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Glastonbury LIFE



Small classes and a friendly, informal atmosphere encourage Lori Hunter's students to ask lots of questions.



Lori Hunter demonstrates good cooking techniques and then shares the food with her students. Photos by Brian Ambrose

Neighbors

It's a sweet and savory life

Lori Hunter follows her passion in the kitchen

by Nancy Thompson

An engineering degree from the University of Pittsburgh, a master's degree from Harvard, a doctorate from Syracuse. So what's Lori Hunter doing in the kitchen?

"The business happened to me," she said of her catering company, Sweet and Savory Creations. "I was at the right place at the right time."

Ms. Hunter, who was born and raised in the Bronx, had a knack for science even as a youth. She attended the Bronx High School of Science before earning a degree in electrical engineering at the University of Pittsburgh. She worked for a couple of Fortune 100 companies before returning to school to earn a master's degree in education at Harvard.

After being hired as the associate dean of engineering and computer science at Syracuse University, she commuted between Glastonbury and Syracuse for six years, earning a doctorate in higher education while there.

After she finishes her dissertation, she decided to take some time off to regroup and ended up starting a new career.

"The business started in response to a friend's need for catering support for a new business venture," Ms. Hunter said. "I started catering the company's board meetings and I assumed the responsibility of preparing food for most of the functions at my church." That experience led to yet more jobs catering weddings for members of the church, Faith Congregational in Hartford.

After a year, she returned to higher education, taking a job as an associate dean at Wesleyan University in Middletown. The catering work continued, however. "The business continued to grow and expand. We managed to double the business each year for the first six years," she said, adding that networking and word-of-mouth referrals were her primary source of advertising.

"The irony is I never had a desire to open up a catering business or to do anything in food service. The business happened to me."

Ms. Hunter was splitting her time between being an academic administrator at Wesleyan and running a catering business from Glastonbury. After five years, she had to pick one or the other.

"I was faced with the decision to close the business or work it full-time, as it had grown too large to keep

working it on a part-time basis," she said. "I took a leap of faith and have not looked back."

Where does an electrical engineer and university dean learn to cook, and do it really well?

Ms. Hunter said it started with her grandmother, Sylvia.

"My grandmother loved to cook and show her love to her family through food," she said. "She made homemade yeast rolls that just melted in your mouth. She made lots of traditional southern dishes like fried chicken, candied sweet potatoes, macaroni and cheese, and lots more. She loved to have her grandchildren around her in the kitchen helping her or just watching. The older I got, the more I wanted to make sure that I could carry on some of her recipes. I make yeast rolls today, never quite like Grandma's, but they sure are good."

Ms. Hunter has taken classes with area chefs at the Culinary Forum at Delia in Wallingford and at Sur la Table in Canton in addition to a series of classes on the art and science of cooking. She said she's also learned a lot from watching the Food Network and studying culinary books from local cooking schools.

She gives credit for her success as a business owner to JoAnn Price, whom she described as "a friend, a mentor, the chair of my advisory board and a true entrepreneurial role model." In addition, she said, Ms. Price is "a very successful entrepreneur, and she believes in giving back and helping others who are making the effort to achieve success in their ventures."

The admiration appears to be mutual.

"I met Lori Hunter as she was contemplating making a career change," Ms. Price said. "She was in the process of building a successful catering and personal dining company. She was already successful as an engineer, educator and administrator. I have watched closely as she has methodically built her business. She took financial risks to build out a professional catering operation. Our company, Fairview Capital, is a regular customer. She services all of our catering needs. She is creative, always looking to create new and different approaches in food preparation, presentation and design."

She continued, "Her logo, her spices, the sweet potato are some of the unique strategies she has used to build a full-service business. And she is very

impressive in appearance and in presentation, a role model to any individual contemplating starting and building a business."

Engineering and cooking

Ms. Hunter acknowledged that some people find the switch from engineering to cooking an unusual one.

