

Recipe for success: Free cooking class takes beginners through the basics

By [Ron Maxey](#), Special to The Daily Memphian

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Kiara Bruce (left,) preps food during a Cook Well, Be Well class at Crosstown Concourse. Classes are offered in person from 10 a.m. until noon on Tuesdays or 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. on Thursdays. (Ziggy Mack/Special to The Daily Memphian)

Cheryl StevensManning traveled on average 42 weeks a year in her job as a workshop training facilitator, leaving little time to develop culinary skills.

Luckily, her husband was a good cook.

“Walt was a phenomenal salmon cooker,” StevensManning, 65, recalls of her late husband, Walter Manning, the associate dean in the school of communication sciences and disorders at the University of Memphis. He retired in 2016 and died last September following complications from Alzheimer’s disease.

Supper Club to reopen with Chef Tam

“That’s mostly what we ate, a lot of fish and not much meat.”

So among the considerations for StevensManning as she began pondering her new reality after her husband’s death and her own retirement was one particular detail seemingly unimportant in the grand scheme and yet entirely necessary: how to feed herself.

That’s how she and the Church Health Cook Well, Be Well program became acquainted.

“Someone in my family came across this cooking class, and so I signed up,” StevensManning said. “Unfortunately, I didn’t make the first cut because the class was full, and so I made the next one (in February).”



Church Health holds basic cooking classes in Crosstown Concourse as part of its Cook Well, Be Well program.
(Ziggy Mack/Special to The Daily Memphian)

Cook Well, Be Well is a four-class series, meeting for two hours once a week for four weeks, at the Church Health Nutrition Hub in Crosstown Concourse. The nutrition hub is part of the Church Health suite of services. Church Health occupies the first, second and third floors of Concourse's west atrium with a medical clinic, dental clinic, eye clinic and physical therapy services in addition to the nutrition hub, which boasts a full kitchen with multiple ovens and stove tops as well as a community dining room.

Local food truck finds 'Good' home where Muddy's once was

Sharon Moore, the wellness education and nutrition manager, said Cook Well, Be Well grew out of the nutrition hub's original mission to serve as a licensing facility for the culinary medicine curriculum at the Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine at Tulane University in New Orleans.



Vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans and nuts and seeds are featured ingredients in the Cook Well, Be Well program. (Ziggy Mack/Special to The Daily Memphian)

As they began to expand offerings into Church Health’s Memphis community, Moore said nutritionists started to realize that more basic skills were needed than what was being taught as part of the licensing curriculum.

“What we found, for the population we serve, is that these classes were a little too advanced and we needed to have more cooking skills in the curriculum,” Moore said.

As a result, participants who sign up for the free, four-week Cook Well, Be Well sessions now get the basic kitchen skills that many novice chefs need — how to handle knives properly, knowing the difference between simmering and sauteing, figuring out when to slice and when to dice.

“You’re not going to cook anything, healthy or otherwise, if you don’t know how to cook,” noted Sheri McKelvie, a nutrition coordinator who helped write the curriculum for the classes and develop the recipes prepared by participants.

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Gabriella Huffstetler, another nutrition coordinator, said knowing there’s a watchful eye is reassuring for beginning chefs.

“I think one of the biggest things is that they like having somebody walk you through cooking,” she said. “It kind of takes away a bit of the fear and builds their confidence.”

At the end of each class session, participants gather in the community dining room to share a meal of everything made in that day’s class.

Among the recipes prepared during the hands-on sessions are a range of dishes based on the principles of the Mediterranean diet; it places a heavy emphasis on vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans, nuts and seeds, olive oil, and herbs and spices for seasoning. Meat is used sparingly, though some recipes do include chicken.

The diet derives its name from the traditional flavors and cooking methods of people in the Mediterranean region.

Repeated studies have shown fewer deaths from cardiovascular disease as well as lower blood pressure and cholesterol among people in Mediterranean countries such as Greece and Italy.



Chef Gabriella Huffstetler reviews recipe notes with students during a Cook Well. Be well class at Crosstown Concourse on Thursday, March 28. “I think one of the biggest things is that they like having somebody walk you through cooking,” she said. (Ziggy Mack/Special to The Daily Memphian)

Former private chef for rich and famous finds home at SOB East

Mason said it’s no accident that Church Health focuses on the Mediterranean style of cooking in its courses.

“A lot of the people we serve are obese, have diabetes, hypertension or all of the above,” she said. “We knew that was the right thing for us to be teaching where we live in Memphis, Tennessee.”

The nutrition team began developing the curriculum and recipes for its community classes during the pandemic, when they could not bring people together in the kitchen, and then launched the classes post-pandemic.

Classes are now offered in person from 10 a.m. until noon on Tuesdays or 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. on Thursdays for a total of four classes in the course. The same curriculum is repeated each month. There’s also a class in Spanish from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. on



Chef Sheri McKelvie (right,) treats student Carter Ambrose (left) and others to smoothies during a Cook Well, Be Well class at Crosstown Concourse Thursday, March 28. (Ziggy Mack/Special to The Daily Memphian)

Tuesdays during alternating months. A class in which participants can work online at their own pace is also available.

There's a one-month break during the summer and the winter holidays. [The Cook Well, Be Well website](#) includes future class dates as well as a registration form and required pre-registration survey.

[Grit and grind: Coffee shop owner](#)

[balances beans and business](#)

Where to stir the pot



Most Cook Well, Be Well recipes avoid meat, but chicken is occasionally used. (Ziggy Mack/Special to The Daily Memphian)

Hands-on programs such as Cook Well, Be Well are hard to find locally. Whole Foods at one time offered a cooking program, Salud Cooking School, but a Whole Foods spokesman said the class died out during the pandemic and hasn't been revived.

The Kemmons Wilson School of Hospitality and Resort Management at the U of M offers degree programs in culinary arts and noncredit continuing education courses in food handling, according to its website, but no courses in basic cooking skills.

A spokesman for the school did not return messages about program offerings.

Olive oil, spice and culinary accessories shop Bazaar offers themed cooking nights at its store on the Collierville Town Square. Professional chef Penny Behnes prepares meals for participants and will offer limited hands-on interaction by asking those in attendance to help with stirring or chopping, for example, said Bazaar co-owner Kim Avery.

'Bite of Memphis' brings food stories home

Avery owns the store with her sister, Kristi Lester. The two bought Bazaar from its original owner about two years ago and decided about a year ago to resume the dinner nights started by the original owner.

The next themed dinner will be "April in Paris" on Thursday, April 25. The cost is \$65 per person and between 22 and 26 people can be accommodated in the store at 88 N. Main St. Potential participants should call [901-861-7218](tel:901-861-7218) to make reservations.

But for an immersive, hands-on cooking experience, StevensManning said nothing beats what she got out of Cook Well, Be Well.

"I absolutely, thoroughly enjoyed it," she said. "No. 1, it validated all of the research I had done on the Mediterranean diet and lifestyle.

“And I learned so much about just the basic skills. The basic skills is what it’s all about: how to cut, what you need fundamentally. It makes it so much easier, so I’m not as intimidated by cooking now. If someone asks me to do something, I don’t just break out in a cold sweat.”

TOPICS

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Ron Maxey is a Memphis native with 45 years of journalism experience in the city and surrounding area.
