

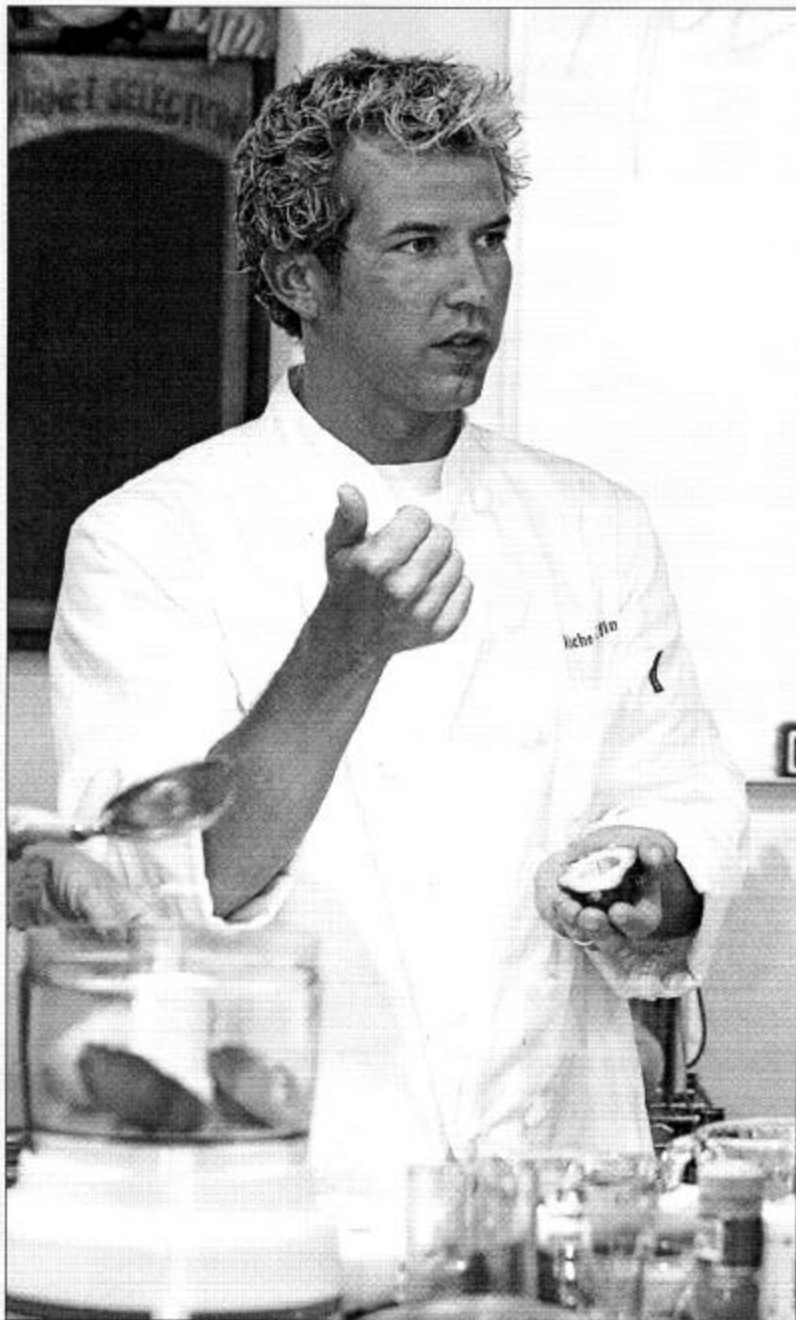
What's Cooking

in the Celebrity Kitchen

A somewhat jaded
cook searches for
inspiration and finds a
new culinary lifestyle

By Carol Kipp

Photos by Tim Hawk



Independent Chef Riche Griffen prepares to work some culinary magic during a recent session at Celebrity Kitchens.

When I signed up for a session of culinary enlightenment at Celebrity Kitchens, the recently launched hands-on cooking school/dining experience in Wilmington, I was not entirely prepared for the evangelistic zeal of Polly Grimaldi, the celebrity chef of the evening. I had chosen Polly and her healthful, low-cal dinner from the array of possibilities—master chefs and their creative menus—available during any given month. It turns out Polly is a soy guru, with more than 20 years experience as a nutritionist

A Tasty Idea

Angela Martinez, co-owner of Celebrity Kitchens, pours wine for Rich Mayo (L) and Dave Stepanski. Below, John Pergolini works on Caesar salad dressing with wife Jean.



in the field of preventive medicine, and I was ripe for conversion.

