

Happenings

Beyond Big Mac: Culinary confidence

THERE'S A TIME to move beyond the culinary limits of Big Mac and Hamburger Helper. But after encouraging your taste buds at various ethnic restaurants in the Chicago area, what then?

Like most Americans, I was raised on a steady diet of meat and potatoes, all cooked in the same basic manner—unexciting. It wasn't until I opened the doors to a variety of food palaces here and in San Francisco that I began to enjoy food, even look forward to it! But eating out puts a cramp on the budget.

So confronted with bankruptcy or more meat and potatoes, I took up ethnic cooking and soon discovered that all knowledge does not come from a cookbook. I decided it 'twas time for a cooking class.

ENTER DAVID NOVICK, 29, who has a culinary mission: teaching cooking confidence. Novick, a graduate of the University of Chicago's MBA program, has held a very unusual and fun cooking school for the past 19 months in the kitchen of his Hyde Park home.

Novick shuns the traditional structured approach to culinary instruction. He teaches an informal, relaxed course, sans starched white hats and utilitarian

stainless steel counters. Instead, the setting is an olive and red-colored kitchen with newly-sanded maple floors. And the price is right in these inflationary days: \$35 for five lessons, food included.

Novick believes that good cooking "is not an archaic art achieved at the feet of a master." Rather, he lets the students do the stirring and chopping to attain the confidence he believes important to success in the kitchen.

"If they understand it, they can do it," he says of his desire for students to comprehend the process behind recipes, "so they can duplicate them at home." That process, he says, is merely a matter of technique, another point fundamental to his instruction.

NOVICK'S THEORIES WORK, if my experiences as a somewhat timid, tho very interested, student of Near Eastern cuisine are any guide. I finished the course, not as a chef supreme, but as a confident practitioner of the kitchen arts.

The cuisines Novick teaches are as varied as his interests: Mandarin, Near Eastern, French, a bit of Japanese, and soon, Italian Beyond Spaghetti. Novick once managed the Court House Res-



Student Howard Finberg, left,

Mac: Confidence

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Tribune photo by Ovie Carter

Student Howard Finberg, left, and instructor David Novick.

...taurant in Hyde Park before returning
...to college.

...Good eating, he maintains, doesn't
...have to be expensive. He recommends
...Chinese cooking for singles as a tanta-
...lizing way to minimize the expense of
...cooking for one.

...One point shouldn't be overlooked
...about Novick's classes: they're fun. He
...is enjoyable to watch as he dashes about
...the kitchen in the manner of a hyper-
...active Julia Child. He takes command
...before a 50-year-old, eight-burner res-
...taurant stove, moving from one bubbling
...pot to another, tasting this and that. He
...never really seems to measure ingre-
...dients, but he's always careful and
...particular about taste.

...What's more important is the manner
...in which he teaches his students. His
...ease in the kitchen can't help but rub
...off and make you relaxed and, a better
...cook.

...STUDENTS, ABOUT four to six in
...each class, assemble along a 20-foot
...long marble-topped table that serves as
...an all-purpose cutting board as well
...as a workbench. Walls and counters of
...the huge kitchen are crowded with thrift-
...shop finds such as 30-year-old mixers
...that still work, heavy-duty woks, an-
...tique cleavers; and assorted other kitch-
...en work tools, out of date but still use-
...ful.

...Pots and bowls are everywhere, and
...by the end of a lesson, the tiny sink is
...usually jammed with cookware. Spices
...and herb containers are stacked high
...on one wall. The refrigerator bulges
...with food.

...It is within this organized confusion
...that learning occurs. For each two-hour
...session, about three recipes are dis-
...cussed, created, and hopefully eaten
...with gusto — in most cases. Students

...range from budding food freaks [like
...myself] to interested beginners. In fact,
...Novick enjoys teaching tyros: "It's
...more of a challenge, and it's more fun
...for me."

...He and his wife, Ann, a constant critic
...in the kitchen and an English professor
...at the University of Illinois, travel
...around the country looking for new food
...and recipes. On one trip to New Orleans,
...they drove home with 40 pounds of
...Creole tomatoes, 30 pounds of green
...peppers, 20 pounds of eggplant, and as-
...sorted bags of coffee and spices. There
...are also frequent field trips to New
...York for cheeses and Italian specialties.

...IN MY NEAR Eastern class we tried
...cooking egg-lemon sauces and kufits;
...folded filo dough, kneaded pita bread,
...and delved into the secrets of creating
...halvah for dessert. Throughout the five
...weeks Novick tries to parallel class
...techniques with other, more familiar
...cuisines.

...At the conclusion of my lessons,
...each class member prepared part of a
...meal and brought a friend for dinner.
...The main course was leg of goat. Yes,
...goat, a staple in the Near East, but a
...curious, undeveloped taste in Chicago.
...[The rest of the meal was received with
...somewhat more enthusiasm than the
...goat.]

...Novick's most popular class is Man-
...darin cookery. He would like to teach a
...South American class, but hasn't yet
...found enough students.

...What's "quarter-pounder" in Spanish?

...Classes are held on weekends and
...weekday evenings for two to two and a
...half hours. Cost is \$35 for five lessons.
...Novick has a French course starting
...Saturday, March 23; a Chinese course
...the next day. For information, 924-2180.

Howard Finberg