Chef's kiss

Cooking programs serving up options that feed body and soul

TONY V. MARTIN PHOTOS, THE TIMES

Cheryl Dornberg of Mrs. Dornberg's Culinary Experience teaches online cooking classes, some of which are designed for senior citizens.

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It's a balancing act: Eating healthfully while cooking for two — or just one.

On top of that, nearly 10% of those 60 and older in Indiana experience some degree of food insecurity, according to Meals on Wheels data from 2025.

But, thanks to healthy aging cooking classes, older adults are not just whipping up delicious, nutrient-rich meals, they're also boosting their independence and nourishing their spirits.

Susan Siwinski-Hebel of St. John joined a healthy cooking class in 2023, hoping to replace the habit of dining out or picking up Asian, Mexican or pizza on the way home from work.

"It was a perception that I didn't have time to cook at home and carryout was easier," she said.

Aiming to enhance the quality and nutritional value of her diet and improve her long-term health, Siwinski-Hebel enrolled in Mrs. Dornberg's Culinary Experience Real Food, Real Results Challenge, attending the 12-week class virtually.

This is among the cooking and nutrition classes from Mrs. Dornberg's Culinary Experience, owned by certified health and wellness coach Cheryl Dornberg.

Teaching in person since 2011, Dornberg shifted to virtual classes in 2020 for better accessibility. Her courses, including the Real Food, Real Results Challenge and Nourish with Confidence, simplify healthy eating with practical nutrition, shopping and cooking tips. Classes for adults 50 and older focus on nutritional support for health issues such as high blood pressure and blood sugar.

In Dornberg's class, Siwinski-Hebel learned adaptable cooking strategies, techniques and improved her pantry by skipping prepared meals, packaged kits or boxed ingredients. "We haven't used store-bought salad dressings since 2023," she said.

Dornberg's recipes address health conditions including gluten intolerance, hypertension and low blood glucose levels, Siwinski-Hebel said, adding that she and her husband, in their 50s, have benefited from the program.

"We often remark we're more satisfied cooking at home. We know where ingredients are sourced and more about their quality," said Siwinski-Hebel. "Our meals taste great. There's no 'taste' or craving that can't be addressed."

Favorites include chickpea "tuna" salad wraps, Greek chicken burgers, cilantro black bean quinoa salad, Thai basil chicken with coconut rice and a grain-free fruit crisp.

"My energy levels are more consistent throughout the day, GI discomfort and bloating are significantly reduced and annual blood tests remain within normal limits," Siwinski-Hebel said.

Eileen Sturm of Naperville attended Dornberg's in-person classes with her sisters from Highland. Before taking the Nourish with Confidence course, she and her husband, Bob, ate frozen dinners and fast food that Sturm called over-processed and flavorless and that didn't align with their health goals.

"When Cheryl switched to remote learning, Bob joined me on our healthy cooking journey," said Eileen Sturm. Their kitchen became a hive of activity as they washed produce; set up cutting boards, knives, and pots and pans; and reviewed recipes. After signing into the 60-90-minute class, they'd cook favorites such as pasta fagioli, beef Bolognese with homemade bone broth and chicken Marsala.

"Every meal is awesome, healthy and delicious, as are the leftovers," Sturm said. "We are very thankful to Cheryl for helping us maintain our commitment to healthy eating."

Nutrition matters as we age, according to Danielle Crowder, director of Community Health Improvement at Franciscan Health. Type 1 and 2 diabetes, heart disease and/or failure and cancer ... are directly impacted by improved fruit and vegetable intake, nutrition education and lifestyle support.

"The Franciscan Health Produce Rx Program supports patients managing chronic conditions by pairing access to fresh produce with practical nutrition education and hands-on skill building," said Crowder.

Franciscan Health's Produce Rx Program provides low-income individuals with diabetic A1C score higher than 7 and patients with congestive heart failure and high blood pressure who have moderate to severe food insecurity access to specific foods to meet their health needs.

Franciscan Health is a satellite member of the Indianapolis-based nonprofit Indy Hunger Network, according to Crowder. This program connects individuals with food resources and nutrition education through the Cooking Matters curriculum funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"All activities are designed to be accessible, culturally relevant and supportive of long-term healthy behavior changes," Crowder said. "Goal-setting sessions, peer-to-peer discussions and optional simple physical activity prompts further support for participants."

LEFT: Eileen Sturm and her husband, Bob, have upped their meal game with Cheryl Dornberg's virtual classes, which last 60-90 minutes. **CENTER:** Susan Siwinski-Hebel of St. John joined Cheryl Dornberg's class in 2023 to help kick her carryout habit. **RIGHT:** Danielle Crowder is director of Community Health Improvement at Franciscan Health.