



Owner/chef Allison Davis teaches a Friday evening demonstration class.



COOKING UP A STORM

Popular cooking classes
and other events put Wild Thyme
on the Lexington food map

By Vickie Mitchell / Photos by Kirk Schlea

Chef Allison Davis is 35 minutes into her cooking demonstration when it becomes clear: Wild Thyme is the perfect name for the cooking and catering business she opened five years ago in the Chinoe Shopping Center.



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Left, Wild Thyme welcomes cooks of all skill levels at its Chinoe Shopping Center address. Above, class participants Sara Kelly (left) and Bernadette Dionisio (center) get pointers from chef Jane Webb.

The 10 students enrolled in her “Night in the Mediterranean” class are chatting and laughing, sipping the varied adult beverages they have brought along for the Friday night course. Although this is a demonstration-style class, with Davis and her assistant, chef Jane Webb, doing most of the work, a couple of class members are trying to outdo one another, rolling spanakopita, a Greek spinach-filled pastry, into triangles or “little footballs,” as Davis says, an appropriate analogy for football season.

Her students aren’t exactly wild, but they are mildly rowdy, with high-fives to celebrate culinary successes, some good-natured bragging, and toasts to three students who are there to celebrate birthdays.

Amid the banter, Davis and Webb chop,

stir, blend, and share cooking tips:

Don’t ever make phyllo dough. Shop at the international markets. Listen to how the aioli sounds in the blender. Use your nose; it tells you when a dish is done. Put some carrots in a sauce instead of sugar to sweeten. Add some orange peel; it complements fall flavors. Soak pricey saffron in water or lemon juice to stretch it.

Seated inches from the action, students can smell the nutmeg Davis grates and the garlic Webb adds to her spanakopita filling. They get slightly splattered when a blender spurts.

And they simmer down when the chefs set their meal, one course at a time, before them. Students sup spoons full of fish stew, dip their lamb kofta in sauce, and bite into the sweet finish, baklava. The four-course meal is so generous that

many will need to-go boxes.

“Our goal,” said Davis, “is to make the best meal you have had in a long time.”

Students depart not only sated but also inspired. Aaron Wilson and Sara Kelly closely watched as Davis layered sheets of fragile phyllo dough and a nut-and-fruit mixture to make the baklava. Now, an exotic dish that sounded difficult seems doable. “We never thought we could make baklava, but now we think we will give it a try,” said Kelly.

When Davis turned a basic storefront into her culinary business, her aim was to make students feel comfortable and at home. So, although the demonstration kitchen has professional-grade appliances, an enormous exhaust fan, and five times the burners you’d have at home, the space is softened by dark wood,



contemporary cabinetry, and shelves lined with cookbooks and teapots.

“Every time I would cater a dinner party or go to someone’s house, everyone would end up in the kitchen and it would just become the hearth of the home. That is what we wanted this kitchen to feel like,” she said.

It immediately made Catherine Anthony and her husband, Lowell, feel more at home when they checked out Wild Thyme shortly after moving to Lexington a few years ago. They came here to work at the Markey Cancer Center — she is a scientific editor; he is chief of the division of medical oncology — and were living

Davis adds honey to baklava, the dessert feature of a recent demonstration class.

in temporary housing off Chinoe Road. They’d taken cooking classes in New Orleans but instantly liked Davis’ classes better. “They were more friendly and interactive,” said Catherine. “You can talk to Allison and ask her questions and get feedback, find out where she is buying ingredients, why she uses them, and the science involved.”

The newcomers also found new friends and acquaintances as they took a couple of classes a month. They continue to take classes. “We find it a wonderful way to meet people outside of the work environment,” Catherine said.

