Cooking instructor instills confidence in the kitchen

Paulette Bruce isn’t afraid of mistakes. She embraces them. “One year, I made a huge pan of lasagna—about 25 pounds of ingredients. I put the pan in the oven, but forgot to turn the oven on,” the longtime cooking instructor said, recalling one of dozens of gatherings she hosts at her Sacramento home each year.

Despite the entree’s delayed debut, Bruce and her guests remained unfazed. “I just poured more wine for my guests, turned the oven temperature a little higher than normal and put foil over the pan to help it cook faster,” she said with a laugh. “What else can you do?”

Bruce’s anecdote illustrates the good-natured unflapability she models at Good Eats cooking school. Held at a culinary center a few miles northeast of the state Capitol, the classes are lively, hands-on affairs where students of all abilities cook in a professional kitchen with seasonal ingredients.

“But there’s no grocery store nearby, so if something goes upside down, I tell everyone we can rename it or just change the whole thing,” she said. “It’s good to make mistakes. We learn together how to fix them.”

Raised in an Italian-Basque household in Bakersfield, Bruce learned to cook at her grandmother’s side and brings a similar sense of intimacy to classes with topics ranging from “Farm to Fork” to “The Big Meltdown of Baked Pastas.”

“Cooking is the one connector that brings people together, and I love sharing that,” said Bruce, also an avid gardener and full-time public relations consultant. “For me, the best you can give life is to share your love and your talents. No matter what your talents are, share them.” — Barbara Arciero

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Fare share

PANCETTA and fennel tart

“I like layers of flavor,” says cooking school instructor Paulette Bruce, explaining her use of wine in this pastry dough: “Also, an acid makes pastry flakier. Some people add lemon zest.”

Serves 6 to 8

White wine pastry dough

1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 tsp. salt
8 tbsp. (1 stick) unsalted butter, cut into small cubes
1 large egg yolk
3 tbsp. dry white wine, dry white vermouth or cold water, plus more if needed

To make pastry dough:

In the bowl of a food processor, pulse flour and salt together. Add butter and pulse until mixture resembles coarse sand. Add egg yolk and wine. Continue to process until dough begins to come together. Remove to a lightly floured surface. Shape into a disk and wrap loosely in plastic wrap. Chill until firm, at least 30 minutes. Dough may be refrigerated up to 2 days, or it can be frozen.

To partially bake tart shell:

Butter or grease a 9 1/2-inch tart pan with a removable base. On a lightly floured surface, using a lightly floured rolling pin, roll out dough until it is 2 inches larger than the pan. Transfer dough to prepared pan and press it well into the corners, taking care not to stretch it. With your fingers, press dough evenly up the sides of the pan and trim. Prick base of shell with a fork. Chill shell until very firm, at least 30 minutes; for quick results, place in the freezer.

Preheat oven to 425 degrees and set a baking sheet lined with parchment paper or a silicone baking mat on a low rack to heat. Crumple a piece of parchment paper and press it into the tart shell, gently pushing down into the corners. Fill with dry beans or rice to hold the base flat. Bake shell on preheated baking sheet until dough is brown around the edges and firm enough to hold its shape, about 15 minutes. Remove baking sheet and tart pan from oven and lift out parchment and beans. Lower oven to 375 degrees, return tart pan on the baking sheet to the oven and continue baking until the bottom of the pastry is dry. 5 to 10 minutes more. Remove and set aside on a cooling rack while you prepare the filling. Leave the oven on.

To make filling:

Melt butter in a large skillet over medium heat and sauté pancetta, stirring often, until lightly browned, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in fennel, fennel seeds and salt and pepper to taste. Cover and cook over low heat, stirring often, so fennel softens and cooks in its own juices, until it is very tender and lightly browned, 15 to 20 minutes. Spread filling in the tart shell. Whisk together eggs and cream in a bowl. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Pour egg mixture into tart shell. Bake until filling is set and lightly browned, 30 to 35 minutes. Let sit for at least 20 minutes before serving. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Pancetta and fennel tart filling

1 tbsp. unsalted butter
8 oz. pancetta, diced
1 medium fennel bulb, trimmed, halved, cored and thinly sliced
3/4 tsp. fennel seeds
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
2 large egg
1 cup heavy cream

Pancetta and fennel tart filling

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2 large egg
1 cup heavy cream
ROASTED CARROTS with thyme and garlic

Roasting turns garlic into something pleasantly mellow and slightly sweet, Bruce says, adding that there’s no need to peel the cloves: “The skins are easy to slip off after roasting.” She also reminds cooks to leave the carrots undisturbed during their first cook time: “You want them to brown around the edges. That’s where the flavor comes from.”

