

Real Men Cook

It's a fact: Men are cooking for their children and families, making elaborate meals, even baking and preparing food for parties. We get kitchen tips and recipes from some Emerald Coast men

Real Men Cook Emerging from behind the barbecue, today's men are mixing it up in the kitchen.

By Anita Doberman + Lori Hutzler Eckert

We know all too well the alpha male chef, the explosive culinary genius, who creates unique platters while towering over and shouting orders to the staff. It's an iconic figure.

Not so familiar is the image of the average American male, a dad, husband or son, preparing elaborate meals in his home kitchen — or meals at all, for that matter.

But it's a fact. Men are cooking. I am not referring to barbecuing or grilling out back, but cooking for their children and families, making elaborate meals, even baking and preparing food for dinner parties. We see men stepping up to the stove all around us.

When we go to a friend's house, the male host may have cooked the entire meal. Enroll in a cooking class, and you might find that half or more of the students are men. And at specialty stores, you'll see male customers looking for exotic ingredients for their recipes.

Celebrity chefs, Emerald Coast restaurateurs, residents and prominent figures in the community have their own views as to whether and why men are taking over the kitchen.

While opinions are varied and explanations abound, you won't hear many women complain about this phenomenon. One thing is for sure: Everyone, men and women alike, are enjoying the benefits of this newfound trend.

From movies such as "Sideways" to the use of terms like "metrosexual," it's more and more culturally acceptable for men to be interested in more than just beer and burgers.

Today, being a connoisseur of food and wine is not only accepted, it has become an essential element of high status. Men who cook are "in"; men who don't know their arugula from their elbows are "out";

"Men are discovering that cooking is fun," said Luke Palladino, renowned international chef and owner of four fantastic restaurants — Specchio, Ombra and Risi Bisi, all in Atlantic City, N.J., and the recently opened Bragozzo in Biloxi, Miss. All four offer different perspectives on Italian cuisine. "Cooking is also a way to socialize and reconnect with family and friends," he said.

Palladino sees evidence in his own restaurants that men are more interested in cooking and learning about food preparation.

"Cooking is a contrast to a harried way of life, in which we are trying to jam one more thing into our limited time," said Palladino, who grew up in an Italian-American family and has been interested in food since a young age. He studied in Italy for several years and trained in the United States under Emeril Lagasse, Todd English and Bobby Flay, among others.

Palladino has been creating his distinctive plates for years now, and he emphasized that cooking is a creative outlet — one that allows men to express themselves in unique ways while taking a break from the fast pace of modern life to enjoy family and friends.

Cooking, Palladino pointed out, is a creative outlet that brings people together, allowing them to share and connect.

The Guy Gourmand

Our own Emerald Coast men are taking part in this activity and are using their free time to learn about food and share with family and friends. Kay Snipes, one of the owners of Gerard Cookery and Cajun Market in Sandestin, which also offers cooking classes, sees an increasing number of men interested in learning about food — not only in her store, but also in her classes.

“People like to learn about making meals and then get to know and learn about one another — it’s great fun,” said Snipes. She added that part of the reason more men are able to enjoy cooking is that many male baby boomers have retired, and while women may be changing careers or starting something new, men have more free time and “are taking over kitchen duties.”

Michel Thibau, manager of Wine World in Destin, shares Snipes’s views. Thibau, who learned to make cheese as a boy of barely 13 from a shepherd in his native village in France, added that in general, women of all ages are entering the work force and spending as much if not more time outside of the home. This has allowed men, either by necessity or out of pure boredom, to try their hand at cooking and thus avoid ordering takeout every night.

In the process, men have realized that they enjoy cooking.

“Men are becoming more in tune with their senses,” Thibau said. He pointed out that the availability of high-quality products, not only in large cities but anywhere around the country, has made a difference.

“There is a better understanding of good food,” Thibau said. “Before, it was uncool to cook or show interest in making meals.”

Now people are in tune with the fact that there are good products available everywhere, and they want to learn about them and use them.

“The ‘in’ place has become the kitchen,” said Thibau, and men want to be part of it.

Not surprisingly, men often have approached cooking with a style that is distinctively male — head-on. They often don’t bother to follow directions, instead trying their own creations and coming up with new ways of doing things.

Snipes said that men take pride in going their own way. Perhaps this is due to the fact that they see cooking as a pleasure, not a chore, and feel free to experiment with new combinations.