Celebrity Kitchens was easy to find; it's right next door to Weight Watchers in the Independence Mall on Concord Pike. Inside, there were five tables set for four in the attractively appointed room, all arranged to offer a clear view of the state-of-the-art kitchen—the stage, as it were. There the chef of the evening was poised to entertain 20 guests by sharing her techniques and culinary wisdom, while simultaneously preparing a fabulous, four-course meal.

The wine flowed freely, the strangers at my table were exceedingly congenial, and the evening got off to an auspicious start when Polly promised to change our lives with soy.

"The only bean that's a complete protein, soy is the staff of life in the orient, just as bread is here," Polly tells us. "In the orient, tofu (a soy product much maligned by the average fast-food junky) is art, like a fine painting is art. Poetry has been written about tofu." It's not hard to believe, then, that the quality of tofu varies. Polly talks about the "mystery and spiritual quality" of tofu in Japan and China, where those who make it have to undergo special training.

"Soy is the road to health," she con-

tinues. "It has 0 fat grams; it's the great cancer preventer." While preparing the tofu-based dressing (delicious) for the asparagus salad, Polly offered lots of shopping tips—where to buy blanched, shelled soybeans, packaged miso soup, dried kelp and the lowest-priced vegetable steamer—information I dutifully recorded.

By the end of the evening, we had consumed the tofu spectrum, from chicken tofu stir-fry to tofu fruit delight. I was ready to swear off processed foods



and a fatty diet for life. "The way we eat creates the diseases we inherit as a society," Polly warns. "The sorrow of our generation is what our children eat in school." I was not the only guest to purchase her latest cookbook.

An Alternative to Dining Out

One entertaining and enlightening evening at Celebrity Kitchens certainly begets another. And that was the plan when two local women decided to start a business that would feed their passion. The idea of Celebrity Kitchens is not new, but there are only about 800 similar establishments nationwide, with no connection to one another, according to co-owners Angela Martinez and Cindy Kine Weiner. "They've become really popular over the past year," says Martinez. "Especially since Sept. 11, people want to spend more time at home entertaining."

Martinez and Weiner are both attorneys and worked together for 12 years as child-support prosecutors in Delaware County, Pa. Although Martinez still counts the law as her day job, Weiner decided she wanted a career change after a bout with breast cancer motivated her

continued on next page

We Build Beautiful Families



Since 1985, Adoptions From The Heart has been placing infants and toddlers in loving homes through domestic and international adoption.

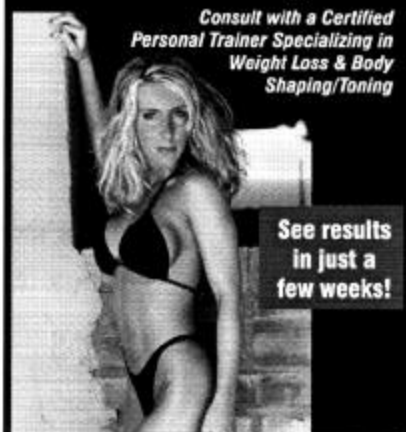
We can help build your family.
Please call today.

 **Adoptions From The Heart®**
(302) 658-8883
www.adoptionsfromtheheart.org

Get into SIZZLING SUMMER SHAPE

in the privacy of your own home or in the gym

Consult with a Certified Personal Trainer Specializing in Weight Loss & Body Shaping/Toning



See results in just a few weeks!

Laura Walker
ISSA Certified Personal Trainer
Call 302-373-4884
For an initial consultation

to reassess her life. The decision to open Celebrity Kitchens was the result of methodical planning and a thorough market study. It was not the first entrepreneurial idea the two friends tried, but so far it's been the best.

After composing a list of all the things they enjoyed and loved, they discovered a common thread. "Food and eating ended up in several categories," says Martinez. "It was the constant theme." Rather than open a restaurant, they thought they might try the idea of a cooking school where the participants also came to enjoy a meal.

Because neither is qualified to teach cooking, they called all the chefs they knew, as well as every single friend, asking for feedback on the celebrity-chef concept. Three months and approximately 1,000 phone calls later, their market analysis revealed an overwhelmingly positive response. "Almost universally, people thought it was a good idea," Martinez says. "The feedback also helped us refine the concept."