Serves 4

3 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
2 1/2 lb. large carrots, cut on a 3-inch diagonal
3 tbsp. unsalted butter
1 head garlic, cloves separated but left unpeeled
5 sprigs thyme
1/2 tsp. Maldon sea salt
1/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
1/2 cup water

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Melt butter in a 10-inch ovenproof, nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add onion and cook until softened but not browned. Add spinach, tossing until it wilts. Season with salt, pepper and chili flakes, and transfer to a plate. Set aside to cool. Wipe out skillet. Whisk together eggs, 1/2 cup Parmesan and garlic; season with salt and pepper. Stir in cooled spinach mixture. Heat oil in the same skillet over medium-low heat until it shimmers. Add egg mixture and stir gently with a fork to distribute spinach. Cook omelet until eggs are set around the edges, lifting the eggs and stirring, 3 to 4 minutes. Transfer the skillet to the oven and bake until eggs are firm, 8 to 10 minutes. Slide omelet onto a serving plate; garnish with remaining 1/4 cup Parmesan and olives.

SPINACH OMELET with Kalamata olives

Unlike a typical omelet that’s folded over at the stovetop, this one is finished off in the oven to yield a hearty, frittata-like dish. It’s delicious as is or with additions such as cooked sausage or cooked, sliced potatoes.

Serves 6

2 tbsp. unsalted butter
3/4 cup minced onion
8 cups coarsely chopped spinach leaves or Swiss chard leaves
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
1/4 tsp. chili flakes
10 eggs
3/4 cup shredded Parmesan, divided
1 tbsp. minced fresh garlic
2 tbsp. olive oil
12 pitted, sliced Kalamata olives

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Heat oil in a 12-inch, heavy, ovenproof skillet over moderately high heat until very hot and just beginning to smoke, then add half of the carrots, cut sides down. Cook, undisturbed, until they begin to brown, 12 to 15 minutes. Transfer to a plate. Brown remaining carrots similarly, but leave them in the skillet. Add butter to skillet and return carrots on plate to skillet. Continue to cook over moderately high heat, turning frequently, until carrots are golden brown on the edges, about 5 minutes more. Add garlic, thyme, sea salt, pepper and water, and cover skillet tightly with a lid. Roast in oven until carrots are tender, about 20 minutes. Remove lid and continue roasting, turning over carrots occasionally, until edges are slightly crisp, 10 to 15 minutes more.
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MORE ONLINE
The sharing continues at www.californiabountiful.com. Paulette Bruce offers cooking tips and another recipe, and reveals how many cookbooks are in her collection.

San Diego County citrus grower Helene Beck has assembled a noteworthy recipe collection that includes inventive ways to prepare and serve persimmons, kumquats and blood oranges. Jewels From My Grove includes recipes for condiments, meats and desserts that tastefully answer the question, “What do you do with this?” Paperback from Chefs Press. $25.95.

California Bountiful’s Book Reviews highlight books related to rural living and California agriculture. To suggest a book, contact Kate Campbell at kcampbell@californiabountiful.com.

ORANGE and olive oil cake

Bruce’s Italian heritage shines in this traditional dessert, which she describes as “a perfect cake because it’s not too sweet or gooey.” It stores and travels well wrapped tightly in plastic, making it ideal for tailgates, potlucks or welcoming new neighbors.

Serves 8

6 oz. blanched almonds
1 cup all-purpose flour
1 tbsp. baking powder
4 large eggs, at room temperature
1 1/2 cups sugar
Zest of 1 orange, finely chopped
Juice of 1 orange (about 1/2 cup)
1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil

Garnish
Powdered sugar
Thinly sliced oranges
Fresh mint leaves
Whipped cream

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Oil a 9-inch springform pan with olive oil. In a food processor fitted with the metal blade, process almonds until finely ground, almost like breadcrumbs. In a medium mixing bowl, combine ground almonds, flour and baking powder and set aside.

With an electric mixer on medium speed, beat eggs until frothy. Slowly add sugar and beat mixture until it is light, thick and lemon-colored. Slowly add flour mixture and then add orange zest, juice and olive oil, mixing just to combine.

Pour mixture into prepared pan and bake for 50 to 60 minutes or until a skewer inserted in the center comes out clean. Cool and remove sides of pan. Place cake on a serving platter and sprinkle powdered sugar in a decorative pattern on top. Garnish with orange slices, mint leaves and whipped cream.