

A CLASS ACT A COOK IS BORN AT EATZ

BY DANA ROBINSON

My first cooking class . . .

Excited, yet somewhat apprehensive, I made my way down an ivied path that led to a lovely home already filled with chatter, soft music, and the seductive, yet sophisticated smell of home cooking. What may have looked like a dinner party was in fact a typical Friday night class at EATZ, an organization dedicated to teaching small cooking classes in a warm, fun atmosphere. For the next three hours I was to strap on an apron and join 11 other culinary hopefuls in a quest to discover the joys of cooking.

The theme of the evening's event was "Cocktail Bash"—a lesson in creating simple cocktails and small bites fit for my next intimate gathering. I approached the class as a culinary virgin. I'm not embarrassed to say that in my 30+ years on this earth, I've never chopped, sautéed or fried anything. I can make brown rice, grill chicken in a pan and add eggs and water to a bag of Betty Crocker cake mix—that's it. I would soon discover, however, that my lack of culinary skills doesn't matter. The focus at EATZ is on learning, having fun and most importantly, eating what you create.

After a bit of small talk with my new classmates and several dips into the appetizer, Baked Brie with Caramelized Onions, the class settled into creating the first item of the evening: Vodka Lemonade. After the lemons were squeezed and the vodka was poured, the pitcher was passed around. We were off to a great start.

The evening was full of firsts for me: We created Crab Cakes with Creole Honey-Mustard Sauce (I handled hot oil!), Shrimp and Bacon Skewers with Apricot-Ancho Barbecue Sauce (I learned what an ancho is!) and Potato Crepes with Crème Fraîche and Caviar (I tasted caviar!). I also learned the proper way to cut vegetables—the blade should never completely leave the cutting board, and the hand that's holding the vegetables should form a "claw" to avoid slicing anything other than the food. I also smashed and peeled garlic for the first time and realized that heavy cream and butter make almost anything taste good.

So, did I master all of the dishes? Nope. My crab cakes were a bit squarish in shape and stayed on the heat for too long, yet they were still pretty darn tasty. And I doubt it's supposed to take upwards of five minutes to devein a single shrimp (those little suckers are slippery). But the pros who run EATZ showed me that sometimes it doesn't matter how a dish looks or how long it takes to prepare—only how it tastes. And even if it doesn't taste right, just learn from your mistakes and try it again.

Perhaps my next EATZ class will be "Turning up the Heat," featuring fiery Latin dishes, or "Rendezvous a Deux," which teaches the finer points of cooking romantic meals for two. Whichever class I choose I'm sure it will feature a repeat of that festive Friday night: great people, an intimate party atmosphere, fantastic food and way too much fun. 🍷

EATZ

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SHRIMP & BACON SKEWERS WITH APRICOT-ANCHO BARBECUE SAUCE

Recipe courtesy of EATZ

Makes 30 skewers

30 shrimp, peeled and deveined
15 strips of bacon, partially cooked and cut in half
30 6-inch wooden skewers, soaked in water for 30 minutes to prevent burning

Wrap each shrimp with a bacon strip and thread onto a bamboo skewer. Grill the skewers in a pan until the bacon gets crisp and the shrimp are just cooked through. Remove and serve with Apricot-Ancho Barbecue Sauce.

Apricot-Ancho Barbecue Sauce

Makes about 3 cups
6 strips of bacon, chopped
1½ c. small-dice yellow onion
1 tbsp. minced garlic
¾ c. ketchup
¾ c. orange juice
¾ c. packed dark brown sugar
1/3 c. chopped dried apricots
¼ c. malt vinegar
2 poblanos, diced
1 tsp. dry mustard
1 tsp. Tabasco sauce
1 tsp. cayenne
2 tsp. salt
1 tsp. ground black pepper

Sauté bacon in a large pan over medium-high heat until almost crisp, about 4 minutes. Add onions and sauté until browned, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and sauté until aromatic, about 1 minute.

Add all remaining ingredients. Simmer until the apricots are very soft, about 10 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Transfer to a blender and purée until relatively smooth. The sauce can be stored in a covered container in the fridge for up to one week.