“People are starting to see good food as a celebration,” said Phillip McDonald, creator of Table Five Personal Chef Services, specializing in dinner parties and special home events along the Emerald Coast. “Men are pushing for more quality meals,” he said, adding that “there is so much more information about food now, we are more aware of what we eat — we eat for pleasure.”

Boys, Start Your Blenders

For those men who are starting out, McDonald suggests that they “start with the basics. Learn skills that are simple. Get a cookbook and become familiar with food products in different sections of the store. Understand the techniques and make it your own.” Most of all, he said, “Make sure you relax and have fun.”

Palladino joked about something that all men who are unsure of their cooking abilities should keep in mind. “Be innovative and have fun with it,” he said. “And remember: Cooking is the new way to a woman’s heart.”

All of the chefs encouraged men to have fun with cooking and to try out different things that work for them. Each pointed

out different factors that have contributed to men becoming interested in cooking.

Whether it's a function of cooking having become the cool thing to do, a stripping of gender associations from the kitchen, the fact that cooking is an approved creative outlet, or simply a consequence of women spending more time outside of the home, the fact remains that more and more, men are discovering the joy of cooking.

And in the end, perhaps, the reason doesn't really matter. Both men and women are enjoying this newfound interest, and hopefully there will be many more meals to come from our husbands, dads, brothers and friends for all to enjoy. Real Man Cooking:

Greg Crosslin

When Greg Crosslin and his wife, Patti married, they made an agreement: If she was willing to clean the kitchen, he would gladly do the cooking. It must be working out for the couple, as they have been married for 27 years and Crosslin, an attorney, often can be found expertly cooking many nights a week.

Crosslin, 48, who practices commercial defense litigation nationwide through his Destin-based firm, found his love for all things culinary while spending time with his grandmother in Florence, Ala.

"She was my cooking mentor," he said. "I learned early on that if you can eat it in the South, you can fry it. She taught me how to cook with an iron skillet and how to slice for frying."

Crosslin's interest in cooking led him to work in the restaurant industry. And while holding a management position with the Pillsbury company, he was able to participate in culinary classes. But in the early 1980s, he enrolled in law school.

"I thought the hours in practicing law would be less than in the restaurant industry — I was wrong!" he said.

However, cooking has remained a passion that he enjoys sharing with his friends and family, including his daughter, Kimberly, and son, Matt. In fact, while Kimberley and her friends were planning their high-school prom evening, Crosslin volunteered to cook a surf-and-turf dinner for the whole group.

"I especially like to cook for large gatherings — it gives you a chance to try new things," he said.

Over the years, Crosslin's cooking has evolved, and he hangs his chef's hat on his ability to prepare a variety of delicious sauces. However, one thing has remained the same:

"I would rather spend eight hours cooking than one hour cleaning!"

Greg Crosslin's Orange Remolaude Sauce

1 cup mayo (Crosslin: "No light stuff.")

3 tbsp chili sauce

3 tsp brown (spicy) mustard

2 tsp Worcester sauce

½-1 tsp prepared horseradish (to taste)

3 small green onions finely chopped (optional)

¼-½ cup finely diced red bell pepper

1-2 tsp of favorite hot sauce (to taste)

1 tbsp freshly grated orange peel

½-1 tsp allspice

¼ cup olive oil

6 oz orange marmalade

Combine all ingredients, except the red bell peppers, and mix thoroughly. Heat the mixture in a saucepan until it comes to a boil. Turn the heat off, add the peppers, cover and allow it to reduce for 10 minutes. Crosslin suggests serving this sauce while warm over crabcakes or cold with vegetables or shrimp.

Real Man Cooking:

Dennis Lichorwic

Dr. Dennis Lichorwic grew up in the restaurant business, with family members who have owned restaurants for at least three generations. And for that very reason, Lichorwic went to dental school.

However, there is no denying that Lichorwic inherited the family passion for preparing fine food for friends and family, because whenever time allows, the hardworking dentist can be found in the kitchen.

Lichorwic, who moved to the Emerald Coast and founded the Destin Center for Cosmetic Dentistry in 1999, said he finds that cooking is a creative process for him.

"I think cooking is almost artistic in a way," he said. "I am very limited in my artistic ability, but (cooking) is one thing I can do. I can't play an instrument, but I can feed the band!"

Lichorwic said he enjoys creating his own recipes and likes for his dishes, which are mostly Italian, to be fairly simple and quick to prepare. But he said his greatest inspiration in the kitchen comes from entertaining.

