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GRAHAM ROCKINGHAM'S BEST BETS G5



COURTESY: NANCY HENLEY FOR THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

A very down-to-earth tree house kitchen

Chef Nancy Henley cooks, teaches and creates in her Dundas home

DAN KISELKO
 The Hamilton Spectator

Nancy Henley likes nothing better than when people come to play in her tree house kitchen.

But there's nothing childlike or frivolous about such a visit.

That play is actually work — creative work, mind you, but it does involve learning and putting your cooking skills to use in her kitchen.

And that kitchen, contrary to what the name suggests, is not something made believe perched precariously between two big old branches of an ancient maple or oak tree.

No, Nancy Henley's Tree House Kitchen is very real, very sophisticated, and very much for grown-ups who want to become better cooks.

Above all, it's a new concept in a cooking school, certainly in these parts.

The sleek, ultra-modern and spacious kitchen is just off the central foyer of Henley's sprawling home on the Dundas escarpment.

When Henley and her husband built the



Nancy Henley in her sleek, ultra-modern kitchen.

house some eight years ago, they left a well in the foyer — no foundation below — to accommodate what is now a six-metre ficus tree in the ground. Hence, the house and kitchen wrap around the tree for the self-

professed lover of nature who also is deeply involved in conservation efforts.

And this kitchen is no hobby for Henley. She is a teacher, author and professional chef, a graduate of the hotel and food admin-

SPEC

Nancy Henley prepares her savoury vegetable sauté at thespec.com

istration program at University of Guelph and of the chef's program at George Brown College in Toronto. She apprenticed and worked at several top hotels in Toronto, and some 20 years ago obtained one of the highest working honours a Canadian chef can achieve — the Red Seal designation.

She subsequently opened Nancy Henley's Cooking School in Oakville, was a guest chef on both TV and radio programs in the Toronto area, was hired by the LCBO to run its internal training kitchens and appear in training videos, and wrote for several publications, including *The Hamilton Spectator*.

Throughout that busy schedule, she was raising her three kids, now ages 17, 13 and 9.

"This is a working kitchen. It's for teaching, recipe testing, entertaining, and it's where we get together as a family to eat," Henley says as she stands in the middle of the kitchen.

Ambience continues // G10

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FOOD

Chef's lesson for pampering veggies

If you use this system when you sauté vegetables, your results will be tender yet crisp every time

NANCY HENLEY

The beauty of this recipe is that the combination of savoury and a nutty-tasting Parmesan cheese, cured and slightly bitter olives and fruity tomato juices takes the edge off some strong-flavoured but super-healthy vegetables in a fantastic way! Finish the dish off with some fresh basil and it is a party in your mouth, and the colour combination is a feast for the eyes and a treat for the body.

It is a one-pan dish so cleanup is simple. I could say, "Cook everything in one pan, cooking largest vegetables first and smallest vegetables last," and we would be done our interaction via recipe. Instead, I want to take this opportunity to run through a vegetable cooking lesson and give you a system so the results are tender yet crisp every time. Follow these guidelines for dinner after sourcing your favourite vegetables and you will also have appetizing, tasty veggies for snack or lunch next day.

Respect the inherent beauty of your ingredients. If you chop everything larger in natural looking pieces it is more pleasing to the eye and it decreases the likelihood of (yuck!) overcooking them. After removing the woody ends, slice your broccoli and asparagus stalks into thirds. Slice your cherry tomatoes in half lengthwise, slice your garlic in thin strips, pit and quarter the olives, coarsely grate your Parmesan, chop your basil leaves roughly and leave your pine nuts whole (roast them golden brown if you like).

Whole spring fiddleheads or farmer-fresh cauliflower separated into florets (large pieces) or halved brussels sprouts work just as well as a substitute for the green flowering-type veggies like broccoli or rapini in this dish — all you need to remember is keep 4 cups (1 L) of asparagus as the anchor vegetable and choose 4 cups



Nancy Henley is at the helm making her savoury vegetable sauté.

SCOTT GARONDA, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

(1 L) total of one, two or three other vegetables for a total of 8 cups (2 L) raw vegetables plus tomatoes.

It is really not a matter of artistry that produces perfectly cooked vegetables for the plate; instead, it is a good chef's sourcing great vegetables and being organized and attentive to the entire cooking process. You can do this too!

Savoury Vegetable Sauté

MAKES 4 TO 6 SERVINGS

2 tbsp (30 mL) olive oil
4 cups (1 L) broccoli or other fresh flowering-type vegetable such as broccoli, cauliflower, brussels sprouts, rapini
2 cups (1 L) fresh asparagus
2 cups (500 mL) cherry tomatoes
3 medium cloves garlic
1/2 cup (125 mL) black Kalamata olives
1/2 cup (125 mL) Parmesan cheese

1/2 cup (125 mL) fresh basil leaves
1/2 cup (125 mL) whole pine nuts

Preheat your pan for a minute on medium high. Add your oil, then immediately add your largest vegetables in one layer.

