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LIFE & STYLE

Cutting Costs at Culinary School

By DAWN FALLIK

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When Hubert Sawyers signed up for a cooking class last June, he thought it would help make for great date nights for him and his new wife.

Then he got laid off from his job as an executive assistant at a real estate appraisal company. The \$58-a-person "Sautéed Salmon" class all of a sudden seemed like an unnecessary splurge for the 28-year-old, whose cooking skills were mostly limited to grilling. But the tutorial turned out to be a long-term money saver: The couple went from eating out at a restaurant four times a week to once a week, utilizing Mr. Sawyer's newfound cooking skills as he sought to find a job.

"My sauté game is definitely on now," says Mr. Sawyers, who lives in Royal Oak, Mich. "We save between \$25 and \$50 a week. The class made cooking at home a lot easier."

Nationwide, restaurant diners and take-out folks are turning to the home kitchen, hoping to cut costs and save money during the downturn. But many, like Mr. Sawyers, need some help discerning a simmer from a sauté.

At the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., administrators increased their five-day, \$2,095 "Basic Training" boot camp to 14 classes a year, up from 10

three years ago. The Whole Foods in the Soho neighborhood of New York City saw enrollment in the store's cooking classes increase 46% between 2009 and 2008, says a company spokeswoman. The number of classes at that store -- ranging in price from free to \$75 -- rose as well, to 247 in 2009 from 184 in 2008. Whole Foods does not collect nationwide data on its stores's cooking classes, but a spokeswoman says there's been an overall rise in interest.

The Kitchen Conservatory in Clayton, a suburb of St. Louis, Mo., is on pace to teach 8,000 students this year, a 6% increase in two years, says owner Anne Cori, noting that many of those new students are beginner cooks.

"People take these classes as a reaction to the recession," says Culinary Institute spokesman Jay Blotcher. "The boot camps help people make better food shopping choices and encourage them to prepare meals more often at home."

Adds Ms. Cori: "Years ago, our classes were all older women. Now we're getting a lot of young male professionals. There's a change in the type of people interested in cooking."

Chefs and culinary teachers are taking note and adapting their classes to address cost concerns by offering grocery-shopping advice and suggestions on reusing leftovers.

In April, the Kitchen Conservatory launched the "Beef Up Your Budget" class, giving hands-on instruction for making short ribs, brisket and sirloin steak -- all cheaper cuts of meat. The class sold out within days. This fall, a new "Frugal Fish" class is on the menu, which will teach students how to make low-cost seafood dishes such as tuna burgers.

Students say cooking classes are a good place to ask rudimentary questions without judgment from family, friends or the foodie standing next to them at the farmer's market. And they say it's worth spending money for a class if it means they can save money by eating at home.

"I'm trying to cut back on the money we spend going to restaurants," says Sigrid Miller Pollin, an architect from Amherst, Mass., who took a two-day, \$850 CIA boot camp in June.

She and her husband used to eat out two or three times a week and would spend more than \$40 each outing. They hoped the class would help them use their vegetable garden more and order out less.

Ellen and Jeremy Amato took the Conservatory's "Pizza on the Grill" class last May to learn how to better utilize their groceries and not be as wasteful. Much of the food they would buy ended up shoved behind take-out containers and then thrown out, says Ms. Amato.

Although Ms. Amato, 28, was a "dabbler" cook, her husband's idea of a fine meal was a fried bologna sandwich, she says.

"My husband was definitely overwhelmed," she says. "We were chopping onions and he'd never diced an onion before."

Now they spent \$50 a week ordering out, instead of \$150, she says. They joined a community produce-delivery program, and make most of their meals at home. Ms. Amato does most of the cooking, but her husband, 32, will help with the preparation.

"We didn't really know where to start," she says.

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