"I like having dinner parties and coming up with new dishes to cook," he said. "I think it is my way of doing something for people."

Recently, Lichorwic did more than just feed people — he helped raise funds and awareness for the American Cancer Society through his cooking talents. Lichorwic hosted "An Evening in Tuscany . . . Dinner with Your Dentist" for 20 guests.

The single father also finds pleasure in cooking meals for his two young sons, Zachary and Jackson, and enjoys it when they make special requests for his meals. Currently, his spaghetti tops the list.

"Enjoying a meal together was part of my childhood," he said. "And when I cook for my kids, I create moments that become memories."

Dennis Lichorwic's Manly Bananas Flambé

4 bananas

3 tbsp butter

2 shots rum (regular, flavored or spiced)

¾ cup brown sugar, loosely packed (add more or less to taste)

Sprinkle of cinnamon

Dash of nutmeg

Cut the bananas in quarter-inch-thick slices and place them in a deep pan. Add the butter, rum, brown sugar, cinnamon and nutmeg and cook over medium heat until bananas are soft and sauce has thickened, about five minutes. Spoon over vanilla ice cream (Lichorwic recommends Häagen Dazs).

Real Man Cooking:

Demetrius Fuller

When Demetrius Fuller is not conducting Sinfonia Gulf Coast, he often trades in his maestro's baton for a whisk or spatula.

The 30-year-old Emerald Coast native said his love of cooking, which was greatly influenced by mother Malpa Fuller's Greek heritage, started during childhood.

"As long as I can remember, since I was old enough to reach the counter, I have been cooking," he said.

Fuller's grandmother, mother, aunt and uncle all encouraged him to join them in the kitchen, teaching him to cook traditional Greek dishes with no written recipes.

"It was like 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding' in our kitchen; there was always an abundance of food. And my yiayia (Greek for 'grandmother'), she could make a mean phyllo dough," Fuller said with a laugh.

As Fuller got older, his interest in cooking continued. While attending graduate school in Cincinnati, Fuller worked in an upscale restaurant and used the experience to learn from the chef. He went on to foster his hobby by attending seminars at the Aspen Culinary Institute and Le Cordon Bleu in Paris.

Fuller said he has noticed a trend in men becoming more interested in gourmet cooking, and he expects it to continue.

"It is an energy release — something that is relaxing, creative and rewarding, no matter what your gender is," he said. "And cooking is becoming more of the dinner-party process, and men want to be a part of that experience."

Over the past five years, Fuller has combined his love of creating good food with his passion for making music by auctioning his cooking expertise more than 30 times through various fundraisers. His "Maestro Dinners" have raised more than \$72,000 for local charities, allowing Fuller to share his cooking talents and giving dinner guests a taste of his symphony work.

Demetrius Fuller's Kalamata Olive Relish
 2 cups pitted kalamata olives
 18-oz jar of giardiniera (pickled Italian vegetables)
 Juice of half a lemon
 ½ cup Italian parsley
 2 tbsp olive oil
 Pepper

Place all of the ingredients in a blender or food processor and pulse to mix, but do not purify; the consistency should resemble a fine mince. Add pepper to taste and mix. Fuller suggests using this relish as an accompaniment to chicken or fish, particularly when paired with a beurre blanc sauce.

Emerald Coast men speak up about cooking:

Men don't do so well when they follow recipes, like reading instructions on how to assemble something. Men do well when they learn from others.
 — Destin Mayor Craig Barker

I started cooking by necessity. When I left home I wanted the same thing that my mom made for us, so I learned by asking her and through trial and error.
 — Air Force Maj. Bill Sisnowski, Hurlburt Field

I enjoy cooking and try doing it every time I can, mostly on the weekends. I took a couple of cooking classes in South Florida and started experimenting. I love Italian, because if you mess up, it's still really tasty!

– Destin City Manager Greg Kisela

I think of men's food as beer, hot dogs, chili and hot wings – things that are associated with sporting activities. But more men do seem interested in learning about cooking.

– Geno Fowler, professional chef, Wine World Destin

I love to cook food for family and friends and started taking over the kitchen after my wife went back to working longer hours. The kitchen is my domain now. I mix my own Italian dishes with Cajun and Southern delicacies – it's a killer combination!

– Maurizio Bonomi, seasonal Emerald Coast resident and a tour manager in Rome

I cook for my family almost every day, and they love it.

– Scott Sotherland of Contractor L3 contractors. His children call him an "amateur chef."