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Cooking with Class

Networking is a key ingredient for MB culinary arts school's founder as she helps students "feel secure" in the kitchen.

By Megan Bagdonas

DAILY BREEZE

Armed with a sharp knife and a zeal to spice up her clients' culinary repertoire the energetic Annette Gallardo operates an interactive cooking school in Manhattan Beach.

The South Bay School of Cooking teaches anyone wanting to enhance a culinary resume, from newly wedded women trying to impress mothers-in-law to single men sick of eating frozen pizzas.

"I like the challenge of making them feel secure in cooking," said Gallardo as she rinsed off some leeks.

The 46-year-old former pastry chef opened her school in 2004 and has since been slicing and dicing for attentive students wanting to learn how to cook anything from Spanish paella and Thai noodles to simple soups and sauces.

Small classes structured around a single workspace is what Gallardo says distinguishes her hands-on cooking instruction from the rest.

"Fondle your fish," Gallardo advised a recent sold-out weeknight fish class. Eleven students gathered around their mentor as she guided them from preparation to presentation of Asian-style steamed salmon, parchment-baked fish with sea scallops, asparagus and green beans, pecan-crusting catfish and other fish fare.

"When I'm here teaching, I'm on stage -- I'm a ham and I love that," she said of her bombastic teaching style.

The South Bay School of Cooking relies strongly on its Web site and Gallardo's tireless pavement pounding to get the attention of would-be at-home chefs.

"I'm a super networking person -- I have to be -- because I don't have the advertising dollars, so I've found a lot of ways around it," Gallardo said. "I'm not shy -- I'll say, 'Hey, I have this business, you have this business, maybe we could market together.' "

Gallardo works with Whole Foods grocery and Cookin' Stuff culinary store for advertising, sponsorships

and promotions.

The way she sees it, they all share the same type of customers: "If someone's in there buying a really nice knife they might also be interested in cooking classes."

Speaking of knives, Gallardo is the self-proclaimed Knife Queen, owning more than 30 knives, some of which she lets students use.

"This knife is Henckels from Spain," she says authoritatively while sharpening a knife a student brought to class.

One of her cooking philosophies is that people don't need all the high-priced culinary accoutrements.

"I give them techniques so they don't have to buy ridiculous amounts of equipment."

And don't get her started on the frivolity of a chopping block full of specialized knives. "I've come up with ways that you can get away with just three knives maximum in your life and know how to do everything with those knives."

Classes at the South Bay School of Cooking are more than just chopping, measuring and baking. They serve as fountains of savory advice on all things food-related: where to buy the freshest fish, differences in paprika, and how to rig a steamer out of a skillet, a metal coil and a plate.

"I should be doing infomercials," jokes Gallardo as she demonstrates various graters and shredders to her students.

Three assistants are on hand at classes to whisk away dirty utensils and bring supplies and spices to the workspace so students can concentrate on learning, not on mundane kitchen chores. It also makes the classes more fun.

Gallardo says she could write a book about all the funny conversations she hears while cooking. At her popular fish class, one woman asked in all seriousness, "Have you heard about cooking the fish in a dishwasher?"

Occasionally guest chefs are contracted to teach a specialty class, but Gallardo teaches most. She has classes ranging from "Everything Chocolate" to a "Cooking Lean Series."

While Gallardo's ideal business situation would involve owning a retail cooking store with classes and publishing a cookbook, she is content for now with her focus on creating new classes and keeping abreast of cooking trends while running a business.

"I am the office," she says. "I also wax the floors here."

Gallardo works hard to create word-of-mouth, or a buzz: She teaches one to three classes a week, buys fresh produce, tests new recipes, responds to e-mail and sends out newsletters.

Her classes seem to fill up fast.

"I'm thinking about bringing my husband to the basic series," one student says before biting into her finished culinary masterpiece: an ahi tuna burger.

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