

LIVING HERE FOOD & WINE

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Stay in and cook – for a party, just add friends

A couple of times a month, Paul Robins and his wife, Bridget, have friends over for dinner. More accurately, they engage them in meals, try things, play with recipes, get everyone involved. In short, they go all foodie on the dinners.

That's no real surprise if you know Robins. These days, he hosts Channel 40's morning show, "Fox40 Live," and for years he did a cooking segment on his morning radio show.

Let me restate that. The man cooked on radio. And it worked.

The Good Life
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Now, it turns out, he's doing what loads of other people in Sacramento and across the country are doing: turning their homes into a combo kitchen/

restaurant/social center.

Both the food and wine industries report a leap in this kind of thing recently. For instance, one consistent theme running through the Unified Wine & Grape Symposium in Sacramento in January was that loads of people are buying their wine and drinking it at home with the meals they cook.

There are two big reasons for this restaurant-at-home trend. One is simply the economy. When you eat at home, you can control the cost. The other is an ever-increasing fascination with

the food-wine culture in America, born, as much as anything else, from the Food Network and other TV that make the whole foodie world so accessible.

"I find it a little disturbing that we're part of a trend," Robins said. "That's so unlike us."

In his case, he was out in front of it. His dinners also demonstrate the biggest part of that trend. He and Bridget get everyone to pitch in.

"We often try to have something going so that when people show up, they can help us prepare it," he said. "We may have

already made a filling for a butternut squash ravioli with sage brown butter. Then we'll open the first bottle of wine and sit around chatting while we all wrap them."

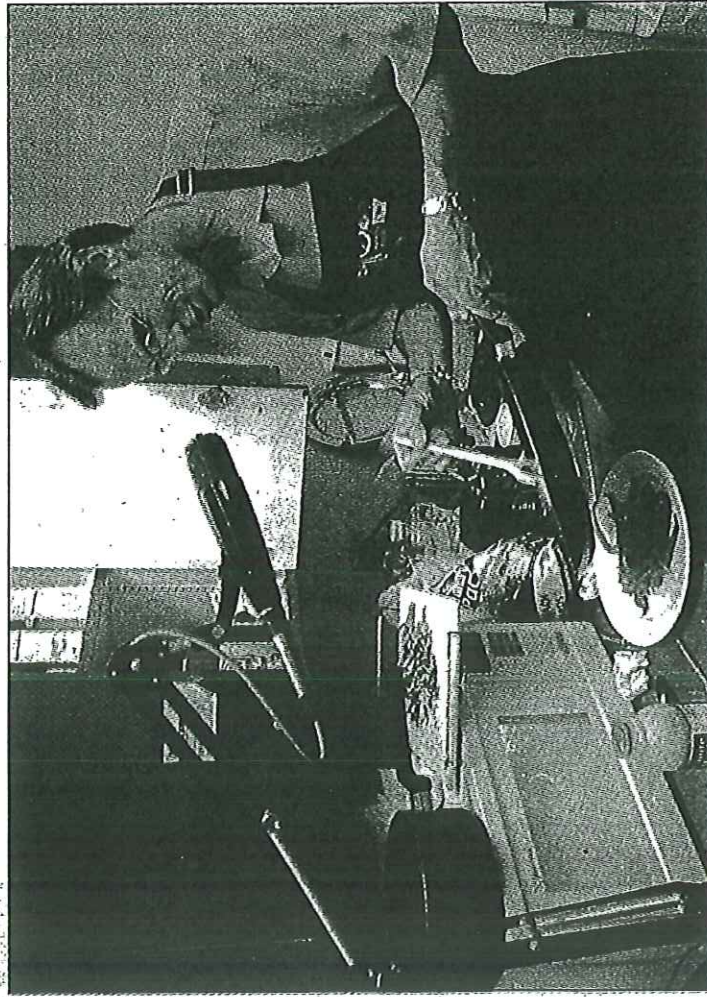
The other route is to play chef for your friends because you want to. Elaine Corn, a food reporter for Capital Public Radio and an award-winning cookbook author, falls into that group.

"For my birthday," Corn said, "my present to myself is I cook for my friends."

Whether it's a group project or

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Good Life: Home cooking parties should let guests get involved



Paul Robins, now the host of "Fox40 Live," used to prepare recipes for the radio audience at '92.

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a solo performance, there are lots of ways to attack the in-home food-wine-party scene. Here are some tips from Corn, Robins and Laura Stewart, a personal chef who often presents dinners that involve her clients.

■ Don't try to be a restaurant. You're limited by the size of your kitchen and your staff, which is, fundamentally, you. And don't cook a meal so complicated and exhausting that you'll either be too tired to enjoy it or you'll turn bitter and hate your guests.



