

Chicken surprise

sub: Inside Ramekins' hands-on cooking class

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By Neal Ross

With untutored enthusiasm, I raised my cleaver above the table and brought it down on the chicken leg with a satisfying chop.

As the half-inch thick bone parted neatly, I thought, *Wow. I have GOT to get one of these.* But cleaver technique was only one of the various skills I learned during a recent class at Ramekins, on Sonoma's West Spain Street.

Ramekins, founded just over two years ago by local entrepreneur Suzanne Brangham next to her General's Daughter restaurant, is a combination bed-and-breakfast and culinary school. The latter features demonstration and hands-on courses taught by a stellar array of chefs in a galaxy of cuisines: dim sum with Joyce Jue, mustards with Michele Anna Jordan, California summer salads with John Ash, to name those from the more local constellations.

Most of Ramekins' offerings are demonstration classes, where attendees get to watch somebody cook something wonderful and then get to eat it. But cooking-school manager Andrea Koweek says the roll-up-your-sleeves approach is gaining in popularity.

"Certain restaurant chefs are going to sell: the big names, the celebrity chefs, people want to see that," she says. "But aside from those kind of demonstration classes, people really want to do the hands-on ... the knife-skill classes, the basic poultry classes, even the introduction to Mexican cuisine – all of this kind of thing. Seems like people are really interested in learning all the basic skills now."

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I've enjoyed cooking since I was a little kid, and my wife has enjoyed my cooking since I learned not to use every spice in the cupboard in the same dish. But amateur though I am, I found it somewhat challenging to pick the right hands-on class – not for ease of home duplication, but mostly something that I could write about before deadline. I settled on the "Chicken Workshop," which promised to teach me "various useful ways of 'breaking down' and boning whole chickens (very economical!) and parts as well as a variety of useful preparations and cooking techniques from around the globe."

Since my chicken-chopping technique tends to resemble Norman Bates', causing me to order out every Thanksgiving, I eagerly made reservations. (Besides, as we all know, chickens are oddly newsworthy in this town.)

The Friday-morning workshop was taught by former restaurant chef Jay Harlow, who apparently swapped his toque for a typewriter 14 years ago – he has served up 11 cookbooks so far, as well as a battery of newspaper and magazine columns.

After washing up, and being issued a recipe packet and apron, I walked into Ramekins' clean and spacious demonstration kitchen.

Four big wooden tables were set up in front of a long stove-cum-countertop festooned with various ingredients, and hung overhead with an angled mirror so that we could see what the teacher was doing. Some of the early attendees were busily coring artichokes and putting them in water-and-vinegar-filled containers for later use. We took obedient seats by the window, as Jay began his pre-class briefing.

“One thing that’s great about the hands-on classes is there’s always lots of food,” Jay said affably. “You’re going to learn a lot, you’re going to have a great time, and you’re not going to go away hungry.”

Jay gave us an overview of the day’s assignments: basic chicken stock; sautéed chicken with artichokes and mushrooms; spicy-baked chicken wings (“not buffalo wings”, he said); tandoori-style grilled skinless chicken with yogurt marinade; Cantonese stir-fried chicken breast; and “perfect roast chicken.”

Aside from the breakdown skills, this last was what I was particularly looking forward to learning. It would be achieved through a newly-popular process called “brining,” which involves soaking a whole chicken overnight, or for at least six hours, in a thick plastic bag filled with brine: water, kosher salt, apple juice, a few peppercorns, a bay leaf and a sprig of thyme. The idea is that the salt “denatures” the protein, Jay explained, breaking it down to absorb water and flavor.

Jay also briefed us on the health aspects of what we were about to do, saying that while salmonella is actually fairly rare, there are other tiny enemies lurking inside the uncooked birds. “Always assume that raw chicken will make you sick,” he said, adding that it’s important to measure ingredients ahead of time so as not to contaminate boxes and bottles.

And with that cautionary word, the chickens were doled out..

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Raw chicken is very slippery. And when it starts to thaw, it gets even more slippery. I ruefully looked at my notepad, pen, and tape recorder, all of which require clean hands to operate. But I’ve long been an advocate of culinary honesty, gleefully celebrating the connection between living animal muscle and the tidy packages on display at the grocery store. I improvised some towel-paper mittens and set to work.

Jay, who uses knives as though they were extensions of his arm instead of separate tools, demonstrated the proper boning technique – whizzing calmly and effortlessly through the bird and leaving it bare of breasts, legs and wings. He moved with an almost military precision, dropping little advice-grenades as he went:

- Loosen up the chicken by popping all the joints first, so the knife can simply pass through the meat.
- Use the tip of the blade for boning, feeling your way into the space between bone and flesh (“Think of it as a scalpel”).
- “When in doubt, just sort of scrape meat off the bones.”
- Figure cooking time at 10 minutes a pound, at 375 degrees.
- Bigger chickens simply have more meat, not more bone or fat.
- And my favorite: “Recipes are guidelines. Recipes are not absolute rules.”

