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Dig into a team-building class at Le Chat Gourmet in Eaton Rapids.



## NOW YOU'RE COOKING

Tie one on—an apron, that is—at local cooking schools, a tasty option for your next meeting or event. BY SUSAN R. POLLACK

COOKING CLASSES ARE A GREAT WAY TO MIX IT UP with your team, whether that means building camaraderie or literally stirring up ingredients while preparing delicious food. Michigan features a bevy of cooking schools that host corporate meetings and team-building events.

When you're sharing whisks with co-workers, crimping pie crusts together and rushing against the clock to create perfect risottos and prettily garnished plates, a special bonding takes place that goes beyond what may transpire at computer screens, boardroom tables and other typical workplace settings.

"Food always brings people together, it's the great unifier," says Eric Blotkamp, director of the Mirepoix Cooking School at Holiday Market in Royal Oak, which conducts hands-on, *Iron Chef*-style cooking duels in its profes-

sional, state-of-the-art kitchen.

The duels are friendly competitions, and Mirepoix also hosts relaxed mix-and-mingle cooking events, popular for corporate holiday parties. Participants may watch the culinary action at two cooking stations—French and Italian are popular—or roll up their sleeves and help slice, dice and saute.

Groups of up to 40 work best, but more can be accommodated at both types of events. Prices start at about \$100 per person, Blotkamp says, adding: "Everyone takes

home a recipe packet specially prepared for that class ... and people usually leave with a little doggie bag."

Here's a look at some other cooking schools around Michigan:

### Bekins Cooking School

Don't expect a Gordon Ramsay-style verbal smackdown when your group attends Bekins Cooking School in Grand Haven or Grand Rapids. "We try to make our cooking sessions entertaining and fun—it's not like a day of working in *Hell's Kitchen* or anything like that," says corporate chef Tom Reinhart, who stages his "jovial" sessions in semicircular cooking theaters inside Bekins appliance stores' high-end showrooms.

Fast-paced, hands-on Asian stir-frying and



Above: Pizza brings people together at Le Chat Gourmet. Right: It's time to make the bagels at Zingerman's Bakehouse in Ann Arbor.

Thai cooking classes foster the most group cooperation and excitement, he says, but slower sushi-rolling and ravioli-making sessions are also fun. Participants typically divide into small teams, practice techniques and consume what they make at the end. Classes run two to two and a half hours and start at \$600 for up to eight people. (With seating for 11, there's room for three more at \$50 additional per person).

## Zingerman's Bakehouse

French baguettes, pies and pizza are among the tasty treats turned out in hands-on group baking classes at Zingerman's Bakehouse in Ann Arbor, but strudel, French macarons and other more advanced baked goods also are an option, according to Amy Emberling, co-managing partner.

Two classrooms accommodate up to 24 participants, generally divided into 12 per class (though room can be made for more). Participants prepare their own baked goods, typically two to three items, in classes that run about four hours. In team-building exercises, groups generally divide into three-member teams. Cost is \$1,000 for a four-hour gathering of up to 12 participants, or \$75 per person for a three-hour class.

Team-building exercises can be "a real leveler," changing up the dynamics of a group,



Emberling says: "It helps people see without that corporate structure or title that people have different skills to contribute outside work."

Sometimes, she notes, corporate groups order lunch or dinner from Zingerman's Deli or Roadhouse, combining a two-hour baking class with a social gathering or meeting.

## Chateau Chantal

From "Spanish tapas" and "Spring in Tuscany" to "Paris/Texas" (a fusion of French cuisine with Southwestern style), cooking classes at Chateau Chantal on Traverse City's Old Mission peninsula can be custom tailored for groups, according to Brian Lillie, hospitality director at the 65-acre vineyard estate.

With panoramic bay views from each window, groups of 12 to 24 gather in the winery's demonstration kitchen for four-hour, hands-on classes that incorporate locally sourced ingredients. "Participants break out in small

groups and work together to create their dishes, then sit down to enjoy the fruits of their labor," Lillie says.

Rates range from \$95 to \$125 per person, depending on group size and menu. Arrangements can be made for team-building sessions that include an overnight stay, wine dinner, breakfast and cooking class.

## Le Chat Gourmet

Michigan-sourced butternut squash soup with herb drizzle or chili oil, and rustic apple brandy tart with homemade caramel sauce are among the seasonal dishes students prepare at Le Chat Gourmet, chef Denene Vincent's cooking school in Eaton Rapids, near Lansing.

Groups of six to 24 tackle menu themes such as French Table, Taste of Italy, Gourmet San Francisco and New Orleans Steakhouse in her 1,000-square-foot teaching kitchen. Classes run three to three and a half hours and start at \$95 for three courses and \$125 for four courses, plus a 15 percent gratuity.

Whether groups choose classes or a team-building exercise, Vincent says, cooking together changes things up from typical golf outings and survival exercises. "Everyone has to work as a team," she says. "They have to communicate and get their timing right, just as if they're doing a presentation or a job. It's very social, interactive and fun." 🍷

## GET CONNECTED

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