Although Wild Thyme is best known for its classes, the business also does catering, sells cooking supplies and healthy take-home meals, serves as an event venue, offers cooking

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A demonstration class yields, clockwise from top left, vegetables ready to be prepped; the beginnings of spanakopita; bourride with cod; assorted vegetables; kofta with roasted red pepper sauce, tabbouleh, grilled pita bread, and grilled mixed vegetables; and baklava.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Sure you can learn to make soups, sushi, tapas, biscuits, bourbon balls, and a host of other dishes at Wild Thyme. But cooking classes are only one facet of the culinary business, opened five years ago in the Chinoe Shopping Center.

DINNERS TO TAKE HOME

Every Monday, owner and chef Allison Davis and her team make meals for customers to heat and eat throughout the week. Typically, there are 10 entrees to choose from, including chicken, beef, soup, vegetarian, salad, and chef's choice. Meals are ordered online and picked up beginning at 5:30 p.m. Mondays. Customer Penny Warren orders a couple of meals for weeks when she's too busy to cook. She knows the food will be healthy, tasty, and sometimes a dish she hasn't tried before. "You get carry-out from a restaurant, and it is the same old, same old," she said.

COOKING COMPETITIONS

Corporate team building is a growing part of the business. Employees can split up and challenge one another in "Iron Chef" and other Food Network-style competitions. Afterward, all dine together and eat what they've made. "The reviews from people who have done it say it was one of their best team-building events," said Davis.

KIDS' COOKING CAMPS

Each summer Wild Thyme trains the next generation of chefs during weeklong cooking camps. Youngsters arrive, put on their aprons, set up their stations, and get to work. Not only do they learn about safety — no



JASON C. TAYLOR

Kids can learn to make their own birthday cupcakes.

running with knives — but the meals they make throughout the day focus on different international cuisines and teach them about other cultures and countries.

SPECIAL EVENTS SPACE

Penny and Bob Warren had their 50th anniversary dinner at Wild Thyme. They, their children, and grandchildren visited with one another as they cooked their meal and the Wild Thyme staff assisted and cleaned up. The men grilled steaks and made sangria, the kids made tempura and lava cakes, and everyone else helped out or made appetizers. Wild Thyme will also bring the party to customers' homes. Catherine Anthony and her husband, Lowell, have already booked a Wild Thyme chef for their family holiday dinner. "It's the third year we've done it. When I asked my family if they wanted to do it again, it was unanimous," said Catherine.

A TEST KITCHEN

Area restaurants have used Wild

Thyme as their test kitchen, and chefs with food trucks or pop-up restaurants have booked the kitchen to prep for events. Samantha Fore is owner of the Sri Lankan pop-up eatery Tuk Tuk. "Allison has the certified kitchen, everything is kept to code, there are 20 burners ... I'm like a kid in a candy shop," said Fore.

A RETAIL SHOP

Customers can buy gadgets they use in class and other kitchen tools in Wild Thyme's small but well-stocked retail shop. Warren, for example, has bought knives, an iron skillet, and a router that juices lemons, which has become one of her favorite cooking tools. Customers who need a gift often pair an apron, cookbook, or other cooking item with a gift certificate for a cooking class.



Cooking classes can be customized for special occasions.

CATERING

About half of Wild Thyme's business is catering events. Davis' banker, Larry Forester of Cumberland Valley Bank, hires Wild Thyme to make special cakes or trays of cookies, and he'll soon enlist it to cater a meeting. And, he always orders her Dreamsicle cookies for kids' birthday parties. "I'm a rock star when I show up with those."

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camps for kids, and does corporate team building. (see sidebar, p. 87)

Davis has training in both business and culinary arts. After earning her degree in business administration at Eastern Kentucky University, Davis was pondering an MBA when news clippings about Sullivan University's new culinary program in Lexington began arriving in her mailbox. The senders were all family friends who realized Davis' first love was the kitchen. She enrolled, becoming a member of the Sullivan program's first class of chefs at its Lexington campus.

