

What are some of Mr. Lévy's favorite presentation techniques? Even though he has plenty of tricks up his sleeve, Mr. Lévy discourages his students from emulating the dazzling architectural feats served in trendy restaurants. "I like the rough and tumble of a plate," he says.

Other tips can be picked up without even asking. Ms. Lee tapes her recipes to the cupboard doors to keep them visible yet safe from oil and flour. When I opened a jar of cumin in her kitchen, I was overtaken by the difference in smell between her spices and mine. "Maybe you've put your spices next to the stove in one of those fancy decorator racks," she said. "That's the way to lose flavor." I'm now storing mine the way she does, in brown vitamin bottles in the refrigerator.

I also noticed the way Ms. Lee slowly sweated the onions for an Indian-inspired lentil soup, and only added the spices for it after the onions were safely caramelized. She then encased that intensified flavor in tomato purée before adding homemade vegetable stock. The soup almost sang with flavor, despite its low fat content.

A student in this kind of class also learns just by watching the informal, improvisational choreography of great home cooks at work — the way they clean up as they go, the little tricks they have devised. After watching Ms. Lee prepare an entire complex meal using a stainless-steel Chinese cleaver as her only knife, I bought one myself. Now, I rarely use any other.

Mostly, though, you pick up the feel of how a great kitchen hums with activity, all of it smooth. For Ms. Callen, the key to everything is honoring fine ingredients by treating them well.

This concept takes on meaning when you watch her smelling the olive oil, patting the succulent meats that will be simmered to make bollito misto, then showing her students how to cut peppers for sautéing. Slicing them in half and deftly removing the pith, she bemoaned the way that "Americans cut away too much of the pepper."

Home kitchen classes are also a great way to meet and network with other home cooks. A few days after my class with Ms. Lee, a student called to tell me about a pasta machine he had bought and where I could find one for myself. Two of the students in Ms. Callen's class made plans to get together to exchange their own cooking secrets.

"I really believe people in New York don't just want to go to restaurants," said Vicki Majors, who was taking her first home

cooking class. "I think many people want to cook in their own apartments. But they don't know how."

How to Find Them

MOST of the home cooking schools in the New York area are listed in "The Guide to Cooking Schools, 1999" edited by Dorene V. Kaplan (Shaw Guides, \$22.95), and they can also be found on the guide's Web site, www.shawguides.com.

Following are a few of the more established teachers:

JULIE SAHNI teaches comprehensive classes in Indian cooking and cooking with spices to a maximum of three students. Classes run from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. for three consecutive days, and from 11 A.M. to 2 P.M. on the fourth. Next opening is April 6 to 9. Fee is \$1,445; Box 023792, Brooklyn 11202-3792, (718) 625-3958.

HENRI-ÉTIENNE LÉVY of La Cuisine Sans Peur teaches classical French cooking as well as regional cuisines like Alsatian and Provençal to a maximum of four students. Classes run one weekday morning or evening for five consecutive weeks. Fee is \$450; (212) 362-0638.

ANNA TERESA CALLEN teaches regional Italian cooking to a maximum of six students. Classes are held from 6:30 to 9:30 P.M. on five consecutive Mondays. Next class, Jan. 11. Fee is \$625; (212) 929-5640.

KAREN LEE teaches fusion cooking, pairing Chinese, French, Italian techniques and ingredients, to a maximum of 10 students. Classes are held from 6 to 9 P.M. on four consecutive Mondays. Fee is \$450; (212) 787-2227.

“An Indian inspired Lentil and Split Pea Soup almost sang with flavor... despite its low fat content.”

KAREN LEE teaches fusion cooking, pairing Chinese ingredients with French, Italian or American techniques and ingredients, to a maximum of 10 students. Classes are held from 6 to 9 P.M. on four consecutive Mondays. Next class, Jan. 18. Fee is \$450; (212) 787-2227.