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The Taste of Spring

SAVOR DISHES
INSPIRED BY
LOCAL CHEFS

Culinary Delight

At cooking class, Dana McKinley and Erika Sturino prepared crab-stuffed Alaskan wild salmon in hollandaise sauce and sweet potato gnocchi in butter sage sauce.

YOUNG COUPLE FINDS TWO COOKS BETTER THAN ONE

By Michael J. Solender
Photos by Shane Baskin

DANA MCKINLEY, 26, AND ERIKA STURINO, 24, made each other a promise as part of their New Year's resolutions — more cooking and eating at home in 2013.

The busy couple — he's a manager of client services for Ballantyne-based Integration Point; she's an online marketer for Red Ventures — felt they were eating out far too often, spending too much money and too much time away from home and each other. This year they vowed to share cooking responsibilities around the house, which meant improving their culinary skills and adding some dishes and techniques into their kitchen routines.

"When the Date Night opportunity came up to take

the couples cooking class at Morrison Family YMCA," Sturino says, "it could not have been more perfect. Dana and I got really excited about spending some time in the kitchen together and learning some new tricks."

Mom Plays Key Role

Sturino and McKinley have been together since 2007 when they met at the University of South Carolina. They share a home together in Indian Land after each moved here one year apart after graduation.

But it wasn't sparks and fireworks for the couple as they first got to know each other mostly through mutual friends, sorority sisters and fraternity brothers. In a not-so-small way, it was actually

McKinley's mother who played an integral role in the couple getting together.

"I was one year ahead of Erika," McKinley explains. "And when I first moved to the dorm from Ohio, my mom came along to help get me settled. She met some of the other moms, mostly of the young women in the coed dorm. They got together and it was my mom who connected me with the girls who eventually introduced me to Erika."

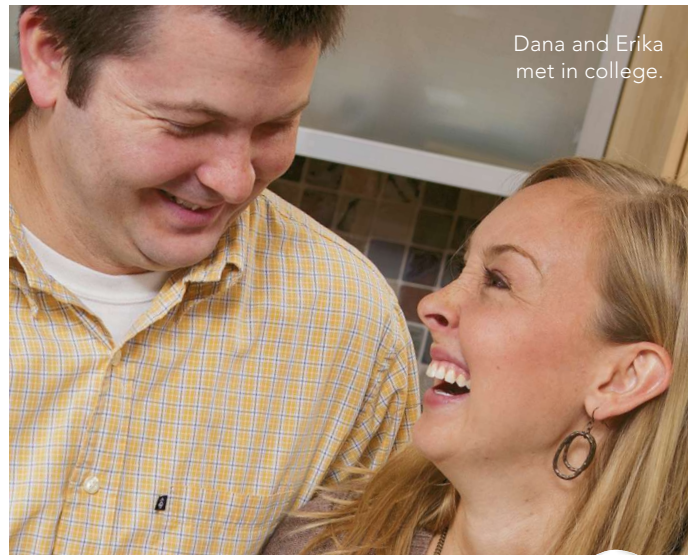
Initial dates were quiet Mexican dinners and enjoying a craft beer or two at some of the local college-area pubs. Each recalls having a great time at the World Beer Festival in Columbia, which the couple has made into an annual must-attend event. Another extra special date

involved making the trip to McKinley's parents' home in Ohio, where the couple enjoyed fishing together and attending the annual car show.

"A great date for us," Erika says, "is where we can leave our mobile devices turned off and tune out from our phones or computers and just enjoy some quiet time together."

The couple has redoubled their efforts to adapt a healthier lifestyle this year. That finds them sharing alternate evenings in the kitchen cooking. They recently remodeled their kitchen and equipped it with some high-end appliances, including a "top drawer" stove that until recently served as a sorting table for bills and extra counter space.

"We are determined to put



Dana and Erika met in college.

"A great date for us is where we can leave our mobile devices turned off and tune out from our phones or computers and just enjoy some quiet time together." — Erika Sturino



it to the use it was intended for,” Sturino says.

Cooking Styles

“Each of us really can cook,” she continues, “I like to improvise and use recipes more as guidelines, while Dana is a more literal cook. He needs a lot of detail and direction — the cooking class was actually a good fit for both of us.”

Along with three other young couples, McKinley and Sturino were greeted at the Morrison Family Y’s pristine demonstration kitchen by Chef Adie Cervin. She is executive sous chef at Myers Park’s Nolen Kitchen, a top area restaurant.

Cervin had a special romantic menu on tap for the evening’s lesson: crab-stuffed wild Alaskan salmon fillets with hollandaise sauce, seared sweet potato gnocchi in a butter sage sauce and perhaps the ultimate couple’s dessert, creme brulee.



“There was just a bit of a competitive nature with the couples as we went around the room, first separating eggs for the creme brulee.”

— Dana McKinley

“It was a fun, relaxed atmosphere, and they had everything laid out for us,” McKinley recalls. “There was just a bit of a competitive



Erika tries her hand at something new — separating an egg.



nature with the couples as we went around the room, first separating eggs for the creme brulee. The first couple really nailed it and then Chef Adie came to us, and I started to feel the pressure.”

McKinley’s recollection brought laughs from Sturino. “Dana comes from a food background — his mom taught home economics for a vocational school — but he has this thing about eggs. He can’t even make scrambled eggs without a step-by-step guide — it’s crazy.”

The truth came out a moment later when Sturino admitted she’d never separated an egg before either. “That really was a new experience for me, and I don’t

Chef Adie Cervin explains to Erika and Dana the particulars of stuffing the salmon with crab.

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Dana adds the finishing touch to the creme brulee while classmates Andi Kennington (from left), Erika Sturino, Clay Kennington, Jeremy Singleton and Asha Singleton look on.



COUPLES COOKING CLASS

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consider myself a novice cook," she notes.

The crab-stuffed salmon proved to be a favorite for the couple, both in preparation and in eating. The crab meat was combined with seasonings, bread crumbs and mayonnaise to bind it together.

Whisk-Impaired

"We had tons of crab," says McKinley, clearly a big fan of the crustacean. "It was almost as much crab as salmon, so we got the best of both worlds."

The hollandaise sauce, a decadently rich, lemony sauce made with — you guessed it — more eggs (and butter) also proved to be a hit. McKinley couldn't help but get a few samples from the fingers of his gal-pal. In another playful moment that involved the prep of the sweet potato gnocchi, a small "explosion" of flour managed to get more of the white powder onto Sturino's nose than into the tiny dumpling mix.

She managed her payback, however, in turning over whisking duties to McKinley. Admitting to being "whisk-impaired," Sturino was only too happy to let her beau whip up the tasty outcome to the evening's festivities.

With Sturino and McKinley eager to try their new techniques and recipes at home, rumor has it — the couple's stove no longer is the final resting place for their bills. 📷

Center: The class baked the crab-stuffed salmon and seared the sweet potato gnocchi.

Left: Before digging in, Erika and Dana congratulate themselves on their culinary achievement.