

BUILDING COMMUNITY BY COOKING TOGETHER: COOP COOKING CLASSES MAKE A COMEBACK

July 31, 2023



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

By Frank Haberle

Brooklyn is undoubtedly one of the world's great culinary capitals. According to the New York City Department of Health, there are 6,646 restaurants lining the avenues of our borough, representing almost every cuisine and culture in the world; with food trucks, markets and other venues, every conceivable dish is at our fingertips. Among the Park Slope Food Coop membership, we are blessed with a multitude of professional chefs as well as talented home cooks who have remarkable knowledge of the many ingredients we hold on our shelves, and of how to prepare delicious meals for our fam-

ilies. The Coop's cooking classes—a series of events organized and presented by a committed working group of our members—offer a remarkable opportunity to learn how to prepare a fantastic range of dishes, using the products available at the Coop.

As the Coop continues its steady progress toward pre-Covid normalcy, one of the most important aspects of this effort is bringing back the programs and activities that helped to strengthen the sense of community that defines our membership. In this effort, the return and rising popularity of Coop cooking classes has been a key ingredient.

“THERE WAS A COMMUNAL SENSE TO THE IN-PERSON WORKSHOPS WITH A GREAT DEAL OF INTERACTION AND HANDS-ON LEARNING BETWEEN THE MEMBERS AND PRESENTERS...”

MANDIRA GHAI, COOKING CLASS CO-CHAIR

The cooking classes that were hosted on-site in the upstairs meeting room for years before Covid-19 were a popular mainstay of the community. The classes brought chefs and home cooks from the widest possible range of cultures and cuisines to share their knowledge and love of great food with members. The classes were always popular events, drawing a core group of “regulars,” both new and long-standing members. With Covid restrictions during the spring of 2020, the cooking classes, like all workshops hosted by the Coop, had to be paused.

Today, under the leadership of co-chairs Mandira Ghai and Jeff Bonar and squad members Sophia Li, Tritia Denaro, Nina Fattahi, Amanda McCleod, Jeffrey M. and Elana Siggall, cooking classes have returned to the Coop in a virtual format—a big change from the pre-Covid, in-person workshops, necessary due to the meeting room being repurposed. Ghai, a Coop member since 2016, remembers that “prior to the pandemic, classes were packed between first-time attendees and regulars who participated each

and every month. The interactive, hands-on approach of the in-person sessions, especially the prepared meal everyone shared at the end of the class, really reinforced the communal nature of the Coop.”

When classes had to be canceled due to Covid, the core group of organizers voluntarily continued to meet and plan how to bring back the workshop series. “The team saw a unique opportunity at the beginning of lockdown to translate classes into an online social activity that offered ideas and inspiration, especially during a period when people were overwhelmed by how much more cooking they were doing at home,” Ghai said. “It was a nice feeling of camaraderie for us to keep going in the midst of chaos, and a reminder of how much I enjoy collaborating with the talented, affable people in our squad.” Another initiative by the Food Class Squad was cooking for the Coop’s hard-working staff during the pandemic, preparing meals for nearly 60 essential workers.

“WE WANT THE CLASSES TO FEEL WELCOMING FOR EVERYONE—FROM GATHERING INGREDIENTS TO ENCOUNTERING MOMENTS OF UNCERTAINTY AND HAVING A PERSON THERE TO GUIDE YOU.”

SOPHIA LI, MEMBER

Open to members and non-members, Coop cooking classes offer wide-ranging options for member cooks. This summer, classes have included recipes for summer squash, presented by Jeffrey Mason, and a workshop on blueberry pie hosted by Elana Segall. In all cases, there is a great deal of flexibility in the structure of the workshops, which allows the leaders to be creative. Cooking classes are designed to be accessible to people at all levels as cooks, with presenters walking the group through preparation of dishes, step by step, with plenty of time for Q&A.

Sophia Li, a new Coop member who worked in stocking and checkout before joining

the Cooking Class Squad very recently, spoke of how impressive it is to see how the classes contribute to a strong sense of community. “I know a lot of people who have joined the Coop since the pandemic, ranging from professional chefs to people who only eat Ritz crackers. Regardless of your cooking level—from gathering ingredients to encountering moments of uncertainty and having a person there who can guide you, to hearing other people’s questions during the class and discussing together—we are seeking to facilitate a space for learning together,” Li said.



D. Tint

ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

“It is a priority that our classes reflect the diversity of the products, producers, and people found at the Coop,” Ghai added. “Anyone with a perspective on food and cooking is encouraged to propose a virtual session. We also want to ensure that what we are sharing is useful, especially given the level of fatigue sustained by online meetings, so community requests and general feedback is extremely valuable as we continue redefining the class.”

“When we shop at the Coop we are surrounded by members representing every food tradition on the planet,” said squad co-chair and professional chef Jeff Bonar. “I am honored to be on the squad that celebrates that bounty! If you have some special food or cooking expertise and want to share it with other members, let us know.”

To learn more about upcoming Coop cooking classes and how to get involved—including doing a presentation—please visit the cooking class website. You can also check Instagram for updates and previous class photos. If you are looking for recipes and past presentations, please visit the YouTube channel or contact the squad directly at info@foodcoopcooks.org.

Frank Haberle is a 30-year Coop member, a professional grant writer, and the author of two novels about 1980s drifters—Shufflers, and the upcoming Downlanders—both published by Flexible Press in Minneapolis.