

# Free Range

In the third installment of our home chef series, local pros explain culinary nirvana — freedom from recipes.

BY LAURA BENGIS  
PHOTOS BY LAURA DIERBECK

From free resources online to paid memberships to old-school hardcover cookbooks, building a collection of recipes that challenge culinary skills and tempt palates seems to be a never-ending quest for the home chef. While a healthy repertoire of recipes can keep cooking fresh, Milwaukee-area chefs say the key to unlocking potential in the kitchen is working toward freedom from recipes.

“I always teach people it’s 80 percent technique and 20 percent creativity,” says Andy Schneider, co-owner of Le Rêve in Wauwatosa. Once home chefs understand the basic properties of foods, he says, they’ll know where to find opportunities for creativity.

And the fun of creativity comes in adding flair to a dish and changing its flavor profile, adds Braise owner Dave Swanson. When instructing students on building a soup, for example, his classes at Braise will cover basic necessary elements — a base, flavored ingredients, and the body of liquid. A trained home chef will then learn how to substitute out ingredients to fit the profile of a new original dish.

“It’s all plugging and playing,” Swanson says. “You don’t need to have 10,000 recipes. If you have 15-20 techniques, that will carry the day over any recipe.”

The best place to pick up new techniques? A local cooking class.

Glorioso’s Appetito event and culinary manager Betty Miller says when looking into classes, it’s important to understand the type of class to make sure it aligns with your learning style. Participation-based classes like hands-on and chef assist classes



Dave Swanson

foster an interactive experience, whereas demonstration-style classes give students a chance to watch and listen more closely.

Classes can also vary by cuisine, technique, and difficulty, so it can be important to have an idea of what you’re looking for before setting out to find a class.

“It’s all different,” Hell’s Kitchen contestant and Egg and Flour owner Adam Pawlak says. “It just depends on what you want to get out of it or who you’re cooking for.”

Miller says starting out with a course that is technique-focused can give home chefs the most value. She recommends Appetito’s Pasta Cuts class, which demonstrates how to make twelve different cuts of pasta.

Chef Pam’s Kitchen owner Pam Dennis says a knife skills class — she offers one, as does Braise — can be another great place to start. The class typically covers how to hold, sharpen the knife and care for the knife, and techniques to perform different cuts.

She says students won’t leave without eating, though: “I felt like my mom never would have someone come to the house and leave without eating something,” Dennis

Adam Pawlak



says. She ends her knife skills classes with three appetizers made from everything students chopped.

## Learning To Improvise

Enjoying the fruits of kitchen labor isn’t the only benefit of tasting. While learning technique is important, it’s also important to remember that cooking is a personal activity, and chefs in training are encouraged to alter a dish to their preference, Miller says.

“There’s no right or wrong: it’s what you like,” she explains. “In cooking [a dish], you can change it to your own liking.”

Classes at Appetito don’t hand out recipes until the class is over. “People can get so hung up on the recipe that they miss the enjoyment of taking the class,” Miller says.

## Taste Test

Swanson says he, too, emphasizes the importance of tasting food while preparing it in his courses. “All onions are not made equally,” he says. “The taste of carrots can vary widely. The amount of seasoning needed can range.”

To make sure food is seasoned properly, he recommends that chefs should be trying food all the time as it cooks. “If you don’t know where you’re starting from, you have no idea where to go,” he says.

In a cooking class, students don’t just have access to techniques shared by the instructor. They can also learn and get support from other students.

“People are always willing to help other people,” Miller says. “I love seeing some of the older women that have made pasta their whole lives turn around and help someone younger and guide them.”

Dennis says this camaraderie can boost the overall enjoyment of meal preparation for any home chef. “I’ve had people who’ve been cooking all their life say to me when they’ve come to class, ‘You’ve rejuvenated my love for cooking,’” she says.

Many classes cover the importance of mise en place, or preparing all of your ingredients and your workstation in advance. “Even if you do and prep everything the day before a recipe and you come home from work, hey...how nice that it’s all ready for you,” Dennis says.

And many meaningful friendships have formed over preparing a meal together. “I had a woman who lost her husband,” says Betty Miller of Appetito. “She signed up for a class to get out and meet people. She was probably in her late 60s, and she met this gal who was probably 35. They became friends, and they started coming to class together. This newly single woman has made so many friends in our cooking classes.”

Adds Dennis: “I had one whole group of 24 in for Valentine’s Day. They all just met that night. At the end of the class, they said, ‘Chef Pam, we all want to come back but we want to cook something different with you.’” MKE

## Beef Tartare

with egg yolk aioli, garlic sourdough, farmer greens and roasted shallot vinaigrette

By Adam Pawlak, owner of Egg and Flour Pasta Bar

### Beef Tartare ingredients:

12 oz. beef, chopped  
4 shallots, minced  
Salt and pepper  
½ bunch parsley, chopped  
Egg yolk aioli  
Spring mix tossed with shallot vinaigrette  
(Served with grilled bread)

### Egg yolk aioli ingredients:

3 egg yolks  
Red wine vinegar  
2 cups EVOO  
Salt and pepper  
¼ tsp. mustard  
6 cloves garlic

### Roasted shallot vinaigrette ingredients:

4 shallots, minced  
¼ tsp. mustard  
Pomegranate vinaigrette/red wine vinegar  
½ bunch parsley, chopped  
Salt and pepper

### Directions:

1. Chop beef in ¼-inch cubes and hold in bowl over ice to stay cold.
2. Cut bread of choice into desired pieces. Rub on butter and grill to perfection.
3. Egg yolk aioli: In food processor, add all ingredients and run on high until everything emulsifies. Hold for build.
4. Roasted shallot vinaigrette: Sauté shallots and garlic until soft. Add mustard, vinegar, and parsley to vegetables. Slowly whisk in EVOO until everything has emulsified. In bowl, combine beef and half of the egg yolk aioli and mix together.
5. Plate beef and put some egg yolk on top.
6. Toss farmer greens with shallot vinaigrette enough to lightly coat the greens. Place on top of beef.
7. Garnish with bread of choice on top or around the beef tartare.



Pam Dennis

