

Around Town

Making Food And Friends At The Fig Cooking School



Heide Lang, Founder of The Fig Cooking School
Photo by Lexi Crocco

By Jessica Galán

On a cold and clear night, a group of students gather around a piping hot oven. This class is different. Its focus is on learning about food and flavors, not long division or spelling. Its teacher? An exuberant and warm woman named Heide Lang.

Lang is the founder and lead instructor of The Fig Cooking School, one of Milford’s newest small businesses. She’s eager and excited for town residents and beyond to “find their inner gourmet.”

It took Lang two years to find an ideal location for Fig Cooking. Now she’s close to the shores of Connecticut, and the town of Milford is all the more fortunate.

Impeccable architectural details can be found throughout her establishment in the Walnut Beach area: gorgeous marble tables, tiled bistro floors, and glints of copper detail.

Lang tells the class well-known recipes come to life when “a nice twist on basic ideas” are infused.

“Welcome, how are you guys?!” Lang says, greeting her first guests. A variety of people shuffle in quietly and place their belongings along the tall navy bookcases that line one wall.

The classes aren’t meant for spectators. Upon arrival, you’re asked to check in, grab a navy-blue apron, and lather and rinse your hands. The crowd gathers before an ivory marble counter. Jaime and Shannon, Lang’s assistants, offer the crowd pomegranate spritzers and sparkling water.

With a dazzling smile and mischievous eyes, Lang puts the crowd at ease. “This is your class,” she assures. “We make what’s

on the menu together.”

She exudes a passion for food and people. “Tell us your name and a little about yourself,” she asks the students.

People arrive there from all walks of life. Tonight’s class includes a professional fisherman. Various educators. Retirees. Married and single. On most nights, Lang’s classes average 8 to 10 couples.

A black and white menu is set before the students. The evening’s theme? A dynamic menu entitled Viva Italia! Family Dinner.

The menu is a five-course meal jam-packed with unique recipes: an earthy-flavored crostini with creamy gorgonzola and fig jam. A side dish of panzanella salad and butternut squash and slow-roasted grapes. A hearty Bolognese sauce with red wine and pancetta.

The first meal to create is torta sbrisolona, a centuries-old “peasant” dessert from the Lombardy region of Italy.

Lang passes around some of the ingredients that will debut in different foods: a bottle of anisette sugar, orange blossom water, almond extract, anisette sugar. Orange blossom water and almond extract bring to mind warm summer nights. The scents of unique ingredients awaken the senses. She explains that fresh ingredients make delicious food.

Cooking with Lang is a hands-on effort; no one is left out. The fact that the group will eventually eat what they prepare is crucial. Some cooking schools aren’t as hands on, relegating the chef to do the brunt of the work while the audience merely observes.

The students pour sugar. Chop almonds. They mix cornmeal and flour, carefully incorporating the mixture until it becomes rich and flaky dough.

Some say defining experiences can foretell our futures. Perhaps it was Lang’s first experience with baking as a teenager that sealed her future in food.

“I remember baking a cake for my grandfather’s 75th birthday,” she says. “My mother, of Austrian and Hungarian descent was an excellent baker. She had taught me.”

In college, Lang enjoyed making food for dorm mates – meals tastier than ones found in college cafeterias. She believes her flair for cooking netted a handsome medical student with blue-green eyes. Her boyfriend had never eaten such flavorful chicken. And 13 months later, they were husband and wife.

Lang considers herself a self-taught cook, yet she wanted to make sure her cooking school was rooted in technique. So she attended the French Culinary Institute to perfect her cooking skills.

The class prepares the panzanella salad next. The students shave a mix of Parmesan and Gruyère cheese and cut day-old bread into cubes.

The group slices tomatoes. Chops thick slabs of bacon. Lang is patient as she gently guides students’ hands when the cutting technique is off. She leans into a huge white bowl, demonstrating how to carefully incorporate the rest of the ingredients.

The evening’s main dish comes next – a hearty Bolognese sauce infused with red wine.

“This Bolognese is one-of-a-kind and feeds a ton of people. It’s a nice twist on basic ideas,” she explains.

Generous cubes of pancetta sizzle in a Le Creuset Dutch oven. As the scent wafts through the air, the crowd relaxes. It’s as if Lang has conjured a kitchen memory from the past.

As the night progresses, quiet strangers divulge bits and pieces of their own stories. That’s exactly what Lang strives for; it’s part of her mission.

But that’s not all that happens.

The students are no longer strangers. Instead they are a group united by gorgeous food. By the end of the evening, they realize how magical cooking with Lang can be.

Eventually, two “teams” form, playfully conspiring against one another. Who’ll dice faster? Who’s an expert with the whisk?

“Breaking bread brings people together,” she says. “It’s what I’m truly passionate about.”

Good food and great ingredients matter, but it is the people gathered around our tables that make memories.

Lang and her daughters have sat down at many restaurants across the United States and around the world.

“I’ve found restaurants may plate well, but I’ve sat at some restaurants whose food lacked flavor,” she says.

She makes it her mission to teach her students that deep flavor must override presentation. She offers simple tips: flavor with kosher salt alone. Don’t go overboard with oregano. Sea salt is meant to enhance.

Toward the end, the group sits on black stools as Jaime and Shannon serve night’s creations.

“What meal did you like best?” Lang asks. Answers vary, but everyone agrees cooking side by side heightened the experience.

Tom, a professional lawyer and “closet foodie” in his own right shares what he loved about the class. “Great food by itself is just that—food. But it’s the camaraderie which fuses the experience.”

John Fontana, a national builder of custom-designed homes, says “I’m just having a good time with my daughters.”

Lang and The Fig Cooking School are determined to bring people from all walks of life together. You’ll find themes that follow the seasons. You’ll make friends. You’ll mingle with food, flavor, and folk.

Will you join her? If you do, your experience will be nothing but magical.

The Fig Cooking School is located at 42 Naugatuck Ave. in Milford. It’s website it figcookingschool.com. You can also find it on Instagram at @figcookingschool or on Facebook at facebook.com/figcookingschool/.



Photo by Lexi Crocco



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A recent class at The Fig Cooking School. Photo by Jessica Galán of Recast Today