I began to wonder if Jay was born knowing all this stuff, so casually and matter-of-factly did he present it. But his presentation was also completely genuine and unaffected; clearly communicating, without making it patronizingly obvious, that we couldn’t possibly ask him a “stupid question.”

The room was quickly abuzz with the sound of a dozen-and-a-half people of all ages laughing, chatting, and depositing poultry-parts into pairs of aluminum pans: legs, wings and breasts (cubed and whole) for most of the day’s recipes, wing-tips, fat and excess skin for the stock-pot.

After the pans had made their way to the stove or marinade-bowls, most of the class crowded around Jay as he explained about roasting, baking and stir-fry methods–

sprinkling expertise as though it were a generous seasoning. But my slicing still had a few rough edges, as did the meat I had excavated. So I raised my hand when asked, “Who wants to work on another chicken?”

The chicken, face up on my cutting board, stared at me with headless patience. *Well, let’s get cracking*, I thought, disjuncting it with a series of soft pops which, surprisingly, took less effort than I had anticipated. Maybe I can get the hang of this after all.

One of my table-mates, Novato firefighter Steve Rucker, had also decided to bone up on his cutting. He and wife Cathy were back at Ramekins for their second time: “To learn how to make exciting chicken dishes,” Cathy said.

Previously, Steve had taken a barbecue demonstration with a friend, while Cathy had opted for a pie-making class. “It was money well-spent, I’ll have to say that much, because it was a great pie,” Steve said with a grin. “Actually, everyone at the firehouse got some.”

Having armed himself with a cleaver as Jay had done, and separated his bird into its component parts, Steve asked me if I’d like to do the same with my chicken. “Sure,” I said, accepting and hefting the blade, even though I wasn’t sure whether something that big was suited to such fine work – at least by my hand.

The ease with which the cleaver sliced into the chicken breast astonished me, as the bird fell apart like a moist jigsaw puzzle. “Okay, I’m never using a knife again,” I said, feeling dangerously like a pro.

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Slicing up a whole chicken while it’s raw is easier, in some respects, than carving it when it’s cooked, since you can hold on to it without burning yourself.

Two of the tables had been cleaned, sanitized and set with silver and wineglasses for our impending meal, most of which was sitting on the countertop in all of its tandoori, stir-fried, sautéed and spicy-winged glory. Before us, on a cutting board, lay one of the two brined and perfectly-roasted chickens.

It’s clean smelling, the brined chicken is – simultaneously bracing and appetizing. After the bird came out of the oven, it sat for ten or fifteen minutes to allow the juices to settle and the flesh to firm up.

Jay explained that to properly carve, we should slice down along the breastbone, then under. He made this look like a completely natural maneuver. However, halfway through my first attempt, Cathy reminded me that Jay first removed the thigh.

“Right, I knew that,” I deadpanned. “I was just testing you.” But it did make the job a lot easier.

With exaggerated nonchalance, my greedy table-mates and I surreptitiously stripped bits of meat from the bird’s carcass and popped them in our mouths. MMMMM. Perfectly moist, juicy, warm, salty but not overly so. Mmmm. Mm. Best roast chicken I’ve ever tasted.

As Steve divvied up the other bird, Jay, a Ramekins regular, told me why he particularly enjoys the basic-technique instruction – “skill sessions, as we call them.”

“I like teaching hands-on classes because for one thing, you can tell right away if they’ve gotten it or not,” Jay said. “Right now, I can see that Steve is carving the chicken, and ... I know that he’s learned how to do it. In a demonstration class, you never know.”

“In any sort of teaching, you pass on what you’ve learned from others, but also what you’ve figured out for yourself,” he continued. “I don’t consider myself an innovator. I’m a teacher of a tradition, and a tradition that’s always changing.”

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Afterward, munching the fruit of our newly-acquired labors and washing it down with wine, we compared notes and flavors. I find the tandoori to be very subtle, the stir-fry excellent, the wings just spicy enough and the sauté richly satisfying. (The roast chicken is beyond intelligible description.) I can't wait to share this with my wife.

My fellow students are making similar post-scholastic plans. Jane Borders, of Santa Rosa, planned to cook at least two of the dishes for herself. "I think I would do the wings and the roasted chicken," she said. "There's a million ways you can do chicken. I learned a lot."

Charlie Clarkson, who journeyed from Petaluma so that he could learn "greater efficiency with chicken," also said the day was a success.

"I think it's great. I got to work on three chickens, so I feel my technique is definitely better now," he said. "It's fun to watch up there, and nice to make chicken dishes at the same time."

Now all I need is that cleaver, and I'll be set for life – or at least the next class.

Ramekins Sonoma Valley Culinary School is located at 450 W. Spain St., Sonoma. For more information, call 933-0450 or click over to www.ramekins.com.