



Good Cookin'

Something new is cooking at Chez Boucher

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HAMPTON | Love food? Then you need to learn more about Chez Boucher, A French Cooking School.

Owner Ron Boucher has expanded by moving to a new location at 321 Lafayette Road, and has created a warm and welcoming environment that has something for all ages, abilities, ambitions and appetites.

Classes are designed to accommodate people who only have one evening during the week or those who want to immerse themselves in study. The goal is to have people view cooking as more than standing in front of the fridge asking, "What's for dinner?" but to move towards thinking of cooking as an opportunity.

While the school is founded on the basic principles of French cooking it is not exclusively French cuisine. This fall's offerings include "French Cooking Essentials" and "French Classical Cuisine." There are also workshops on "Comfort Food," "Flavors of Italy," "New England Christmas Dinner," and a "Holiday Desserts" class.

Boucher regularly does an "International Cuisine" series that is a collection of six classes focused around a region. These classes are a challenge for the instructor to research and teach the most realistic interpretations of traditional dishes from the region covered.

"The only cuisine I don't feel comfortable teaching is Indian," Ron said. That certainly leaves a lot of topics open for this series.

A new class starting this fall is "Kid's Cuisine Dinner to Go" classes. Students between the ages of 8-14 meet one day after school from 3-6 p.m. learning to prepare a meal. When the parent arrives to pick up their child, they also will pick up dinner ready for the family.

Children learn nutritional knowledge and cooking fundamentals while building a life-long skill while parents get a respite from having to plan and cook the evening meal after a busy day. The school also offers two, weeklong summer camps for the same age group.

The ability to offer new classes is part of what prompted the move to the Lafayette Road site. Children can walk to classes, there is easy access from major roads, and the space went from 1,050 sq.ft. at the old location to a spacious 2,200 sq.ft. school, with a 750 sq.ft. kitchen. The result of Boucher's renovations is a French farm feel that is both rustic and elegant.

Warm wood cabinets and granite countertops soften the stainless steel in the kitchen. The dining room, which seats 44, has bench-style seating and a charm enhanced by the personal touches - the mural that was painted by Ron's sister-in-law; his grandmother's table lamp; the

water tap that started life as the artesian well at his boyhood home in Amesbury. Even the linen closet was cobbled together specifically to fit the room.

The culinary arts training program is in action four days a week, six hours a day for the eight weeks of intensive classroom training. Students then spend another eight weeks doing externships at local restaurants, receiving personal instruction from Ron and from Chef Stephen James, one of only 110 Master Bakers in the US.

Students come from varying backgrounds and rarely have experience in the food industry when starting the program. Ron calls it a "Clean Slate Start" and solidly schools them in the foundations and methodology of the science of cooking as well as finding the balance for the palate.

He focuses on finding the "Wow!" factor that makes diners walk away feeling as though they had an experience, not just a meal. There are classes underway now and the next start-up will be in January.

Saturdays are usually reserved for one-day cooking and pastry workshops or for the "Mini Cooking Workshops" composed of three linked units. The school is looking to add an eight-week pastry program on Monday nights.

One of the most amazing things about Ron and Chez Boucher is that you can design your own event. Marrying into a big Greek family and want to have a memorable engagement party? Ron can design a "hands-on" demonstration where the group cooks a Greek meal and then sits to eat it together.

Ron points out that when you just go to a restaurant, you socialize with the people seated immediately next to you. When you cook together, you interact with everyone.

"The social networking surrounding food has been one of the biggest benefits for me," Ron said, "a benefit I never expected."

A group needs a minimum of 8 people and Ron can accommodate groups as large as 44, splitting up the time in the kitchen but having every member participate. The events are BYOB but Ron is always willing to suggest pairings for the cuisine. There is also a corporate team building seminar option for employers.

The overall goal of Chez Boucher School of French Cooking is to take a complicated subject and make it uncomplicated for the students.

"Just cooking good food from scratch," as Ron puts it, yet each element is focused so that even a simple dish becomes something a little more. "I want people to come here and think they had something really special," he says.

With so many options and possibilities everyone should be able to find something that appeals to their interests and schedule at 321 Lafayette Road. The easiest way to find out about available programs is sign up for the school's e-mail list (thereby receiving three weeks advance notice of upcoming courses). For more information about the school itself visit www.chezboucher.com.

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