

Hungry for love

Jody White, *National Post* Published: Saturday, February 16, 2008

On a chilly evening in the Annex, hesitant singles sip wine and chat to light house music amid the gleaming workstations of Nella Cucina's kitchen classroom. In a twist on the age-old icebreaking prop, nametags proclaim favourite foods as well as identities. After several rounds of explaining that yes, my name is Jody and no, Huevos Divorciados is not a Spanish translation of my marital status, I am relieved when host Stephanie Summerhill takes charge and explains how the night will unfold.

The group here has signed up for the Singles Supper Club by Toronto's Aphrodite Cooks. Balanced numbers of 25-to 35-year-old men and women drink, flirt and indulge their inner epicure under the watchful eye of hosts Summerhill and Vanessa Yeung during this singles event disguised as a cooking class.

Yeung, a Stratford Chefs School graduate and former personal chef to Ed Belfour, explains the business model behind a singles cooking class. "Food is extremely sensual," she says. "People here have a chance not only to learn a new skill, but to get their hands dirty and have a tactile experience."

Divided into teams of five, singles create a specific dish for sharing later in the evening. The high school dance atmosphere present at the beginning of the night evaporates quickly as each team realizes the scope of their task. Our group is responsible for roasted pear and gorgonzola crostini, and upon learning that 60 pieces will be required, we jump into action.

Group dynamics immediately come into play, and team members soon define themselves as leaders, followers or slackers. A few minutes into the task of cutting 12 dozen crostinis, Mary, a seemingly shy financial auditor, has a request. "Save me the end piece," she says, looking slyly at me over the rim of her glass. "I like the bum."

As the wine flows and the food takes shape, friendly competition pushes teams to come up with creative presentation ideas, resulting in six creations to (briefly)

marvel at: tortilla cups with avocado, shrimp and tomato salsa; endive boats with goat cheese, figs and candied pecans; chorizo samosas with mango chutney; chai butternut squash bisque with curry pumpkin seeds; and chocolate raspberry tarts.

"Many people tell us that our events are unlike any singles event they've attended," Summerhill says. "Lots of them make new friends, business contacts, and some of them end up together."

There is food, conversation and laughter. Smiles are exchanged, and gazes held. Those still too shy to offer their numbers approach cupid-in-chief Summerhill, who doles out notes at the end of the night. "For a non-single guy you did OK for yourself," she smiles, handing me a phone number.

-Classes are \$100 and cater to various age groups and sexual orientations. For details on classes, go to aphroditecooks.com or call 416-792-3212.