"People look at me strangely when I say I'm an electrical engineer and have my own catering business," she said. "My answer is simply that studying engineering teaches you how to solve problems and develop alternative plans of attack in case the first solution doesn't work. In addition, I spent a number of years working in the high-tech industry in design and manufacturing. In those areas, engineering is managing the processes of designing and building a product. Well, my product now is food, and the process that I must develop solutions and alternative plans for attack for is getting that food from point A

Cooking with Lori Hunter

Adult classes

Feb. 18: Fishy Business (hands-on)

March 10: Easter and Passover holiday Meal Ideas

March 31: Sweet Treats

April 7: Dinner in 30 Minutes or Less (at Delia in Wallingford)

April 14: Chicken About Chicken (hands-on)

April 28: Cooking with Indian Spices

May 12: Men in the Kitchen for Mother's Day (hands-on)

June 2: Salads & Salads, Not Just a Side Dish

June 23: Summer Meals and Grilling

Junior Culinary Academy for youths 11 to 15

Winter break session: Feb. 18 through 22

Summer session #1: July 14 through 18

Summer session #2: July 21 through 25



Fennel and orange salad with red onions and black olives.

to point B on time, at the desired level of quality, consistently for each and every client. My engineering background helped me launch and grow this catering business," she said. "Not bad for an electrical engineer."

The company has kitchen staff of three full-time and two part-time workers and offers full service catering and event planning, cooking classes and a personal chef service. Ms. Hunter also has written a cookbook, "It's All About the Sweet Potato" and sells a dry spice blend.

Beverly Deavens, a Farmington resident, has worked with Ms. Hunter in many ways and said she believes that Ms. Hunter and her company are one of the Hartford area's "rising stars."

"I've known Lori for more than five years now and have seen her story unfold in a way that lets one know there is a force greater than mere mortals at work," she said.

"Lori is a dynamo who expects more from herself

Lori Hunter gives her students all sorts of helpful hints, including the best way to use a knife.



than anyone else.

Her whole life is predicated on the belief that 'Where there is a will, there's a way.' That's how Sweet and Savory was created. Lori has catered parties for me and many of my friends, and no one has had more professional service from set-up to break-down. My daughter attended Sweet and Savory's first Junior Culinary Arts summer Camp last summer and has not stopped talking about the experience and has continued to cook using the techniques and recipes. I have taken several of Lori's classes and they all have been fun and I always learn something new. Did I mention the wine? That's good too."

Learn, eat, have fun

Ms. Hunter's classes cover a variety of culinary topics such as knife skills and 30-minute meals. Some are demonstrations; others offer hands-on experiences for students. All include food, drink and fun.

At a recent class, students sat around a table while Ms. Hunter gathered ingredients for the evening, during which she would make three meals that could be created in 30 minutes or less.

"We'll eat, we'll drink, we'll have fun," Ms. Hunter promised as she handed out a packet with tips and recipes for the evening. "We always have a lot of fun."

Some pearls of wisdom from the evening:

- "If you don't have a salad spinner, you need a salad spinner."
- "If you don't have a good knife, make an investment. One good knife in your kitchen can make all

the difference in the world."

- "The first thing you do with fennel is cut off all the stuff that looks pretty."
- "A normal reaction when you see smoke coming from your grill pan is that you want to turn it down. Don't turn it down. You want the hot, you want the sear."
- "You can always add salt, but there's no way to extract it once it's in there."
- "Use a hot, dry pan. Mix the potatoes in oil. You'll use less oil that way."
- "Once you've cooked your vegetables for more than four, five, six minutes you've killed them."
- "If you want to impress people, use red-leaf lettuce."
- "Black and white are the best colors you can use to plate food."
- After sampling a turkey cutlet in anchovy-butter sauce: "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. You'll all want your own piece. Don't try to cut it."
- "Add parsley if the plate is crying out for some greens."

In addition to her cooking classes and catering, Ms. Hunter provides personal chef services.

The company's catering clients include the Amistad Center for Art & Culture, the CT Audubon Society, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, Hartford Stage, the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, Wesleyan University and the YMCA of Greater Hartford. Not bad for an electrical engineer. **GL**

To learn more about Sweet and Savory Creations, call 633-6879, e-mail sascreations@sbcglobal.net or log on to sweetandsavorycreations.com. Sweet and Savory Creations is located at 15 Welles St. in the Fox Run Mini Mall.