You want your olive oil to be below the smoking point to retain the healthful qualities of the oil. If wisps of smoke wail from the pan, immediately remove it from the heat to cool it down slightly then place it back on heat.

Leave brussels sprouts to caramelize (beginning of a golden brown colour on one side) in the heat without stirring for at least a minute. Then continue cooking them, stirring occasionally, for no more than about 5 minutes, adjusting heat between medium and medium-high until they are just beginning to soften up and are very slightly turning translucent around the outer leaves.

If you are using cauliflower flo-

rets, they would be added next to the cooking sprouts over medium heat. Stir so they touch the bottom of the pan. Leave the cauliflower to colour without stirring. Then cook the slightly caramelized cauliflower, stirring occasionally, for no more than 5 minutes while brussels sprouts continue to slightly soften.

Broccoli or other green flowering veggie like rapini would fit in the cooking process here. Heat again is ranging around medium. You do not want to caramelize these slimmer green vegetables. Stir them occasionally and cook no more than 3 minutes or until they are softening slightly yet still firm.

Add the asparagus next, stirring occasionally until they are slightly softened and are starting to turn translucent. You should be able to get a sense of their crisp-tenderness by touching them with a wooden spoon or having a bite

into one, but do not cook them more than 3 to 4 minutes total on medium heat, and in this case you do not want to brown the asparagus at all.

Add the sliced tomatoes and stir, warming tomatoes for 1 to 3 minutes only or just until they release their juices.

Add the sliced garlic and soften it for a minute or so, turning the heat down to medium low so you do not burn the garlic on the bottom of the pan.

Remove the pan from the heat and add the black olives. Stir in the Parmesan cheese. For dietary reasons, you can omit the cheese in this recipe, but you might just want to add a pinch or two of salt as a replacement.

Stir in the fresh basil just before you plate this beautiful dish and add the raw or roasted pine nuts at this point.

Experiment and have fun with your own combinations and amounts. Be inspired by what you see at the market. Note that dried basil is no substitute for fresh basil, but experiment with fresh dill, coriander, rosemary, oregano, etc. (adding a little at a time) and make it your own.

Various onions or leeks can be a substitution for fresh garlic. You would want to soften and gently caramelize chopped onions at or near the beginning of the cooking process and chopped leeks would be softened near the end. Avoid using bottled garlic.

The cooking goal is to get a tiny bit of caramelized colour on the larger (stronger tasting) vegetables, sweetening them up yet retaining a beautiful crisp-tenderness and vibrant colour in all of the vegetables and therefore reaping their complex nutritional benefits and full delicious flavour.

When cooked properly, this dish holds up for days and can be served hot or cold.
nancyhenley.com

INTIMATE AMBIENCE

CONTINUED FROM // G1

She is surrounded by the giant horseshoe-shaped granite counter-top, the professional Wolf gas range, dark wood cabinets and floors, and the two stacked wood burning ovens. She can seat 20 people between the long table off to the side and the chairs around the counter, although certain classes are kept smaller than that.

This Saturday sees the official kickoff for the Tree House Kitchen sessions, what Henley calls the Nourishing Experience Class es-

ries with "an intimate ambience, green views and a comfortable atmosphere." It runs three hours (to a.m. to 1 p.m., cost \$115) and starts off with a lesson on knife skills — all the fundamentals of handling, usage, safety and speed — and includes a Nela French chef's knife which the student keeps. Then it's all to work — Thai stir fry and Chinese hot pot recipes.

Henley also offers private gourmet dinner party classes, how-to-classes and corporate and team-building events. "I've even got one upcoming with 13 mother-daughter pairs attending," Henley says.

She says her cooking and teaching systems, which she imparts to students, are based on four points — bravely exploring cuisines, growing in culinary life skills,

TREE HOUSE KITCHEN

There are still spaces in all of Nancy Henley's upcoming classes at the Tree House Kitchen. All the information about all classes, including content, dates, prices and how to register, is online at nancyhenley.com (for a short cut, scroll down to the stylized green tree on the right side of the

website and click on "explore class types and pricing"). At this stage, payment can only be made by cheque, and payment guarantees registration. Henley asks that people taking part in classes arrive 10 to 15 minutes early to get settled in, and have a light snack before arriving.

healing mind and body, connecting with our inner foodie, family, friends and community.

"It's the true nature of what I'm doing, to make cooking as much fun and as soul-filling as possible," Henley adds. "That's why I'm doing this; I don't want to be a quick and fast recipe person. I'm a

chef who loves decadent food, but I'm also a health nut, a fitness person. So what we prepare here in the classes is nutritional, sustainable, organic when possible and as local as we can."

She writes all the recipes she offers — she refers to them as "systems" — and triple tests them be-

fore adding them to her class lineups.

"It's about enjoyment an empowerment, to teach people they have the power" to create their food, Henley says.

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