



BOBBY FLAY

Television has turned chefs into celebrities and made cooking 'cool.' Among the most visible of the chef-stars are (from top): Bobby Flay, a host and judge on multiple programs; Paula Deen, the queen of Southern cooking; Jamie Oliver, who has his own show on ABC; Giada De Laurentiis, host of a Food Network show; Emeril Lagasse, another Food Network star; and Gordon Ramsay, host of 'Hell's Kitchen' on Fox.



PAULA DEEN



JAMIE OLIVER



GIADA DE LAURENTIIS



EMERIL LAGASSE



GORDON RAMSAY

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cookbook," he says.

What's behind the new food culture, and are Americans really eating better as a result?

ON A FRIDAY EVENING in Cambridge, Mass., 10 people listen intently to Dave Ramsey, an instructor at the Cambridge School of Culinary Arts, explain the basics of using an industrial kitchen: Don't touch the outsides of the ovens (they are hot); carry knives pointed downward at all times; and most of all – have fun.

The group is made up of friends, spouses, and soon-to-be-marrieds. It's a Spanish cooking class for couples.

Within minutes, the students, wrapped in white aprons, scurry off to separate workstations. Half the room begins chopping garlic, bell peppers, zucchini, and parsley, as well as slicing baguettes, zesting lemons, and peeling potatoes. The other half works over a bank of stainless-steel stoves. Together, the group is creating a multicourse Spanish meal, from gazpacho Andaluz to crema Catalana, in three hours.

For one of the couples, Peter and Trese Ainsworth of Needham, Mass., this is their first cooking class. Mr. Ainsworth, a lawyer, professes that he is a relatively new convert to the kitchen – but a passionate one. When a favorite Italian restaurant in his neighborhood, Sweet Basil, published a cookbook a few years ago, he felt as if he had been given the "keys to the universe." He taught himself to make stocks and sauces. Now he prepares a big family meal every Sunday.

It doesn't end there. He built a raised-bed garden in order to grow his own tomatoes, herbs, and carrots, and regularly watches the Food Network with his two teenage daughters. "I look forward to cooking. It relaxes me," he says.

His rationale for taking up a chef's knife after wrestling with legal briefs all day explains why many people are spending more time in the kitchen: It's something that virtually anyone can do – and it's satisfying. It is a form of self-expression and status, entertainment and education.

In an age of a service economy and pervasive cubicle culture, many people who spend a lot of time glaring at computers find cooking a way to create something tangible. In that sense, the interest in cooking parallels the rise of other "hands on" movements that attempt to balance the virtual world with throwback skills, such as laying your own sheet rock and knitting.

Some people, too, are attracted to cooking as a sort of rebellion against the McDonaldization of America and what they see as the tasteless, processed products of an industrialized food system. "I live alone and can't stand prepared food, so I've learned to cook fairly elaborately for one," says Mr. Hand, whose repertoire includes Wiener schnitzel, polenta, and bouillabaisse. "It's an art."

Like any art, it takes considerable skills to master, which is

'FOOD HAS BECOME AN ENTIRE LIFESTYLE. IT'S NO LONGER JUST ABOUT PREPARATION OR CONSUMPTION.'

– Christopher Powell, author



JOANNE CICCARELLO/STAFF

where the guidance and ingredients of others comes in. In the past year, sales of "cooking/entertainment" books have jumped 4 percent in the United States, while all other categories of adult nonfiction dropped 2 percent, reports Nielsen BookScan, which compiles statistics for the publishing industry.

Classes for both the hobbyist and serious chef are thriving. Enrollment in the gastronomy program at Boston University has tripled in the past three years. "A lot of them don't want to go to culinary school and become a line cook, but they want to do something [meaningful] with food and education," says Rachel Black, the coordinator of the program, which was started by Julia Child and Jacques Pépin in the 1980s.

Le Cordon Bleu, which operates 17 culinary institutes in the US, reported a 20 percent increase in students in 2010. In San Francisco, a venture called Hands On Gourmet, which

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