

## Wielding Kitchen Knives and Honing Office Skills



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Employees of the San Francisco office of the financial services company UBS do some team building in the kitchen of Sur La Table.

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SAN FRANCISCO, Jan. 12 — Steve Jakosa, leader of the Emerald Palace cooking team, took off his apron and sat down to enjoy his dinner when the bad news came. His team's Mongolian beef had lost.

Across the room at a Sur La Table store here, the victors, the Wok Stars, cheered over their triumphant sweet soy and chili flank steak. It was a cook-off with decidedly corporate overtones as the group of amateur chefs from UBS, the financial services company, divided into teams and donned aprons recently one night after work.

Mr. Jakosa stood to make a toast. "I just want to tell you I'm devastated we didn't win the protein category," he said in jest.

Forget ropes courses and golf outings. Cooking is the new wave in corporate team-building exercises. And cooking schools across the country are expanding to meet demand. Last year, Hands On Gourmet, a company in San Francisco, tripled the number of chefs it has on call, to 32. Cooking by the Book, a company based in New York, did 178 team-building events, a 24 percent increase over 2005.

Taking inspiration from Rachael Ray, "Iron Chef" and "Top Chef," companies like [Amgen](#) and [Microsoft](#) are sending their employees off to chop, dice and sauté their way to better sales and management skills. They might spend a leisurely hour assembling a meal together or split up and go cleaver to cleaver in a race against the clock.

However it is done, the cooking class approach to corporate team building has caught on.

"This is a wonderful way to break the ice and get people familiar with each other while getting them to do something as basic as cooking," said Stephen Gibbs, a co-owner of Hands On Gourmet whose corporate team-building business in the last year has increased to 20 events a month from an average of 12.

Cooking events serve as an equalizer, Mr. Gibbs said, where the hierarchies of the office do not always translate. “In the kitchen, it’s not about top-down structure,” he said. “Everyone is working on the same level.” Indeed, Mr. Jakosa, a senior vice president at UBS, directs a small wealth management group, but on this night he was the also-ran, the guy whose team took the equivalent of the Miss Congeniality crown, with the prize for the best noodles.

“Some people would be happy with the noodle prize,” he said. “I’m perennially unhappy unless I’m No. 1 in the meat category.”

Yet Mr. Jakosa kept his humor about it. “It’s so good for the boss not just to lose but to come in third out of three,” he said. “It’s good for esprit de corps.”

Bibby Gignilliat, the owner of Parties That Cook, which sent three chefs to work with the UBS group, said the change of scenery makes people see their colleagues in a different light.

“It breaks down your stereotype of people in the office,” Ms. Gignilliat said. “You might not especially like someone you work with, but suddenly you’re working on a recipe with them and you see they’re a really good cook.”

This is true of other team-bonding pursuits, of course. Companies are always looking for ways to make their employees happy and productive. That is why they go to the trouble and expense of scavenger hunts, rope courses, team boat building, and reality and game show knockoffs (one team-building company offers a number of these, including one called Corporate Survivor). These experiences are all popular ways to get employees together out of the office to discover new things about themselves and one another.

And fortunately most people are willing to give cooking a try, as the threshold to a minimal level of competence in wielding a kitchen knife is relatively low. What’s more, the kitchen can represent a microcosm of the working world, with a deadline, limited resources to work with and a requirement for cooperation.

“At a golf tournament, the better golfers will have more fun,” said Mary Risley, the owner of Tante Marie’s Cooking School in San Francisco. Ms. Risley has been running corporate events since 1980, when she led a group of 24 summer associates at a law firm through a menu of fresh pasta, sautéed chicken with shallots and chocolate mousse cake. Over the years, Ms. Risley has led classes for many law firms and for corporations as diverse as [H. J. Heinz](#), [Genentech](#) and Fidelity Investments.