Elaine Corn, cookbook author and radio personality, tapes copies of recipes at eye level for quick reference while cooking.

■ Set the table the day before, especially if you're doing a more proper sit-down meal. Even if you're going with an informal buffet line, get everything set up.

"That way, you'll know what food goes into what bowls and dishes so you don't have to decide on the fly," Corn said. "And you'll know if you need something you don't have. But most of all, it's gets you into a coordination mood."

■ If you're serving a sit-down, decide how the food's going to get to the table. Do you need trays? Who might you ask to help bring it over? Will you need potholders and serving spoons?

■ Think about themes. My friends were headed for Southern France recently, so to get in the mood, we cooked foods for a night in Provence, more or less.

"I've found people really get into themes," Stewart said. "I had a couple who honeymooned in Italy, so I did an Italian dinner. Or throw in a blind (wine) tasting before the meal, then compare how the wines go with the food later."

■ Get the coffee ready to go early on. I know, sounds silly, but it's an easy step, and will save time when everything's rolling and fun and you don't want to root around for coffee filters.

■ Make a list with the order you need to do things, and when you need to do those things.

"What's most important isn't what you're going to do first, it's what you're going to do last," Corn said. "That's where you start in timing your meal."

■ Corn makes copies of her recipes and tapes them up at eye level. She also writes in the margins what pots, dishes and utensils the dish will need.

■ Don't worry about looking like a Food Network chef. Just think about everyone having fun.

"If you have good friends coming over, that's the time to try something new. That's when you roll the dice," Robins said. "It's an adventure for friends to cook together. I tell my really good friends, I'm willing to fail in front of you."

■ On the other hand, there are some times you do want to make sure you can handle the meal. That's when Stewart suggests trying to make the recipe a day or two before the party. And as Robins said, everyone's got one proven home run.

"If we're having my daughter's boyfriend's parents over for the first time, I go with the home run," he said. "Unless I don't like the guy."

■ If you're doing the group cooking exercise, think ahead just enough to give everyone a task they will like, even if it means just assigning someone to cut bread or make sure wine glasses aren't empty.

■ One trick is to have all the ingredients for each dish ready to go, so the guest cooks can get right to it without too much trouble. Stewart likes that better than just a potluck, because this way she knows all the courses will go together.

"Tell your friends ahead of time what they're doing," she said, "then maybe have them bring a wine that goes with their assignment."

■ Don't be too formal about the wine at a big cook-together. Just have lots of corkscrews out and encourage someone to get the wines open. Then people can find their favorites.

■ If it comes down to it, better that the meal's a little late than some dishes are done too soon.

"Too soon is way worse than waiting," Corn said. "And you can get people moving toward the table if you're behind. They won't mind the wait if they think dinner is imminent."

■ Partly for feedback and partly for fun, when Robins tries a new recipe, he has his friends write on the cookbook page what they thought of it.

The thing that connects all of this, what makes these kinds of dinners happy events, is the notion of simply embracing the effort. That's what is growing through the food world, the idea that cooking and eating are communal, that they are times to be shared.

And I particularly like Robins' swing-for-the-fences approach to trying adventurous dishes. As he says, it's fun when it turns out great, and fun when it doesn't.

"You can always order a pizza," he said.

Call The Bee's Rick Kushman, (916) 321-1187. Listen to him Thursdays at 8:40 a.m. on NewsTalk 1530 (KFBK) and 8:50 a.m. on Armistrong & Getty, Talk 650 KSTE.

Decadent chocolate and hazelnut torte

Prep time: 20 minutes

Cook time: 1 hour

Serves 6

Recipe from chef Laura Stewart.

Note: Prep time does not include the 1-hour cool time before serving.

INGREDIENTS

- 1/2 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 3 eggs, beaten
- 1 cup chopped and lightly toasted hazelnuts
- 12 ounces bittersweet chocolate chips (about 1 1/2 cups)
- 1/2 cup corn syrup
- 2 tablespoons butter, melted
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 store-bought frozen pie crust, defrosted
- Whipped cream, optional

INSTRUCTIONS

- Preheat the oven to 325 degrees.

In a large bowl, mix together the sugar and the flour. Add the eggs, hazelnuts, chocolate chips, corn syrup, butter, vanilla and salt. Stir well. Pour the mixture into the pie crust. Bake for 1 hour.

Cool the torte for at least 1 hour before serving. Serve with dollop of fresh whipped cream, if desired.

Per serving: 655 cal.; 9 g pro.; 82 g carb.; 36 g fat (13 sat., 15 monounsat., 5 polyunsat., 3 other); 117 mg chol.; 310 mg sod.; 2 g fiber; 32 g sugar; 47 percent calories from fat.