By Shelly G. Keller

L and Park resident Paulette Bruce knows a thing or two about food. Just ask any of the students in her sold-out Good Eats cooking classes at the culinary center at East Bay Restaurant Supply in Sacramento. Not only do her classes sell out; many students return again and again.

Bruce explains, “There are more people than ever who want to learn how to cook, whether it’s the economy, or they’re nesting more, or they’re looking for new ideas.”

After almost 30 years as an award-winning public relations expert, Bruce renewed her love affair with cooking when she started teaching cooking classes in her home in the late 1990s. That love affair began during her childhood around food and wine with Basque and Italian grandmothers. “My job in the family was to teach my Nonna better English so she could pass the citizenship test, which she did,” says Bruce. “She would cook and I would teach her English.”

At 10 o’clock on a recent Sunday morning, Bruce welcomes another sold-out class with a preview of what’s on our plates, so to speak, for the next few hours. “There are no silly questions when you’re learning to cook,” she tells the group. “The simplest questions are often the most important. And the ability to prepare a meal for someone is the most important gift of love you can share.”

Billed as Spring Dinner, this class features four recipes (four entrées, a dessert and a coffeecake) from Bruce’s family. “Each recipe is built around what’s in season now,” says Bruce.

She reviews ingredients, techniques and equipment for the recipes. She’s a stickler about some things: reading the recipe a few times before starting; keeping knives sharp; layering flavors as you cook; and the importance of mise en place, the practice of assembling and prepping ingredients for a recipe before beginning to cook.

After a tour of the equipment carts, locations of ingredients and the kitchen, Bruce calls for volunteers for each recipe, then asks everyone to get together with their recipe team. Because so many in the class know the drill, students join team members at different stations and begin gathering ingredients and equipment on baking trays and regrouping to divvy up prep duties. Experienced cooks help the less experienced, while Bruce moves from team to team, answering questions and offering guidance.

The fragrance of chopped garlic, rosemary, basil and parsley fill the room. Piles of sliced asparagus and shelled fava beans appear. Lamb chops and peeled baby artichokes glisten with olive oil. Lemons are juiced and orange rind grated. The kitchen fills with an aromatic fugue that is the natural atmosphere of people who love to cook.

As teams complete their mise en place, students move to the kitchen to cook: sautéing ingredients; searing salmon fillets; stirring risotto; browning lamb chops and roasting potatoes; cooking penne and puréeing peas; and whisking sabayon in a stainless steel bowl over simmering water.

By 12:15, food is ready to be plated while each team reviews their recipe.
Bruce adds her insights, observations and advice. Plates are passed and everyone savors each dish with audible appreciation. As plates empty, each team gets a round of applause. No wonder food lovers come back to Bruce’s classes for more.

For two decades, Bruce has straddled two worlds: the culinary world of her Good Eats cooking classes and the PR world. She says her classes have changed a lot since she started teaching in her home. “They’re more hands-on now because I realized that was a better way to teach,” Bruce notes. “I have more couples and more men in class than in the early years.”

Bruce also teaches custom classes for businesses and groups. She says one of her favorites was a dads-and-sons class. “It was the cutest class I have ever done. The kids ranged in age from 7 to 10, and the dads were so loving.” Bruce also offers gift certificates for classes, selling more than 300 at Christmas. “People today are looking for experiential gifts, especially for holidays, weddings and birthdays.”

She credits her PR background for helping her to create classes that people want, and she’s quick to credit those who have helped her succeed. “Mary Messick helped me fill the classes and wash the dishes when I held classes in my home kitchen. And I cannot do a class these days without my kitchen manager, Kerry Rossi. She’s my wingman.”

Bruce says that food is a labor of love that brings out the best in people. “You get around food and it changes everything,” she explains. “People come back to my classes because they have fun. Then they go home and make these recipes for family and friends who rave about their cooking. What else do we do in life where you can get ‘attaboys’ like that? I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

Upcoming classes include
Best of Summer (August); Pork Favorites (September); Appetizers (October); Tamales (November); and Italian (December). For more information about Good Eats cooking classes, go to GoodEatsCookingClasses.com.