A TASTE OF THE ACTION

THE HANDS-ON APPROACH TO FINE CUISINE

BY MARCIA C. GAGLIARDI

San Francisco is a veritable food mecca. And for foodies, aspiring cooks or even the simply curious, the city's vibrant dining scene offers much more than the opportunity to consume top-quality cuisine. A number of restaurants and businesses have crafted events that allow a participatory approach to culinary adventure. From getting an up-close view while a pro chef works his or her magic to rolling up your sleeves and chopping onions, there are an array of ways to get to know your dinner. We've chosen a few that shouldn't be missed.

Tante Marie's Cooking School

A TASTE OF THE ACTION...

One Market

Hawthorne Lane

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The chef's table at One Market provides the type of ringside action that you can't get at the typical restaurant counter. "The Table" is a black-and-red booth smack in the middle of the bustling kitchen. Chef Mark Dommen, or sometimes the grill cook, leads an in-depth tour of the kitchen and serves a prix-fixe dinner. You get a chef's jacket to wear, which will come in handy if you want to do a little prep work, such as torching your own crème brûlée. The program is also available at lunch, when participants order off the restaurant's à la carte menu. Dinner is $85 (M–Th) or $95 (F–Sa) per person; a minimum of four diners is required.

For those who want to see if their own skills measure up, it's hard to beat the "Chef for a Day" program at Kuleto's Italian Restaurant. For a $150 fee that is donated to the San Francisco Food Bank, dilettante chefs throw on some whites and get to shadow chef Sharyl Seim in the kitchen. You can pick what part of the line you want to work on, from grill to pasta to pastry, and you can "work" in the kitchen for four to eight hours, depending on how much chef reality you're up for. All experience levels are welcome. At the end of your shift, you and a guest get to tuck into a full Italian dinner in the dining room. You will also get to take home a bottle of Kuleto's olive oil and the cookbook *Contemporary Italian: Favorite Recipes from Kuleto's Restaurant*.

If you're less interested in a restaurant-kitchen experience but love to cook, consider visiting local favorite Tante Marie's Cooking School. On Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, you can sit in on demos for the students enrolled in the school's full-time culinary course. Learn how to filet a fish or decorate a cake; the two-hour demos in the spacious, comfortable kitchens are $50–$65. On Mondays and Fridays (10 am–4 pm) and Wednesdays (10 am–2 pm), Tante Marie's offers a participatory workshop, which includes lunch, for $90. The school also hosts weekend classes that tend to fill up, but it's always worth a call to check offerings and availability.

Casual cooks and experienced chefs alike will benefit from the hands-on classes offered by Emily Dellas of First Class Cooking. The eight-person sessions take place three to four nights a week in a Pacific Heights mansion and include a communal dinner at the end. Sessions last two hours and focus on a variety of cuisines, such as Italian and Indian, and admission is just $45–$60.

Hawthorne Lane hosts cooking classes in its immaculate kitchen one Saturday each month (10 am–2 pm). The restaurant chefs lead groups in crafting meals that are fun and seasonal—think lobster boils. Start the day with mimosas, get a hands-on education and then enjoy the fruits of your labor at a sit-down lunch with wine pairings. Classes cost about $100 per person.

For a cooking party that can be a great bonding or team-building exercise, Hands On Gourmet provides the framework to customize an experience for you. It hosts cooking-class parties, for which it provides the kitchen venue, recipes, ingredients and guidance to get you and your group working as a team. After you and your friends or coworkers have finished chopping, sauteing and stirring together, you'll sit down, relax and enjoy a delicious gourmet meal that you can take pride in.

Restaurant Gary Danko's individual culinary internship, called L'École des Chefs, is an intensive two- to five-day program for aspiring chefs of all ability levels. This is the best way to get a behind-the-scenes look at the working of a Relaix & Chateaux restaurant, though the price is steep (admission starts at $1,400) and availability is limited.