

Published November 7th, 2012

Back to the Table for the Holidays

By Susie Iventosch



Back to the Table on Lafayette Circle Photo Susie Iventosch

The first thing you'll notice when entering Back To The Table Cooking School in Lafayette is an inviting dining room table, prominently situated front and center. This is no accident, as sisters Leslie Pease and Lisa Evaristo wanted their school to invoke the lost custom of dining together around the dinner table, along with the friendship and anticipation that go with it. So each and every class begins and ends at this very table. Here guests and instructors offer introductions, backgrounds, expectations and menu review. After the meal is prepared, they all gather back at the table to enjoy the meal along with a glass of wine, or two, to complement the various dishes.

"From the moment our guests walk in the door, we want them to be comfortable," Pease said. "We want them to take part in preparing every aspect of the meal, but also to enjoy a shared dining experience in a comfy, home-like environment."

I just love this, because today, far too many meals are consumed on the run- every man, woman and child for themselves. I truly believe that dinnertime, is the time of day when we can nurture our children and families in every sense of the word: nutritionally, emotionally and

intellectually. Around the dinner table, we can talk about the great meal we are about to consume as well as the school day, the workday, politics, religion, and important social issues.

"We have lost generations of parents who are not cooking," noted Evaristo. "They simply reheat, and therefore, their children are not learning to cook, or love to cook."

All of the teachers at the cooking school, of which there are currently 13, have a passion for the type of cooking they do. Their passions range from baking and quick homemade meals to Sri Lankan cuisine, raw culinary arts, cooking with children, dinner parties, global cuisine, health-related diets, preserving and canning, and even how to best shop the farmers' market!

These instructors come from a variety of cooking backgrounds and include Judy Orpin-Geringer, Suzy Quenneville-Orpin, Lisa Libby Albert, Thama Brentano, Erin Caravantes, Jay Chan, Terry Chaparro, Mitch Costanza, Ruwani Jayasingha, Lizette Marx, Penny Porter, Liza Scaff, and Barbara Weikert.

"Our teachers are the kind of people that everyone loves going to their houses for dinner," said Pease.

Though Pease and Evaristo are busy managing the school, they are well-known within their social circles as masters of entertaining, and perhaps even more importantly, in their kids' circles they are well loved for their baking!

"I remember loving to bake cookies with my grandmother," Evaristo said. "It was a wonderful way to build bonds, family ties and lasting memories."

According to Pease and Evaristo, they both raised their children the way they were brought up and that meant dinner was a precious time of the day, with home-cooked meals and gathering around the table for dinner.

"When we grew up, family dinner at our house was at 6 p.m. and you were to be there!" said Pease. "We also had Sunday dinners at our grandparents' house most weeks."

The girls' father, Jack Maher, was not an avid cook, save for grilling, camp cooking and Dutch oven dishes, but he did enjoy travel and family experiences. So about 11 years ago, he and his wife, Jan, took the family to Florence for a week-long cooking class. The class started every day with an outing to peruse and shop the local farmers' market. The sisters were inspired!

"As a class we decided what we wanted to make that day, depending upon what looked good at market," Evaristo remembered. "We also went to the wine market, and then back to school to make our meal. At 1 p.m. we enjoyed the fruits of our labor for lunch, while we hashed over the day's adventures."

Pease's children have all gone on to enjoy cooking for friends and family. Her oldest son, Ryan and his wife Nicole own Paix sur Terre, a winery in Paso Robles that concentrates on producing Mourvedre, Syrah and Grenache wines. They love to cook and are always doing dinner parties for cousins, siblings and friends.

"I think it's great," Pease commented. "This is exactly what we hoped they'd take away from their family."

Daughter Megan, a student at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, often invites friends over for dinner parties, while son, Michael and wife, Claire, love to barbecue and enjoy camp cooking, even though their main business is Frisbee golf.

Evaristo's children, Nathaniel, Jessy and Jenna are all aficionados of good food. Their mom is known as the "cookie" mom in the kids' social circles, and she was also the coordinator of the hot lunch program at Burton Valley School for six years before opening the cooking school. She mentioned to me that Jenna has already won two cooking contests ... by the age of 10!

The sisters were happy to share two family heirloom recipes-Grammy's Pumpkin Muffins and Grandma Blanc's turkey stuffing, both perfect for the Thanksgiving holiday and beyond. The muffins are delicious and are said to freeze well, though I would not know, because when I shared the photo of my batch with my sons, they immediately requested a shipment! They were not disappointed.

Back to the Table Cooking School
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For more information on cooking classes, birthday parties, ladies' night out, or corporate team building events, please visit: www.backtothetablecookingschool.com

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