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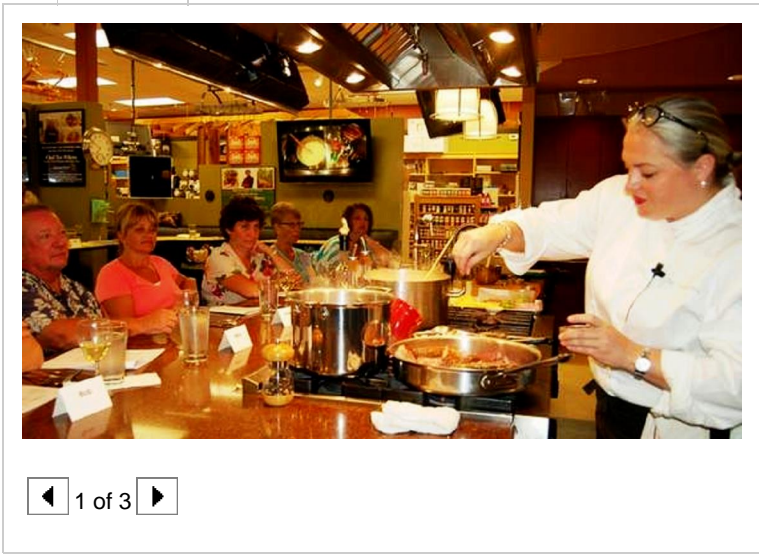
BRANDON NEWS

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Chef Virginia Willis wows local fans with southern flare

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By Yvette C. Hammett | Tribune Staff
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BRANDON - Listening to celebrity chef Virginia Willis teach techniques that will turn a Wednesday supper into a Saturday night dinner party sensation is as comfortable as making one of her recipes, fans say.

Some of those local fans went to a cooking class at the Rolling Pin Kitchen Emporium Wednesday night with Willis' two cookbooks in hand, ready to get them autographed.

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They drank in some of her expertise on how to take an endive and Roquefort slaw from good to great, techniques for chopping without adding your own skin to the recipe and easy twists on recipes like strawberry shortcake that add a bit of glamour to southern favorites.

Best known in foodie circles for her books “Bon Appétit, Ya’ll” and “Basic to Brilliant, Ya’ll” Willis, a Georgia native with the expected soft southern drawl, talked before class about her cooking philosophy.

“I write recipes for normal people,” she said. “It is stuff you can make at home, it tastes good, yet is sophisticated and it’s just not impossible for home cooks.”

Originally from Augusta, Willis, 46, was “French-trained” in Washington, D.C. She has taught and cooked across the country, in Mexico and in France – she served shrimp and grits at the Louvre – and once worked as a culinary coordinator for Martha Stewart.

“Using her recipes is like a cool journey,” said Karla Allen of Riverview. “I discovered ‘Bon Appétit, Ya’ll’ in October and it has taught me so much. I make something different every time and I love the fusion of southern and French cooking.”

Allen said she finds the book to be well written and easy to follow. Willis said she couldn’t have asked for better feedback.

“I have both books and have seen her recipes in Southern Living (magazine) and tried a few,” said Andrea Norgard, of Lakeland, who attended the class with three friends who share her love of cooking.

“The nice thing is that any recipe I do from her, it turns out. It turns out! That’s great,” Norgard said, using Willis’s bacon flan recipe as an example. “It tasted good and it turned out.”

Greg Kelly, of Seffner, came with a group. He’s a regular at the Rolling Pin cooking classes and loves every kind of cooking from New Orleans’ famous Paul Prudhomme to world famous American-born French chef Julia Child. Though he hasn’t yet dived in to “Bon Appétit, Ya’ll,” he has it, and said he was interested to see what Willis would turn out.

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For her entrée, Willis prepared some peach rosemary jam to top a peach Dijon-crust pork tenderloin. The jam recipe comes from a Southern Living project she recently finished, called Little Jars, meant for people who want to make preserves on a small scale.

Willis also prepared a low country risotto from her “Basic to Brilliant, Ya’ll” cookbook, which uses Carolina Gold rice, once prevalent in the South Carolina region until slavery was abolished. The long-grain rice is making a come-back, she said, and cooks should not be afraid to use it for risotto, which typically calls for more starchy, short-grain varieties.

“Southern food is amazingly popular all across the country right now,” Willis said. “The secret is good, simple food. Pork goes great with fruit, whether you’re in Florida, France or Massachusetts.

“While I’m inspired by traditional southern cooking, it doesn’t have to stay in the past,” she said. Those techniques can evolve with the more sophisticated palates of today, she said.

That has led to her next project, “Lighten Up, Ya’ll,” which she expects to publish in about two years.


Cooking classes are offered regularly at the Rolling Pin Kitchen Emporium, 2080 Badlands Drive, Brandon.

Fifteen percent of the proceeds from the Willis cooking class and others held over the past few months, will go to the Brandon Foundation, which serves families in crisis and helps fund other small non-profits serving people in the greater Brandon area.

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