

Taking a cue from the Italians, La Jolla resident offers popular cooking classes from Mt. Soledad home

By Matt Liebowitz

The main course, an herb-rubbed rotisserie leg of lamb with mustard sauce, roasts in the oven while cooks prepare an antipasti course of focaccia with pesto, homegrown organic vegetables, and feta. Guests enjoy a glass of 2003 Clos Du Bois Cabernet Sauvignon paired especially for the meal by a local wine expert. Stunning, panoramic ocean views frame the exquisitely set patio table.

It could be an episode of "Top Chef." It could be a photo shoot for *Food & Wine Magazine*. But this comprehensive culinary experience isn't televised; no fights break out in the kitchen, all egos are left at the door. Instead of cameras and cooking challenges, the kitchen is full of people with one desire: to enjoy California cuisine in its natural state.

"You never know what these houses look like until you get inside," said Jodi Abel, founder and top chef of La Jolla Cooks 4U. "Walking into my house is like walking into a Food Network kitchen or an Italian villa."

La Jolla Cooks 4U is a hands-on culinary experience, in which parties of two to 10 gather in Abel's home atop Mt. Soledad in La Jolla to prepare a six-course gourmet meal designed specifically for their palates, with vegetables picked from Abel's organic garden and wines specifically paired for the dishes they create. Abel spends up to three hours putting the menu together, and the total setup can run as long as six hours, with Abel prepping all the foods, from chopping and measuring herbs, to cutting fruit for a chocolate mascarpone fruit tart.

Dining is done al fresco, on a patio overlooking the Pacific.

Abel mentors guests as they prepare each course, tasting dishes and offering her expert opinion. Price is \$200 a person in groups over four, or \$280 if only two or three are dining. Since its inception in January, Abel has already hosted dozens of classes.

"It's a really amazing experience," Abel said. "People are chomping at the bit when they get here."

Abel, a passionate foodie and self-taught chef, has hosted dinner parties in her home for years, but it was a trip to Italy last July with her husband, Glenn, and a two-day cooking class, Umbria Cooks 4U, in a woman's home in the small city of Perugia, that spurred her to bring the Italian meal model to La Jolla.

"When you're traveling and go into a foreigner's home, you see exactly how they live," Abel said. "The experience blew me away, and I thought, 'I could do what she does.' I took what she did to the next level and made it even more gourmet."

Family and food also mix in Abel's classes: her husband, originally from South Africa, peaks her palate and inspires dishes like Capetown roasted lamb, and is in charge of planting fresh flowers in the garden.

Her 14-year-old daughter Aarin acts as her sous-chef, helping her prepare ingredients for dishes like grilled beef and basil rolls, grilled salmon with char-



Jodi Abel, founder and top chef of La Jolla Cooks 4U.
Photo/Jon Clark

moula, and tomato basil flatbread.

"I pay her big bucks," said Abel. "And my family loves the leftovers, too."

Currently, La Jolla Cooks 4U holds the top spot on TripAdvisor.com's "Things to Do" section for La Jolla. Her classes mostly attract couples, especially those celebrating anniversaries. She recently sold her first gift certificate as a wedding gift, and has bookings well into September and November.

It's not only the beauty of the setting, but her versatility in the kitchen that keeps Abel's classes in high demand, and not just on a local level.

Later this summer Abel will host a party of tourists from India, and while her menu always incorporates both a seafood and a meat dish, for the Indian visitors she must design a fully vegetarian menu per their request. It's no stress on Abel.

"I can design a menu for any group," Abel said. "I can accommodate any palate."

Abel has grand plans for the future of the culinary experience, while retaining its intimate nature.

"I'd love to do wedding parties or singles groups," Abel said. "It could be all appetizers, people could drink wine and schmooze. Wouldn't that be great?" To contact Abel, call 858-752-4980 or visit www.lajollacooks4u.com.

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