Larry Forester, now senior vice president at Cumberland Valley National Bank, met Davis in 2010 when she presented her business plan to banks that sup-



Aaron Wilson treats Sara Kelly to a bite of the kofta prepared during the demonstration class.

port a Commerce Lexington program for minority- and women-owned businesses. She had labored over it for a year, with the help of the Small Business Development Center. Forester, with Community Trust Bank at the time, liked her plan, and Community Trust gave Davis the loan her start-up needed.

"She had the education; she had the

knowledge. And even though it was a start-up, her business mind-set wasn't just fixated on cooking," said Forester. "When you are thinking on a broad scale like that, it is hard not to succeed."

In addition to knowledge, Forester gauges a potential business owner's tenacity and willingness to market. Davis demonstrated both. Her outgoing person-

ality has led to publicity for Wild Thyme. She's done a cooking show on WLEX-TV; she's been a source for numerous stories about food and cooking; she's gotten involved in local events, including Crave, Lexington's annual "taste" of the city. Wild Thyme has participated since Crave was launched; this year it won the award "People's Best Overall."

Although Wild Thyme operates with a small full-



Praised for her business acumen, Davis promotes the Wild Thyme brand with public appearances, events with guest chefs, and a retail shop, among other efforts.



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time crew — Davis, Webb, and chef Ruthie Oesterman and a few support staff — Davis doesn't hog the kitchen. She routinely invites guest chefs to teach classes. UK alum and Louisville chef Dan Wu has made an appearance. Barbara Harper Bach, Lexington cookbook author, recently taught a biscuit-making class. "There were 21 people in here for a morning class; they all got one of her cookbooks with the price of the class," said Davis. Chef Webb, a native of New England, teaches a class about dishes of the Northeast; Samantha Fore, owner of pop-up Sri Lankan restaurant Tuk Tuk, has done a class on curries.

Classes are offered on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday; and Friday night's class is demonstration-style because Davis found that people wanted to kick back, relax, learn a little, and have a nice meal at week's end. The rest of the classes are hands-on.

Classes change with the season — the fall brings a tailgating theme; the holidays mean cookie- and candy-making. And there are standards, like cooking with bourbon, tapas, and sushi making. Some take the same class more than once, but because the menu changes, it is not a carbon copy.

During the Friday night Chef's Table demonstration class, there's a lot to cover in about two hours, but Davis manages to pull it off without seeming hassled or harried as she bounces in her striped slip-on tennis shoes, ash-blond ponytail swinging. She doesn't preach and she isn't pompous, but she is confident. She actually relishes the pressure that comes with cooking a four-course dinner as she



Above, chef Jane Webb plates food prepared during a demonstration class and, below, watches as Mark Pike assembles spanakopita.



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instructs and banters with the class.

"I'm always fighting that clock. I am bred for 'Chopped' [the popular Food Network show]," she said. Her dream, she says, is to battle Bobby Flay using her fried green tomato recipe, a modified version of the one her grandmother and culinary inspiration, Reba Bishop, used.

Being around such a chef as confident, comfortable, and creative as Davis has had a positive influence on frequent student Penny Warren. Before

she started coming to Wild Thyme five years ago, Warren never cooked because of the long hours she worked as a litigation attorney. Now retired, with plenty of time for Wild Thyme's classes, she loves spending time in the kitchen.

"I do feel good as a cook, especially when I have people over, they say, 'Oh, this is wonderful. What did you do?'"

Already this fall Warren has made an Italian sausage soup and a Tuscan bean soup, both from a Wild Thyme class. Although she admits she still follows recipes more closely than Davis would like, she is becoming more adventurous in her use of herbs and spices. "I know Allison's thinking, 'If I can just get Penny to put that recipe away and go with something ...'" Warren said.

Warren is already looking ahead to see what she'll learn next. Whatever class she opts for, based on her past experiences she knows it will be a delicious learning experience.

"That's the joy of going there," said Warren. "You not only have a great meal but you learn a lot and come away a more confident cook. My husband keeps saying, 'Go, go!'" **KM**