Celebrity Kitchens offers two types of classes, participant and spectator, six days a week. Dinner classes (normally 6-9 p.m.) comprise the majority, although luncheon classes and an occasional breakfast class round out the monthly calendar of events. Private parties fill in the gaps. The entertainment aspect of watching a master chef cook a meal, explaining as he works, has enough drawing power that the idea has taken hold as an alternative to conventional birthday parties, bridal showers, fund raisers—even corporate events. It's already getting rave reviews as an alternative to dining out at an upscale restaurant. The average cost, \$45 per guest (including wine), puts it on a par with fine dining.

Since Celebrity Kitchens opened four months ago, participating chefs have come from as far away as Florida and New York, as well as from Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware. They generally cook four-to-five course meals and focus their commentary on cooking techniques. "We always like to leave people with specific skills," Weiner explains, "for instance, knife skills, sautéing skills, fruit and vegetable preparation skills." The latter could address such enigmas as removing the stone from a mango,



Deep Sea Fridays

1 lb. lobster with corn on the cob, fries & slaw only \$15.95

**Klondike
KATES**

Main Street
Newark, Delaware
302 737 6100

www.klondikekates.com

continued on page 57

continued from page 38

she adds. "A lot of people don't even know what a mango is."

Most chefs love the idea and are flattered to be recruited. In turn, they recommend other chefs; many also come back for return engagements. "Some chefs turn us down because they find it difficult to talk and cook simultaneously, or because they're uncomfortable in front of an audience," says Martinez. "However, one of our chefs has a severe stutter, but when he comes in he gets so excited the stutter disappears." The month of June featured luminaries such as Tobias Lawry from Restaurant 821 and Patrick D'Amico from Eclipse.

Now that Celebrity Kitchens is up and rolling, Martinez and Weiner are ready to congratulate themselves on having made all the right decisions so far. It took months to find the right space, but they were convinced that Delaware was the ideal location. "We picked Delaware for the economics of the space and for the market here," Martinez explains. "Wilmington is a great location with lots of advantages, among them our associa-

tion with Moore Brothers [a wine company]."

Besides people like me, who are attracted to the novelty of the experience and are frankly tired of cooking the same old thing, Celebrity Kitchens typically attracts young people in the 21-29 age range who lack cooking skills. "Most come as an alternative to a night out," says Martinez. Additional frequent guests include people who love to cook but are deficient in specific skills (how to make crême brûlée, for example), people who are interested in a particular theme (Southwestern, Asian or the "Single Mingle" for singles under 50), and retired folks, both men and women. "Older men seem to favor the 'stocks and soups' class," Martinez notes. Men, in fact, comprise 40 percent of their adult clients.

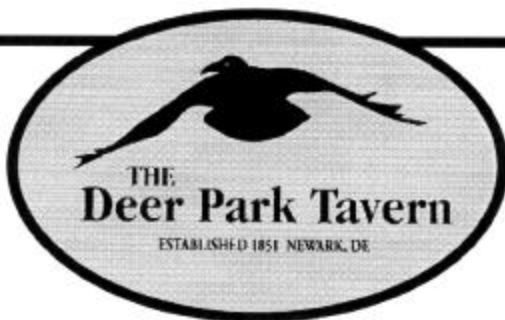
"Most people tend to come as couples," she explains, adding that the fastest-growing segment of their market is private parties—primarily friends or neighbors who just want to get together. Gift certificates are big, too, especially for Father's Day, for which they sold double the number purchased for Mother's Day.

Celebrity Kitchens also is a hit with children, with boys outnumbering girls by a surprising two-to-one margin. "We do kids cooking classes for 8-year-olds and older; we've also taken 13- and 14-year-olds in with their parents," says Martinez. "And Spring Break class was a sell-out; 9-to-13-year-olds made pizza with Caesar salad—all from scratch—and a build-your-own-sundae, with brownies and whipped cream, also made from scratch."

Martinez's enthusiasm for this venture is running high, despite her demanding schedule. Essentially, she's working 14-hour days and loving it. Most gratifying is that clients are loving it, too.

"We've been impressed by how easily strangers fall into conversation here," she says. "It's amazing to me. At the end of the evening they exchange business cards or phone numbers; they exchange recipes. People seem to strike a common chord."

— For more information about Celebrity Kitchens, call 427-COOK or check the Web site, www.celebritykitchens.com



THURSDAYS

YUENGLING & WINGS!

\$1
Yuengling +
Lager
Pints
 Thursdays After 7pm

\$6.95
All-You-Can-Eat =
Wings Served
on a Frisbee
 Thursdays After 5pm

Great Deal!
 Take Home Your
 Official Frisbee!

108 West Main Street, Newark ♦ 302-369-9414
 Parking available at U of D parking authority directly across the street.