

# Eat, Learn, Love

Everything just looks, smells and tastes soooooo good.

That's the bottom-line lasting impression that comes from cooking in the kitchen of Helene Spoto.

Helene is our Dining In columnist, among myriad other endeavors including ownership of Helene's Custom Cuisine, through which she offers in-home cooking classes, interactive dinner parties, corporate health and wellness cooking demonstrations, and other services.

To learn more about what she does, I've been to her Andover home twice to cook, accompanied by other members of the staff of The Andovers. In the spring, the chef extraordinaire shared recipes and tips for fresh, healthy takes on some traditional comfort foods. More recently, she grilled delicious summer fare in her lush back yard.

Her home, which she shares with husband John Spoto, a certified financial planner and proprietor of Sentry Financial Planning, is quintessential Andover. When they purchased it 20-plus years ago, the couple embraced the mid-20th century charm of the 1945 ranch.

"I walked in through the kitchen," Helene recalls of her first encounter with the place. "The hardest thing was trying not to freak out and tip off the Realtor to how much I loved it."

In making it their own, they retained the décor of the era: the kitchen cabinets, the sliding wooden windows.

Because family life for them has always centered on Helene's love for cooking and sharing of good food, they did make some changes in the kitchen area, knocking down a dining room wall to open the space up and adding a kitchen island for the chef's convenience.

Today the space is bright and white, so that the colors, so many colors, pop. Red raspberry jam, shades of varieties of brown mushrooms, fresh pink pork, green onions, lettuces and asparagus, shiny red, orange and yellow peppers.

"I don't like green peppers," Helene says, explaining that the reason they are less expensive and more bitter to taste than their sweeter, brighter-colored counterparts is that they aren't really ripe and



Photo by AMY SWEENEY

Helene Spoto has Editor-in-Chief Tracey Rauh smell the Dijon mustard that goes in a very healthy version of macaroni and cheese.

therefore take less work to cultivate.

The lessons that come during a session with Helene are valuable and practical. But her personality, energy and the down-to-earth way she disseminates knowledge are the qualities that make spending a few hours in her kitchen so delightful.

We from The Andovers arrived with a wide range of kitchen prowess, but even the most novice among us never felt silly for asking a very basic question or needing a nudge in how to wield a kitchen utensil.

We're all women this day, chatting about family, children, and jobs. In eight years running her business, Helene has learned to fit her instruction neatly into such conversations, so that a class with her is also like a visit with an old friend.

"Folklore on asparagus?" she quips. "The richer you were, the higher up you ate the shoot."

She teaches us that asparagus has a natural break, too, then shows us how to find it; that sugar-based anything should be brushed on grilling meats toward the end of cooking, because sugar burns; that it's necessary to remove pork-loin silver before preparing it – and look how easy it is to do so; that salt and pepper help caramelize vegetables; that you can use

the palm of your hand to learn the difference between rare, medium and well-done meat; that she always brings meats to room temp before placing them on a hot grill; that olive oil is kitchen glue.

Oh, and have I mentioned the aromas? Lavender and lime. Rosemary and thyme. And garlic, garlic, garlic.

One of the many great aspects of being the editor of a local magazine is all the people I get to meet. Sometimes, those encounters progress into real friendships and I'm glad that's true of Helene and John Spoto.

Enough from me, however. It's your turn to check out Helene's Kitchen and try her recipes ("Get Out of the Kitchen," Page 31). And if you want to learn more about how to bring her to your home or business, visit [helenescustomcuisine.com](http://helenescustomcuisine.com).

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