Cooking is certainly safer than, say, rope climbing. “This is more social and you’re not dangling 20 feet in the air,” said Shoshana Wolf, the culinary coordinator at Sur La Table in Arlington, Va.

Ms. Gignilliat, whose prices start at \$115 a person, said that unlike the corporate world, where co-workers might be collaborating on a project for a year, in the cooking class “they can see results after an hour.”

Not surprisingly, the culture of the office can creep into the kitchen.

Before the professional chefs let Mr. Jakosa and his employees loose in the kitchen they had rented at Sur La Table they demonstrated some culinary basics — using the side of a knife to smash garlic; the grid approach to dicing onions — and offered a few safety tips.

A teacher suggested to the group that if they were carrying a hot pan and needed to call it to the attention of someone standing in the way, unaware of the peril, they call out, “Hot behind!”

Ever mindful of linguistic caution in the workplace, Mr. Jakosa shouted across the room to a colleague: “Hey, Andrew, can we say ‘hot behind?’ ”

Some of the most gratifying results can come from a cooking event with people who barely know one another.

Throughout each year, Thermo Fischer Scientific, a large maker of laboratory equipment based in Waltham, Mass., invites managers from around the world to participate in a weeklong leadership training program.

For the last two years, a cooking course has been the first event of the week.

“You might have someone from China or Japan who speaks very little English,” said Shelly Goulet, an administrator who coordinates the event. “It’s just amazing that they then come together and do this dinner together. It puts them in a different place outside the business world.”

Ms. Goulet said that in a survey after the program, the comments about the team-bonding cooking event are consistently the highest. “It’s one of the favorite events of the week,” she said.

The culinary approach has even been used to court a customer.

Last spring, Renate Glaessmann, a sales manager at [Hewlett-Packard](#) in Bridgewater, N.J., took her team to a cooking event in Chicago and invited employees from [Verizon](#) — her prospective client — to join them.

“There were some challenges with some of the personalities,” she recalled, “so initially, some people were very reserved, and there were a few mad faces.”

But as the group of a dozen or so sales managers and engineers — mostly men — from both companies worked together to create a tapas menu, the group grew more collegial. “They were pleasantly surprised,” Ms. Glaessmann said. H.P. got the business.

Ms. Gignilliat, whose company is based in San Francisco and offers courses in Chicago and Los Angeles, said she started doing cuisine-centered team building eight years ago, when 40 or so executives arrived in San Francisco from Asia to negotiate a deal. The local law firm they were working with set up a team-building class with Ms. Gignilliat, at the home of one of the lawyers.

Ms. Gignilliat thought they would want to cook fish. The lawyer told her that they wanted steak.

Ms. Gignilliat was skeptical at first. “I walked into the living room and they were standing in a circle, very formally, and no one was talking,” she recalled. She tried to break the silence with a cheerful rallying cry: “O.K.! Who wants to cook!” No response.

Once she managed to get the men to the kitchen and into aprons, she showed them how to make a stuffed beef tenderloin and strawberry shortcake.

“By the end of the night, it was raucous,” she recalled. Ms. Gignilliat heard later that her class had been the highlight of the group’s two-week stay in San Francisco.

“That’s when I knew I was on to something,” she said. “Food is a universal language and nothing brings people together better than creating a meal.”

Mr. Jakosa said that even weeks after the event, people in his office were still talking about it. Of the 13 people in Mr. Jakosa’s group at UBS, two had other obligations on the night of the cooking challenge and could not attend.

Mr. Jakosa likened the bragging rights earned by his group to the St. Crispin’s Day speech from “Henry V.” As the king exhorts his ragged band of soldiers to confront the French, he explains that those who are not there with them will regret it for years to come.

“It was that great,” Mr. Jakosa said. “And that’s the effect it had on people who didn’t come. They regret it. Profoundly.”

Still, Mr. Jakosa said, as gratifying as he and his employees found the cooking challenge, it might be time to branch out. So next year, they might get out of the kitchen and try some four-wheeling down in Monterey.