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Starting a cooking club: A simple recipe

By Tiffany Owens
Special to MSN

Fed up with subsisting on takeout, instant noodles and frozen dinners night after night? Discouraged by the last time your gourmet endeavor for guests went horribly wrong? Now there's help for even the most kitchen-challenged: Stir up some new culinary skills and companionship by starting a cooking club.

That's what six twentysomething friends did in 1996 after discussing the idea over a typical workday lunch. Bored with their entry-level publishing jobs and tired of brown-bag lunches and leftovers, they agreed to start meeting on Sundays to make delectable dinners and dish about their lives. Thus was born [The Cooking Club](#).

"That was one of the reasons that we started the club — we were all sort of surviving on cereal and pasta," says Cooking Club member Lisa Singer. "We wanted to learn how to cook. It was a great low-stress form to experiment with recipes. Now, we *know* how to cook."

The right ingredients

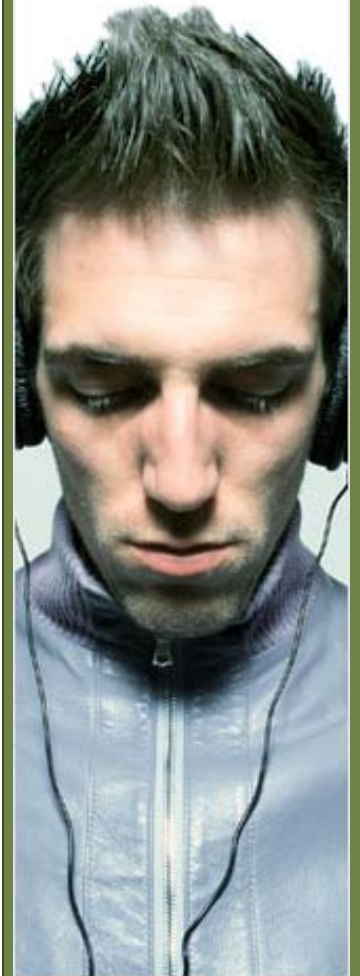
Over the course of these weekend gatherings, they've helped one another find better jobs, ditch bad boyfriends, survive the occasional cooking disaster and become fast friends. The result of their culinary trials and triumphs can be found in their first book, *The Cooking Club Cookbook: Six Friends Show You How to Bake, Broil and Bond*, which offers not only a step-by-step guide to mouth-watering menus, but also tried-and-true advice on the best ways to connect over food. The book's 72 recipes range from easy ("Mini-Me Mac and Cheese") to elegant ("Mussels in White Wine and Saffron Sauce") and are divided among 12 themed menus, such as "Chow Bella: Like True Renaissance Women, We Master Six Regional Dishes," and "Low-Fat Tuesday: The Lighter Side of Creole Cuisine."

Their subsequent *The Cooking Club Party Cookbook* similarly offers festive menus for year-round celebrations — from "Hawaii Five Below," a warming midwinter luau to "Taco Belles," for a spicy Cinco de Mayo celebration.

Cooking Club authors Singer, Rebecca Sample Gerstung, Katherine Fausset, Lucia Quartararo Mulder, Sharon Cohen Fredman and Cynthia Harris are not alone. As many Americans strive to simplify their lives and strengthen connections to friends and family, often over a meal, cooking groups are springing up all over the country. Whether dubbed a dinner club, gourmet club or cooking club, the basic ingredients remain the same: a group of people who enjoy food — both cooking and eating it — and each other's company.

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The Cooking Club's first rule for a forming club is to ultimately have fun; however, these six simple tips will ensure a successful gathering every time:

- **Choose members carefully.** Successful cooking groups recommend six to 12 people per club, be it friends, co-workers, couples, singles or a heady mix of all. The only prerequisites are culinary enthusiasm and regular participation (although extra points are given for dishwasher ownership).
- **Pick a consistent time.** For most, once a month is frequent enough to be regular without feeling like a chore. Sundays often work best for nine-to-fivers because it interferes less with other weekend plans.
- **Plan meetings around a theme.** Themes such as sexy Spanish foods or Mardi Gras are festive, get members excited to cook and ensure that the dishes will work together. Plan menus and courses ahead of time, a lesson the Cooking Club learned after their first session yielded what Singer calls a "catastrophic menu" of pumpkin bisque, couscous and olive ravioli. From then on, a groupwide e-mail was sent to coordinate menu options and avoid future fusion confusion.
- **Meet at the entree-maker's home.** This is purely a matter of convenience — lugging a 10-pound roast around is just no fun.
- **Prepare assigned dishes in advance.** Every member should contribute one dish; however, eight people cooking eight different dishes in one kitchen is a recipe for disaster. Have members do everything but last-minute assembly at home. Cooking independently will help develop confidence and, after all, it's enjoying the results en masse that's important.
- **Celebrate successes and chalk up blunders to experience.** Remember, the object is to have fun — make that your group's mantra. Tempers can boil over in the kitchen and egos can bruise like an overripe peach. Mutual regard and support is what will keep your club cooking month after month.

Overall, the authors' greatest hope is that their books will encourage other aspiring gourmands to find fun and friendship while whipping up fabulous food. "My other friends know you don't mess with the Cooking Club," Fausset exclaims. "It's a one-of-a-kind experience."

Tiffany Owens is a freelance writer, culinary and wine enthusiast, and Master Toaster Oven chef living in Portland, Ore.

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