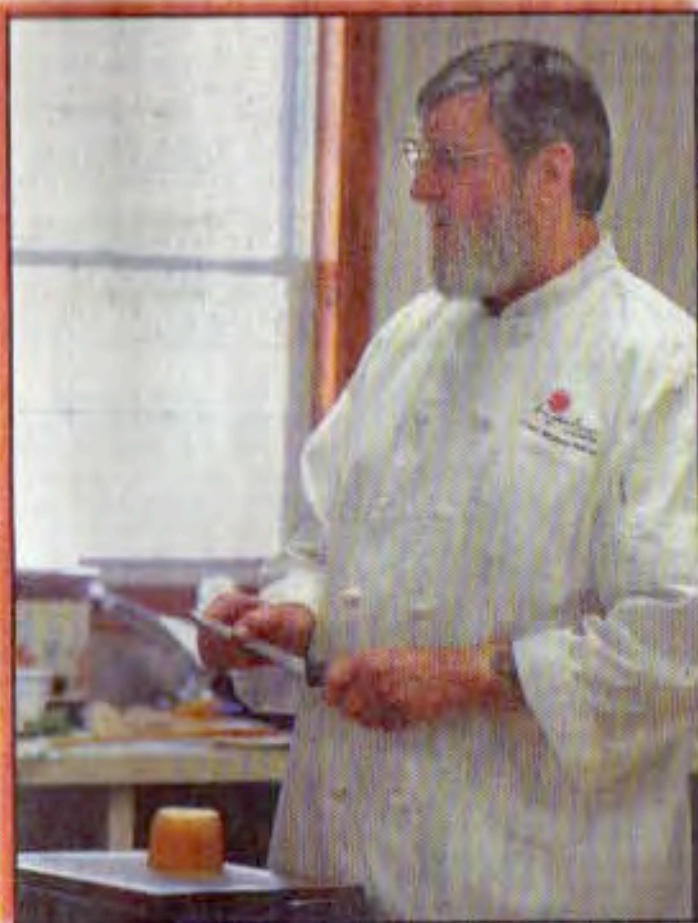


FOOD FOR



PHOTOS BY STEFANIE WEISS / THE JOURNAL-STANDARD
ABOVE: Chef Michael Staver of Brightflower Nursery in Stockton talks during his breakout session on Tasty Soups and Sauces using local ingredients Saturday at Oakdale Nature Preserve.

LEFT: Chef Staver cuts the rind off of a butternut squash.



THOUGHT

Chef's cooking demo incorporates local ingredients

Here's a surefire recipe guaranteed to please every time: Combine Chef Michael Staver with a couple dozen local foodies in a kitchen. Toss in some locally grown veggies, a handful of culinary tips, savory samples and lots of laughter. That was the scene Saturday when the Northwest Illinois Audubon Society hosted its 13th annual Food for Thought Workshop at Oakdale Nature Preserve.

Staver is one local chef who genuinely walks the walk when it comes to cooking with local ingredients. The Stockton-area chef led a workshop break-out session titled "Tasty Soups and Sauces Using Local Ingredients."

He kicked off the session with a beef stew, which included locally grown vegetables taken from cold storage.

"We're cooking locally," he said. "As you know, it's not easy to do this time of year."

He seared the meat before adding it to the stew pot.

"I do that for flavor," he said. "When you sear the meat, you do not seal in the juices - you seal in the flavor."

Next on the menu was Butternut Squash with Pecans and Blue Cheese. The recipe is simple, however dicing the squash into spoon-sized pieces takes some time.

"It takes about 45 minutes to make from scratch," Staver said.

Each of the flavors was deliciously distinct, yet melded together exquisitely. When members of the audience quickly requested another round of samples, it was evident the butternut squash was a huge hit.

Staver's last creation of the event was Scrambled Eggs with Fresh Herbs and Cream. He described it as a French-style, beautiful soft-curd scrambled egg.

As he cracked a dozen eggs from a local farm, he revealed the ingredient which elevates this dish beyond typical scrambled eggs: crème fraîche. It is a cultivated cream which can be made at home. Staver said he usually allows his crème fraîche to sit overnight before using, and it may be stored for three to four weeks.

This recipe ushers scrambled eggs into a new dimension - splendid for serving any time of the day or night. Chef Staver's presentation was chock-full of culinary tidbits to savor. Here are just a few:

- He prefers kosher and sea salts to typical table salt, and advises caution when using salt. "You can always add it, but you can't take it out," he said.
- To protect eggs from a refrigerator's temperature when the door is opened, they should be stored in the middle of the refrigerator, toward the back.
- What's the most nutritious way to cook vegetables? Steam them.
- Don't tear fresh herbs apart. "You want to cleanly cut them - not tear them," Staver advises.
- Use dry herbs in dishes which have to cook a long time. Add them at the end for more flavor. "A fresh herb loses its flavor if you cook it a long time," he said.

For More

What: Brightflower Nursery

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LORI KILCHERMANN / THE JOURNAL-STANDARD
Chef Michael Staver, owner of Brightflower Nursery in Stockton, prepares to serve culinary samples to the audience.

Videos online @
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 footage from
 the cooking
 demonstration

Scrambled Eggs with Fresh Herbs and Cream Crème Fraîche

Break eggs (use two per person) into a mixing bowl, season lightly with salt and pepper. Add 1 tablespoon of milk, cream or water and whisk everything together.

Heat a sauté pan, add ½ teaspoon of butter and 1 teaspoon of olive oil. Heat until fat begins to sizzle and add eggs. As eggs begin to set, slowly stir the mixture with a spatula. Lift and allow uncooked eggs to flow underneath. Cook until eggs are just set, add herbs and 1 tablespoon of cream. Stop cooking when shiny and moist, remove from heat and serve immediately.

Crème fraîche is a mature, slightly tangy cream. In Mexican markets it is known as crema and is an excellent substitute.

**2 cups of heavy cream
 2 tablespoons of buttermilk**

Mix cream and buttermilk in medium-sized bowl, cover with plastic wrap and let stand at room temperature overnight or until fairly thick.

Cover tightly and refrigerate at least four hours to thicken it even more.

Butternut Squash with Pecans and Blue Cheese

**4-1/2 pounds butternut squash
 3 tablespoons olive oil
 6 stalks fresh thyme or ½ teaspoon dried thyme
 1 cup pecans
 1 cup crumbled Roquefort or other blue cheese**

Heat the oven to 425 degrees. Halve and peel the squash, scoop out the seeds, then cut into 1-inch cubes. You don't have to be precise, just keep the pieces uniformly small.

Put squash into roasting pan and toss with the oil. Strip the leaves from about 4 stalks of thyme and sprinkle over the butternut squash. Roast in the oven for about 30 to 45 minutes or until tender.

Once out of the oven, remove the squash to a bowl. Add pecans and cheese, and gently toss. Check the seasoning and add the last few stalks of thyme - cut into small sprigs - to decorate.

Serves 6-8.