

Published March 17th, 2010

Epicurean Exchange

By Susie Iventosch



Chef Charlie Vollmar in action in the kitchen Photo
Susie Iventosch

What we eat matters, and this is clearly the motto of Chef Charlie Vollmar of Orinda. As the founder of Epicurean Exchange, an organization that focuses on topics related to cooking- nutrition, food appreciation, "kitchen fitness", wellness and healthy food habits, Vollmar's goal is to encourage positive lifestyle choices. His medium is food and his methods are proper selection, preparation and enjoyment for everyone from seniors to children and all ages in between. He offers private and group cooking classes, dynamic cooking and team building events for companies, corporate wellness workshops and home kitchen overhauls - personal training for those who need a little help getting their eating habits in order.

Trained at the Culinary Academy in San Francisco, Vollmar emphasizes wellness and prevention through cooking, nutrition, fitness and food exploration. He was instrumental in effecting positive change in the school nutrition program at Orinda's Wagner Ranch Elementary School and has helped many families turn the corner from shoveling in fast food, to creating healthy and fun family dinners using colorful, seasonal foods, rich in nutrients, vitamins and flavors.

"Many people know what they should be eating, but they don't know how to go about executing it," Vollmar says. "They may have a basic understanding that they should eat wholesome foods, but don't know exactly what those foods are or what foods and/or food combinations are properly metabolized by the human body. Awareness is half the battle, and also why it is so important to develop good eating habits early in life."

Epicurean Exchange "kitchen fitness" programs are designed to help families do exactly that. Every program is customized for the specific client and includes recipe development, a kitchen overhaul (i.e. getting rid of junk to make way for healthy ingredients), and personal grocery shopping to learn how to buy the right foods.

"It's all about the food elements we use to recreate the same ideas as popular packaged foods," Vollmar noted. "My mantra-to shop the perimeter of the store where all of the real food is presented. Processed foods are found in the center aisles and in the freezer section."

One suggestion he offers is to replace that processed frozen burrito with a whole grain tortilla, goat cheese and a good quality salsa. Voila! Simple, whole food and far healthier.

Vollmar prefers foods that reduce Omega 6, which can cause metabolic disorders, and encourages foods with high levels of Omega 3s, those essential fatty acids that have been known to lower triglycerides and reduce the risk of coronary disease. He's a big fan of certain elements in organic fruits and veggies and also of hormone-free dairy.

According to Vollmar, the best cheeses are the California artisanal cheeses. Goat or sheep cheeses are the healthiest, but for those who don't like their tangy flavors, there are also excellent blends of cow and sheep or goat's milk cheeses that mellow the sharpness.

For several years, Vollmar worked at a metabolic wellness clinic in Los Gatos where he learned a great deal about proper eating habits from one of the physicians there. Vollmar's job was to develop recipes to sustain a healthier lifestyle for people who were dealing with chronic disease.

His approach is less about caloric intake and more about metabolic conditioning and a rational approach to eating. He emphasizes whole grains and less processed foods, and a lower intake of highly refined sugars, which turn into fat calories. Synthetic elements of processed foods that are not metabolized properly end up being what our bodies carry in the form of fat and plaque in the arteries.e

"Cooking for me is not just a pleasure, but has also become my life's work, and I have always strived to find purpose in it," Vollmar said. "My goal is to help the mainstream eat better and healthier. There is a cultural and historical element that I also enjoy. Each of us carries a food history, often based upon our heritage and upbringing, which is why it is sometimes difficult to effect change when it comes to choices in foods. I love teaching people how to enjoy the whole process of healthy cooking, from planning and shopping to food preparation and dining."

Charles Vollmar

Chef Instructor / Wellness and Lifestyle Consultant

Epicurean Exchange - Wellness and Lifestyle Education

2 Vallecito Lane, Orinda, 94563

Phone: 925.368.4181

Email:

Asparagus-Pistachio Nut Pesto



Asparagus-Pistachio Nut Pesto Photo Susie Iventosch

Charles Vollmar

Pesto is traditionally an uncooked sauce made with fresh basil, garlic, pine nuts, Parmesan cheese and olive oil. It is not uncommon today to find pesto made from a myriad of ingredients from cilantro, arugula or mint to other green vegetables, such as this variation using fresh spring asparagus. This mixture is great tossed with cold pasta, as a crostini topping or as a condiment to grilled fish and spring vegetables. Use care to not over-process this mixture. It should remain crumbly or coarsely chopped.

Ingredients

- 1 pound asparagus, trimmed and cut diagonally into 1" pieces
- 1/4 cup toasted pistachio nuts, coarsely chopped
- 8 medium fresh basil leaves, coarsely chopped
- 1/4 cup Pecorino Romano cheese, crumbled into pea-sized pieces
- Zest of one lemon
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Directions

- To blanch the asparagus, bring a small pot of water to a boil. Once the water is boiling, add the asparagus pieces all at once and blanch until bright green and tender-crisp, approximately 1 minute. Remove asparagus with a mesh strainer and place the pieces in the bowl of cold water.

Rinse the asparagus pieces a couple of times with cold water to thoroughly cool. Once cool, drain well and dry on paper towels. Set aside.

- To a food processor, add the pistachio nuts, asparagus pieces, basil and cheese. Pulse the processor several times until the mixture is coarsely chopped.

- Remove mixture from the processor to a bowl. Add the extra-virgin olive oil and fold to combine. Using a microplane zester, zest the lemon directly into the bowl and fold in until just combined. Season with kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste.

- Pesto can be stored in refrigerator for up to 10 days or frozen for future use.

Makes about 3 cups.

(c) 2002, Epicurean Exchange. All rights reserved

Spring Asparagus Soup with Curry and Coconut

Charles Vollmar

This is an opportunity to enjoy the first of the young California spring asparagus. Choose medium-sized asparagus (not pencil or large) and look for tips that are tight and free from flowering.

Coconut milk and oils, are considered healthy fats and in moderation, are recommended.

The Thai coconut milk brands I recommended are Chao Koh or Mae Ploy. Also, this soup is a favorite of kids, but remember to watch the curry spice. I suggest a mild brand or curry seasoning that has flavor, but less heat.

Ingredients

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 medium leek, cleaned and finely minced

1/2 teaspoon curry powder (or more to taste)

1/2 teaspoon ground ginger

Zest and juice of one lemon, divided

2 cups peeled and diced red potatoes

3 cups chicken stock

1 cup coconut milk

1 pound (1 bunch) asparagus, trimmed and cut diagonally into 2-inch pieces

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

1/4 cup crème fraîche

1/4 cup scallion greens, minced

Directions

- Melt the butter and olive oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add the diced leek and sauté until soft. Add the curry powder, ginger, lemon zest and potatoes and simmer, stirring occasionally for 5 minutes.
- Add the chicken broth, coconut milk and asparagus pieces. Stir to combine. Bring to a simmer over medium heat, cover, and continue to cook until the potatoes are tender, about 15 minutes.
- Purée the soup with an immersion blender, or in batches in a bar blender, until smooth. Season with kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper.
- Combine the crème fraîche with the lemon juice. Serve soup garnished with a swirl of lemon crème fraîche and a sprinkle of the scallion greens.

Serves 4

© 2009, Epicurean Exchange. All rights reserved

Reach the reporter at: suziven@gmail.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA