



+ AT THESE EAST BAY COOKING SCHOOLS, YOU CAN IMPROVE YOUR SKILLS IN THE KITCHEN, LEARN SOME NEW RECIPES, OR JUST HAVE A FUN NIGHT OUT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

A Delicious Education

By LeeAnne Jones

Photography by Mitch Tobias

KITCHEN ON FIRE

The morning of the Vegetables Reinvented class, chef Olivier “Olive” Said shopped at Berkeley’s Monterey Market and couldn’t help but buy whatever looked good—even if it wasn’t in a planned recipe.

“Wow! Wow. Woww,” he says in the class introduction, after tasting a fresh pluot. He pops another piece into his mouth, dramatically shakes his head, and hands out samples to the eight students.

Located in Epicurious Garden in the heart of Berkeley’s Gourmet Ghetto—three doors down from famed Chez Panisse and next door to César, where Said was once an owner and bar manager—Kitchen on Fire is all about seasonal, stress-free, and healthy cooking. Said co-owns the cooking school with Lisa Miller, a nutritionist who is often on hand to offer tips and answer questions.



This page: Acorn squash stuffed with kidney beans, chard, onion, and Kalamata olives. **Opposite:** Chef Olivier “Olive” Said guides students through the basics of food preparation during the Healthy Vegan and Vegetarian Living cooking class at Kitchen on Fire.



After watching Said demonstrate some relevant techniques, the students break into teams, each focusing on a different recipe. Heads of cauliflower are quickly blanched, coated with oil and spices, and grilled. Soft, grilled zucchini slices are wrapped around prosciutto and fresh mozzarella and nestled into a pan of marinara, then baked. Wedge-cut fries are baked and later sprinkled with dulce seaweed and cayenne pepper.

There is a lot going on, but Said has control of it all. He moves quickly from station to station, taking over cutting boards to show proper knife skills, helping assemble portobello “Wellingtons,” and happily giving a new task to anyone who has stopped moving. The dishes are completed just before the three-hour class ends, and everyone makes a plate.

The class goal is easily met: Vegetables have been elevated from side dishes to stars. The grilled cauliflower, served over cannellini bean mash and topped with thyme pesto and crisp-fried shallots, is creamy and filling. Everyone grabs a second zucchini roll. Even the pluots get their moment—baked with honey and goat cheese for a sweet finish.

Classes: Knife skills (\$75); themed classes such as French Pastry Basics, the Art of Curry, and Sausage Workshop (\$115–\$135); and 12-week Basic Cooking Series (\$1,165).

Contact: 1509 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, (510) 548-2665, kitchenonfire.com.



Above: Fresh Parmesan cheese is grated at Kitchen on Fire. **Right:** Instructor Aubrey Winfield (on left) teaches students about the art of grilling at Draeger’s Cooking School.



DRAEGER’S COOKING SCHOOL

There’s no better place to start a Basics: Beef cooking class than with a diagram of a cow, indicating the origin of each cut of meat.

As students arrive at Draeger’s Cooking School, adjacent to Draeger’s grocery store in Danville’s Blackhawk Plaza, it’s this diagram in the class packet—plus a complimentary glass of wine—that gets the conversation going.

Instructor Aubrey Winfield begins by prepping a hanger steak—from the *plate*, or lower belly of the cow—which will marinate while other dishes are made. As she combines garlic, anchovy paste, and spices, she explains the importance of bringing meat up to room temperature before grilling (for even cooking) and cutting against the grain (easier to chew). Once the steak is in the marinade, she invites the 12 students to take spots among three cooking stations.

Each group makes every recipe while being guided by an assistant instructor. Skirt steak is sliced, marinated, and threaded onto wooden skewers for satay. Frozen sirloin is cut paper-thin for a beef and broccoli stir-fry. Ground chuck is formed into patties for sliders.

The latter is an unusual recipe inspired by the famous White Castle sliders. First, minced onion is softened in a skillet. The patties are placed on top of the onions, seasoned, and topped with American cheese and the bun bottoms. The bun tops are placed askew, over any so-called holes in the pan. It all steams together for several minutes.

Cooking complete, the students eat together at a long banquet table. It’s the meatiest feast anyone has had, and chef Winfield darts into the store to fetch salad mix for some balance. Everyone agrees: The juicy, gooey sliders are the clear winner.

Classes: Various demonstrations (\$45–\$75); hands-on classes such as French Breads and Gnocchi Workshop (\$80–\$90); and Basics series classes such as seafood and pasta (\$125).

Contact: 4100 Blackhawk Plaza Cir., Danville, (650) 685-3704, draegerscookingschool.com.



Clockwise from top: Ingredients are prepped for Indonesian-spiced beef skewers at Draeger’s Cooking School; the completed plate of skewers; the beef is covered with a mixture of lime juice, lemongrass, soy sauce, fish sauce, garlic, and ginger.



BACK TO THE TABLE COOKING SCHOOL

“You don’t have to do any dishes! We’ll swoop them away when you’re done,” says instructor Judy Orpin-Geringer, wrapping up her introduction to the Miami Heat Cocktail Party class. And 18 red-aproned students cheer.

It’s typically a lively gathering at the Lafayette cooking school, which was founded by sisters Leslie Pease and Lisa Evaristo more than five years ago. Classes are themed around celebratory occasions (like holiday entertaining) and culinary destinations (such as Italy or France), and draw many mother-daughter pairs and girls night out revelers.

The class is divided into teams, then each tackles every recipe on an ambitious menu: mini Cubano sandwiches, picadillo in crispy corn cups, beer-battered fish tacos with margarita mango salsa, Key lime tarts, and mojitos. It’s a flurry of activity that Orpin-Geringer navigates with an impressive blend of speed and calm—offering onion-dicing tips, whisking pans in and out of the oven, and quickly remaking one team’s overprocessed batter.

Everyone is instructed to taste as they cook, and the class goes through hundreds of tiny metal spoons over three hours. The picadillo—ground beef with tomato sauce, peppers, onions, raisins, green olives, and a variety of spices—tastes thin as it begins a gentle simmer. A student adds a fistful of salt, and 20 minutes later, the flavor is deep and satisfying. A mango salsa gets a vibrant kick of fresh mint and tequila, and Meyer lemons are juiced into the mojitos.

With the cooking done, Orpin-Geringer adds some finishing touches, like swirls of whipped cream atop the Key lime tarts, and everyone loads up his or her plate. The Cuban music that had been playing in the background is turned up, and mojito-filled glasses are clinked in a toast.

Classes: Themed classes such as Paella Party, Pub Grub, and Holiday Cocktail Party (\$95); and a six-week Culinary Essentials series (\$570, or \$95 each).

Contact: 271 Lafayette Cir., Lafayette, (925) 284-1120, backtothetablecooking.school.com.



From top: Mini Cubano sandwiches made during the Miami Heat Cocktail Party class at Back to the Table Cooking School; students squeeze limes and Meyer lemons to concoct mojitos during the Miami Heat class.

From left: A student gets ready to make goodies at Rachel Dunn Chocolates; a decorated chocolate flower lollipop and other treats.



RACHEL DUNN CHOCOLATES

You don’t need a golden ticket to learn the secrets of candy making at Rachel Dunn Chocolates. The Concord company—best known for its three-pound, caramel-coated Unbelievable Apple—offers hands-on classes inside the factory by owners Rachel and Mike Dunn.

At the 1.5-hour Chocolate Workshop, the two dozen students of all ages don hairnets and gather around long metal tables, where trays of prepared fillings await: soft dollops of peppermint cream and peanut butter, smooth pieces of caramel and toffee, and squishy nougat.

From a raised platform at the side of the room, Mike Dunn shares chocolate history and trivia before explaining the bowls of chocolate arranged down the middle of the tables. He tempers it in the oven and says it will remain in this liquid state for up to an hour.

With a video feed of Dunn’s workstation projected on the wall, students mimic his technique for each piece. Toffee is dipped in chocolate and topped with crushed almonds. Pieces of caramel and nougat are stuck together with chocolate, before being fully coated to create an artisanal Milky Way. Truffles are rolled, dunked, and dusted in cocoa powder. Using squeeze bottles, students create chocolate flower lollipops.

“I feel like I’m cooking and painting,” says one student, as he boldly tops peppermint patties with sea salt, sugar crystals, and colorful sprinkles.

While the chocolates set in the freezer, Dunn leads a tasting of his eponymous bean-to-bar line of single-origin chocolates. These are available for sale (along with truffles, brittles, and caramels) in the retail shop, where everyone gathers to socialize after class—except for the kids who’ve settled on the sidewalk outside, already savoring their delicious creations.

Classes: Chocolate Workshop (\$55) and Chocolate Tempering (\$125).

Contact: 1021 Detroit Ave., Concord, (925) 798-4321, racheldunnchocolates.com.